



Fig. 1

I am sure that we have all had the experience of specific plants that grow well for other people, but as soon as we get our hands on them they just go into terminal decline. Or the opposite (much less common), when they unexpectedly thrive! I have noted below some of my thoughts on why, based on my own gardening experiences.

Is water the problem?

Access to this commodity is vital. Recently the Norfolk and Suffolk Group of the Hardy Plant Society had their first autumn/winter indoor talk, which was given by the head gardener of a well-known estate. One of the many interesting and pertinent comments he made was that the majority of us water too frequently; he went on to say that we only need to intervene when a plant's leaves turn brown (fig. 1). This is in relation to established plants, which do not need the cossetting we give them.

He was more a fan of mulching than watering, and quite rightly so. However, in my experience, in a small garden where each plant's performance counts, a dismal, dead-looking plant sticks out like a sore thumb, unless you cut it right down to the ground. Secondly, although really it is just a niggle and easily rectified; birds just love to scratch and flick away any mulching material we put down, so we are constantly sweeping up and putting it back in place.

Are the conditions right for that plant?

It is possible that, where our design-led decisions overcome our more pragmatic instincts, we are tempted to place our plants in unsuitable positions, and they sulk and begin to deteriorate. Garden rooms are very different from rooms in the house; unlike furniture, plants are living things and

have needs. Treating them simply as objets d'art in the garden doesn't always work.

Take the stunning Chatham Island forget-me-not, *Myosotidium hortensia* (figs 2 & 3), which I first struggled with around twenty years ago. The common factor for success we concluded, seemed to depend on precisely where you lived around here in Norfolk. If you lived on the coast, it grew in open ground and set seed which produced seedlings. Further inland by only a mile or so, and you needed to grow it in a pot and take it in during the winter. This was several years ago now, so perhaps global warming will have improved my luck in growing this plant and getting it through the winter.

For this or other reasons, there will always be plants that deny us the pleasure of growing them successfully. Like the lovely Russell lupins that seemed to be growing

Meditations on gardening failure

Andrew Lawes



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Fig. 2 *Myosotidium hortensia*



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Fig. 3 *M. h.* flower

everywhere in Norfolk when I was a child. They never established themselves as perennials, for me at any rate. The more woody, blue and yellow types however flourish, even on road-side verges.

Shared experience versus published advice

Focusing on the detail – which is arguably more the strength of the HPS – is

our collective knowledge about individual plants and their needs. One only has to overhear a conversation between a group of HPS members on a garden visit: the discussion is almost always about the assets and liabilities of the plants around them (fig.4). I am sure that it is as much through our failures as our successes that we have acquired practical knowledge

of plants, their good and bad points, and how to grow them.

If only we could collect – and somehow access – this body of knowledge, we would have our own plant Wikipedia. Though such hard-earned knowledge may at times be at odds with the accepted wisdom disseminated in mainstream gardening books, it has authenticity.



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Fig. 4

Low self-esteem versus conspiracy theory

There are plants that always give us the cold shoulder and, no matter how hard we try, they just seem determined to decline and eventually fizzle out. This is discouraging, and it is tempting to think that it must be our fault (fig. 5). The feeling is often strong enough to prevent us from trying again, particularly with the object of our failure. Once bitten, twice shy.



Fig. 5

Other questions can also spring to mind: is it me? Am I failing to understand the needs of this plant? Or, is there a problem with how this particular one has been bred – more to induce the ‘impulse buy’ than to provide a good garden doer? I am reminded of a speaker at a local meeting of ours several years ago, who touched on this when he cited the way certain bamboos had been produced by micro-

propagation. They just didn’t like this method, and produced sickly plants.

Which brings up ‘the conspiracy’: the natural growth model of a plant is quite unlike that of a business (fig. 6). Ignoring seed dispersion, plants naturally tend to spread at a ‘zonal’ pace, and with a few exceptions they gradually fill in the area around them. Commercially though, they are often treated like battery



Fig. 6

chickens, in their mass production and subsequent transport around our country and the world. A commodity bred to catch our eye, or lure us with perfume.

Some plants just like to do their own thing!

Some plants just need be left alone. For me, it is *Dryopteris sieboldii* (fig. 7). Now I just love this fern, even though it isn’t particularly dainty or pretty, but perhaps because it is different from most other hardy ferns. In the right place it is quite architectural. It may be nearer the truth to admit that I love it because it challenges me, and is not easy to please. Whatever the reason and after several failures, I found that it flourished when I adopted the view towards it of what behaviourists refer to when dealing with difficult children: ‘tactically ignoring’. I made sure that it was in a suitable position and that all its basic

Fig. 7 *Dryopteris sieboldii*



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Fig. 8 *Tulipa sprengeri*

needs were met, but from then on I pretended not to see it whenever I passed by. It grew!

Do they really not like us?

I enjoyed the article by Judy Pollitt on *Tulipa sprengeri* in the Autumn 2019 *Cornucopia* entitled 'It loves me, it loves me not' (fig. 8). In the first paragraph, she refers to the owners of the garden they were visiting, who told her that *T. sprengeri* would only grow for you if they liked you. Is it possible that, no matter how long one has been gardening, there are some plants that could be referred to as anomalies, in that no matter what, they just do not grow for us?

I should have investigated further

Subsurface conditions have a vital effect on plant growth.



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Fig. 9

We had a border alongside the drive, and to enhance it we planted seven of those splendid Italian cypress, *Cupressus sempervirens*, in the autumn prior to an anticipated garden opening the following July. Come July most of them had had to be replaced; the new ones then staggered through the rest of that year until they too started looking shabby. So I heaved them all out and re-planted with fastigate yews – bound to survive and look good – tough as old boots. Within a year they were all removed too (fig. 9).

We were aware of our dry habitat; each planting hole had been well dug and the plantings initially looked good, so there appeared to be no reason for these failures. But when I had the holes dug deeper, we found an iron-

hard pan in the subsoil layer, which probably inhibited drainage in the wet months, and then acted as a barrier in the dryer months, preventing access for the roots to moisture held lower down.

Where does success lie?

Knowledge is power, gained by experience, through which we discover the merits of a plant: its attractiveness, hardiness and longevity. So, although we may not have been very successful in our attempts at growing one of these apparently 'temperamental specimens', we must not discount the journey we have taken in our attempts to do so. And as long as we are able to persevere and learn, we can rest assured that what is happening is of value. 🌱

Andrew Lawes has always said that he has lost as many plants in the garden as he has successfully grown. Members may wish to compare their own garden failures and successes with some that he has mentioned.