

©Twinkl Addison

## A life among plants

### Judy Harry

Fig. 1 Falling into a bed of border irises at an early age

You might have thought that falling off my beloved tricycle into a bed of border irises at an early age would have put me off plants and gardens for ever (fig. 1). Fortunately, it didn't – in any case, it couldn't put me off irises because I was already fascinated by their flowers: their beards, falls, standards and bee-enticing markings. Recently, thinking about this memorable event, it occurred to me that it would be interesting to trace one's early experiences of various plants on into later life. For example, as long as the soil was suitable, my enduring love of iris flowers has always led me to grow at least one 'border' iris somewhere in the garden; the old variety *Iris* 'Jane Phillips' is a particular favourite (fig. 2). It was bred by Robert J Graves (1878-1950), introduced in 1946 and awarded an AGM in 1952.

To say that I was fortunate to grow up in a gardening-oriented family is a gross understatement: I owe more than I can express to this happy fact. It meant that as I grew, so did my knowledge of plants and gardens; I absorbed as it were by osmosis a wealth of facts and opinions, plant names and characteristics that were bandied about by the adults around me (fig. 3).



©Judy Harry

Fig. 2 *Iris* 'Jane Phillips' remains a favourite



©Twinkl Addison

Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5 I find the seedpods of *Stylophorum lasiocarpum* particularly appealing



Fig. 6 *Helenium* 'Waltraut' produces its flowers of orange, flushed over an old-gold ground, over a long season



Fig. 7 A classic phlox, 'Sir John Falstaff' whose cool floppy petals were irresistible to the touch

My mother was an admirer of Vita Sackville-West, and I feel fortunate that she handed on to me her first edition of *In Your Garden*, a collection of the writer's articles which had appeared in *The Observer* in the late forties and early fifties. The style of the large garden in which I grew up was undoubtedly influenced by this most articulate of garden writers, and some of the resultant ambitious schemes would not have

looked all that out of place at Sissinghurst (fig. 4). Hence an entire long border devoted to border irises; a large rose garden with colour-themed beds; a herb garden in the ruins of an old barn; a pair of herbaceous beds bordering a grass path; a pergola swathed in old roses; an orchard underplanted with daffodils; large lawns, and yew hedges: all became familiar territory in which to play. Of course, it must be remembered that in an article she wrote in 1950, Vita put forward the view that a small garden was 'anything from half an acre to two acres'.

As a child, I took all this for granted: it was just where I lived, and where I played endless games among these horticultural riches. I first got to know many of them from a child's point of view: what was at my eye-level; how different leaves felt; how various flowers smelled; and which plants were still taller than me however much I grew. As an adult, much of this physical understanding is as fresh to me now as the day it was first experienced.

One plant for example that was always taller than me was *Macleaya cordata*. This impressive perennial has perhaps faded a bit from the limelight (it would have still been called *Bocconia* then), but in those distant days it intrigued me with its slightly chalky stems, intricately shaped leaves and, joy of joy, orange-staining sap.

Many years later, growing it in my own garden, I also learned about its brittle roots that help it spread itself about. Were I to grow one now I would probably seek out the more richly-coloured *M. microcarpa* 'Spetchley Ruby' which makes a wonderful display, providing stature with a lighter touch. I never lost that fascination with orange sap, and many years later found it to be one of the attractions of the related *Stylophorum lasiocarpum* (fig. 5 – they are both in the poppy family) with its elegant seed pods, which for some reason give me great pleasure.

A clearly remembered plant from those twin herbaceous borders is helenium. I enjoyed then, and still do now, the rich mahogany, orange and yellow colouring of these free-flowering plants, with their prominent central boss and backswept petals. The borders were at the bottom of a slope, and with hindsight I suspect our heleniums benefited from moisture at the roots. My own garden, for many years in relatively dry Lincolnshire, was a challenge for late summer flowers, although *H. 'Waltraut'* (fig. 6) usually did well. Now in the Hebrides, I face the challenge of a short summer season, but with plenty of moisture and wind! It can be tricky to get all the right

conditions into the basket. However, having seen a new short-stemmed variety described in a magazine article, I am wondering if *H. 'Little Orange'*, bred by Henk Jacobs, could cope with my new garden. I am definitely tempted.

The curious warm smell of border phlox was ever-present as I pedalled happily along between the borders and, as I write, is in my memory along with the cool floppy feel of the petals. Many years later, I was to grow and enjoy *Phlox paniculata* 'Sir John Falstaff' (fig. 7), passed on to me by my mother from another garden she created in the 1960s, which she filled with plants from Scotts Nurseries in Somerset. Now I am gardening in an area of higher rainfall, it would be nice to think that I could grow the relatively thirsty phlox, but my daughter who lives nearby has not found them to thrive.

I might try to get hold of the simple but lovely perennial *Phlox paniculata* 'Alba Grandiflora' (fig. 8), which grew most happily on the cooler side of our house in Lincolnshire. I got my original plant when visiting Bide-a-Wee Gardens on an HPS autumn weekend, and it was there that I also saw *Gentiana asclepiadea*, placed so that one could look up into the willowy, arching stems of its blue flowers. This gentian



©Judy Harry

Fig. 8 Not often seen, *Phlox paniculata* 'Alba Grandiflora' makes a charming border plant in a cool spot



©Judy Harry

Fig. 9 Growing to impressive heights in the gardens of Burnby Hall in Yorkshire, *Gentiana lutea* is another rarely seen plant

did not feature in my childhood garden memories, but the angle at which I met it that autumn day was very much that of a child. I am having a go with it in my new damp, acid garden, and seedlings from the HPS Seed Distribution Scheme are making a showing as I write.



Fig. 10

I have never grown the yellow-flowered *G. lutea* (fig. 9), with its stiff stems and whorls of yellow stars, but have a hankering to do so for an odd reason. When on a short holiday in Austria many years ago, we were beguiled by an attractive small stoneware bottle of 'Enzian', a tonic made from the roots of this gentian, and took one home as a souvenir. The day eventually



Fig. 11 *Isotoma fluviatilis* 'Fairy Footsteps' carries its tiny flowers for weeks and weeks

came when curiosity got the better of us and we cautiously poured out a small amount to drink. It was of course extremely strong, and extremely bitter: an unforgettable experience! (fig. 10).

I have memories of small stone alpine troughs in the garden of my childhood, and their miniature scale appealed greatly. Now, here in the Hebrides, I

have established a tiny rock garden. In it I have planted the autumn-flowering *Gentiana septemfida*, which seems to be making cautious progress, and *Isotoma fluviatilis* 'Fairy Footsteps', a carpeting perennial of the *Campanulaceae* family, whose tiny blue flowers are in evidence all summer long (fig. 11). This sort of gardening is quite new to me, and I can feel some



Fig. 12



Fig. 13 *Calendula* 'Orange Star' with *Digitalis* 'Camelot Cream', flowering the first year from seed

stirrings of a growing interest which, to quote Vita Sackville-West again, 'is a mild little thing to get excited about'.

Another resident of this small rock garden is an unnamed rockery pink, which has astonished me with its abundance of sweetly scented flowers of a flamboyant deep cerise. I had planted it more out of curiosity than confidence, having doubted its ability to deal with acid soil, but I need not have worried as it is clearly feeling quite at home. I have noticed other very happy dianthus in several gardens in the area, so my prejudices have had a good shaking up.

Scent of course is one of the strongest triggers to memory, and as soon as I catch the smell of calendula I am transported to the paved area around a garden seat where I laid out miniature farms and roads for my model animals and Dinky cars and tractors. In the process of 'brmming' the vehicles round, I often brushed against the marigolds, releasing their unique scent (fig. 12). So here I am, many decades later excitedly looking forward to trying a new variety of pot marigold, *C. officinalis* 'Orange Star' (fig. 13), this one given me by my daughter, in whom the gardening genes flourish. I am also going to try *C. o.* ex 'Snow Princess' from the HPS 2019 seed list.

The house of my childhood faced south, and

the path to the door was bordered by lavender, whose fragrance I loved. Over the years I have grown many lavenders, with greater or lesser success. One of the main problems for me was keeping them rejuvenated by really quite hard pruning. I probably was inclined to 'dab' at it, so that they eventually got too leggy. Ironically, now that I am enjoying the slightly irresponsible feeling that goes with old(ish) age, I would make a better job of it. This certainly applies to how I treat my favourite indoor, scented geranium *Pelargonium fragrans* that I brought with me to the Hebrides. It is kept ruthlessly pinched, trimmed and groomed, all of which of course release that unique scent of turpentine as a reward (fig. 14). I have found that in this mostly equable – if windy – climate it makes an excellent filler for summer containers, keeping nice and compact, and of course it is ridiculously easy to propagate (fig. 15).



Fig. 14



Fig. 15 *Pelargonium fragrans*, with its neat little turpentine-scented leaves, makes a good filler plant for a container

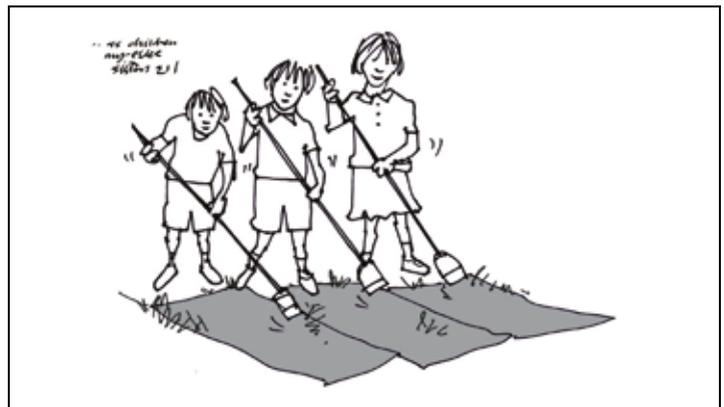


Fig. 16



Fig. 17 A wild water mint making itself at home next to *Ajuga reptans* 'Burgundy Glow'



Fig. 18

As children, my older sisters and I were encouraged to make gardens of our own, and unusually we were given patches of decent ground that were in full sun (fig. 16). I can still remember the excitement of designing my patch, with a curved path leading to a little bench surrounded by quick-growing annuals; candytuft and nasturtium being what I remember best. I must have absorbed the notion from overheard horticultural conversations, that for a path to work satisfactorily it should take a route that a person can follow with comfort. So, many years later, when my husband and I had our own first garden, it seemed the most sensible thing to let the path take the instinctive route that we had trodden between garage and house, on moving in during snowy weather.

Although I had surreptitiously planted some culinary herbs in the garden of our previous rented flat, it was when we had this first one of our own that we could garden more seriously. I can still remember the thrill of

putting in our first plants around the small patio, on a January evening when there was just enough daylight left after having tucked up our daughter safely in bed for the night. This first garden was tiny, but we grew vegetables and herbs, including a vigorous form of horsemint (which grew as an escapee) in the virgin, albeit very heavy, clay soil. So it was very much in character for me to pop a piece of 'wild' water mint into this our latest garden (fig. 17). It has a good peppermint scent, and the early purple-leaved growth is very handsome.

And so I can see that my gardening life continues to be influenced by the plants I encountered with all my senses, both as a child and as an adult. Now that advancing years are more evident, I am aware that *common* sense should also play a part. Perhaps I should spend some quiet evening hours working on an embroidered sampler with the message 'Do not take on more than you can sensibly deal with'. Little hope of that I suspect (fig. 18). 🌿

**Judy Harry** confesses that, despite years of gardening, she is still at the learning stage, as can be seen from this article.

In a previous article I bemoaned the fact that some HPS *Lysimachia ephemereum* seeds didn't seem to be what they purported to be. I was wrong: they are. I offer my apologies and thanks to whoever it was who contributed them to the Seed Distribution.