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Two thugs and a suicidal swan

Peter Williams

Fig. 1 *Anemone nemorosa*

The little scraps of ancient woodland that somehow survived the ravages of the industrial revolution and coal mining industry were my favourite places during childhood in a South Wales valley. I did not know at the time that their ground flora had developed undisturbed over centuries to reach the point where there were carpets of bluebells, wood anemones, violets, primroses and wood sorrel.

Of all the wild flowers in the woods, my favourite was always the wood anemone (*Anemone nemorosa*, figs 1 & 2). As a child I could not articulate why I liked one species more than another, but now I believe it was probably the simple elegance of the single white flowers with yellow anthers that appealed to me. I still love the common wood anemone and, as a mature gardener in age if nothing else, I grow

numerous other anemone species and cultivars in my woodland garden.

Of all the anemones that I have introduced there is just one that I certainly regret planting. The plant in question is *Anemone canadensis*, the meadow anemone. As its name suggests, this species is native to Canada and other parts of North America.

It is hauntingly beautiful but spreads faster than couch grass and is harder to eradicate than ground elder. I first saw the species growing in a village 'open garden' in North Yorkshire about ten years ago. The garden owner had plants for sale but they were so much in demand that visitors were restricted to just one plant per person.



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Fig. 2 *A. nemorosa*



Fig. 3 *A. canadensis* 'hiding' with astrantia

In hindsight, the fact that he was selling numerous examples of just this one plant might have tipped me off to something.

The cherished single specimen was duly allocated a favourable spot in dappled shade in the herbaceous border. The following year it looked so attractive that I split the clump and introduced it to half a dozen new sites. In the third year, I began to have doubts about the wisdom of my actions because it was popping up in the middle of other plants, some distance from where it was initially established. Naively, I thought that I could simply pull out the offending 'wanderers' and all would be well. This proved not to be the case. The plant rampaged through the herbaceous border and despite my best efforts at control and damage-limitation, it



Fig. 4 Dismantling bed to get rid of *A. Canadensis*



Fig. 5 Bed completed

continued to spread and emerge in new locations. Wholesale removal of the plants was undertaken but provided no relief because the rhizomes had travelled far and wide. Even the finest pieces, just a few mm or so in size, could produce a new plant in yet another location. Spraying with glyphosate provided a little respite but the

plant had an uncanny knack of hiding among species with very similar leaves. Its 'favourite accomplices' were clumps of astrantia present throughout the borders and, in the early part of the year, the fully intertwined anemone and astrantia leaves were very difficult to tell apart, making it impossible to spray selectively (fig. 3).



Fig. 6 *A. canadensis* seedling in mixed border

After about five years I decided that enough was enough. I sprayed off or dug out all vegetation in one bed and adopted a scorched-earth policy at all other sites where it appeared (figs 4 & 5). If it grew with a valuable plant, I lifted both and washed the roots of the desirable plant before potting it up and placing it in quarantine for a year. Any anemones that appeared in the pots were killed with glyphosate. If it grew with an easily replaceable companion I sprayed both with glyphosate.

A further three years on, the garden was free of the thug and for the next few years there was no sign of it; that is, until this year when it reappeared in a clump of *Astrantia* 'Shaggy'! This was in a part of the garden where it had not previously occurred and I am guessing it has regenerated from seed – growing slowly and

invisibly for perhaps a year or so until late spring when its distinctive flowers appeared to give the game away (figs 6 & 7). I had completely overlooked the possibility of regeneration from seed, but now realise that there may be many more seeds in the seed bank, and the battle is not over. I also realise that I should have researched the plant before I released it into the garden but alas, failed to do so. In fact, when it was first planted, I knew only that it was an attractive anemone – I had not attempted to find out whether it was a species or hybrid, and the garden owner who so 'kindly' supplied it had informed me that he had no idea what it was but it was a 'good doer'! Investigations undertaken after it had revealed its true character indicated strongly that it is a notorious weed. Indeed, a number of North American websites suggest



Fig. 7 *A. canadensis* seeds

that '*A. canadensis* is a perfect choice when an aggressive native ground cover is needed', and that says it all!

The second thuggish anemone that I have had dealings with is *Anemone sylvestris*, another elegant species from North America (fig. 8). I first saw this one growing at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh, in drifts which looked very special indeed.

Fortunately, I had learned something from my previous encounter with the Canadian thug and decided against releasing this species without undertaking tests of due diligence. After growing the plant in pots for two years and noting just how well it grew, and observing how it tried to escape via the drainage holes in the pots, I decided that I could not introduce this plant into the general borders.



Fig. 8 *A. sylvestris*

After much thought I decided to release it from captivity, but only in an area where it could be easily controlled. I have planted it at the edge of a natural wood, with a 2m exclusion

zone in the form of a soil path protecting the nearby flower beds. The plant has started to spread but has not yet appeared in the path. If (or probably when) it does, I will be ready with the herbicide to thwart its attempt to trespass. Colonisation of the wood will be encouraged and should not cause problems – here it will have to compete with ivy, brambles and other native British thugs, as well as Spanish bluebells. I have high hopes of creating controllable drifts of this lovely but potentially dangerous anemone.

In contrast to the first two, the third subject of this tale is an anemone hybrid that not only doesn't spread uncontrollably, but actually

seems to have a powerful death wish. It is *Anemone* WILD SWAN (fig. 9), which is thought to be a cross between *A. rupicola* and *A. hupehensis*. The former is a smallish woodlander, and the latter is a robust (and on rich soils even thuggish) Japanese anemone that actually originates from China!

A. WILD SWAN is described as being compact and capable of flowering throughout the summer months. The flowers have attractive glossy, white-faced petals that are delicately coloured with violet hues on the reverse, and a golden central core of anthers. When first introduced this very beautiful cultivar was the must-have plant for a



Fig. 9 *A.* WILD SWAN



Fig. 10 A. WILD SWAN at Wisley

couple of years, especially when it was named as the Plant of the Year at the Chelsea Flower Show in 2011. A programme of micropropagation was designed to bulk up the plant to match the expected demand, but technical issues meant that the large numbers required were not produced, with the result that it was scarce and expensive for a number of years.

I purchased two small plants in autumn 2012 for £10 each and introduced them into my garden. I was

very disappointed that they did not survive until the following spring. I purchased another two plants a year later (now just £8.50 each) and kept them in pots in a polytunnel over their first winter, before planting them out in spring. Both appeared to grow away nicely but one collapsed and died before flowering, while the other produced a few flowers in spring, then died in the summer. I assumed that my sandy acid soil did not suit this cultivar, but the plant was just so attractive that

I purchased another two specimens (still expensive at £7.50 each) with the intention of keeping both in large pots. One has survived for a whole year but the other has died.

I have therefore decided that I will not attempt to grow this 'lame duck' again and will just have to admire it in other gardens where perhaps the soil is more suitable, or the gardener more talented and able to cope with the demands of this beautiful but very fickle diva. 🌸

Peter Williams has always been captivated by the elegant simplicity of anemones and the amazing diversity of their wider relations in the Ranunculaceae – a family that has provided so many exquisite garden plants.