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President's perspective – plants, people, places

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Fig. 1 *Hamamelis x intermedia* 'Spanish Spider'

One of the most pleasurable, if obvious, rewards of being a member of the RHS plant committees is the opportunities it brings of seeing and discussing those plants brought together in the Society's Trials. Most plant trials are held at the Society's Wisley Garden, while others are held elsewhere in Britain. One of these, concerning witch-hazels (*Hamamelis*), I attended in January last year, at Chris Lane's nursery in Kent. It has been a long-running trial, given the number of new cultivars made available from sources in Europe and north America. Many of my previous visits have of necessity taken place on typically cold, finger-tingling winter days, but on this occasion the skies were blue and the sun shone brightly, encouraging us to linger over each and every entry as we discussed its merits.

The plants themselves were in full bloom, row upon row on a sloping, exposed site, the spidery-petalled clusters ranging through various shades of yellow to orange and red. Of the many cultivars seen, the following were particularly outstanding, all belonging to the hybrid *H. x intermedia* (*H. japonica* x *H. mollis*): *H. x i.* 'Alexandra', petals fiery red and orange; *H. x i.* 'Spanish Spider', petals pale yellow with reddish base (fig. 1); *H. x i.* 'Pallida' (an old faithful), petals pale yellow (fig. 2); and *H. x i.* 'Harry', petals old gold with red basal flush (fig. 3). All are vigorous, large shrubs of spreading growth, which can however be tailored to suit a smaller garden, by pruning back the previous year's growth to three or four buds after flowering.

An overnight frost at the end of January left many of the plants in my



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Fig. 2 *H. x i.* 'Pallida'



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Fig. 3 *H. x i.* 'Harry'

Fig. 4 *Dryopteris cycadina*Fig. 6 *Polypodium interjectum*Fig. 5 *P. s.* 'Plumosomultilobum' with *R. a.* 'John Redmond'

garden with decorative white encrustations on the fronds, especially of the ferns, including a *Dryopteris cycadina* (fig. 4) and a *Polystichum setiferum* 'Plumosomultilobum', which contrasted beautifully with the stunning red berries of a butcher's broom, *Ruscus aculeatus* 'John Redmond', a compact dwarf form which fruits reliably every year (fig. 5).

Hardy ferns, particularly the native ones, have long been a special delight to me ever since I first came to know them as a boy in Lancashire. It was a joy therefore when, the following month, while walking with my wife and friends through the woods above the river Teme at Ludlow in Shropshire, we came across a whole drift of *Polypodium interjectum* with lush, deeply lobed

green fronds (fig. 6). This is a really handsome wintergreen native fern, which one only occasionally sees in general cultivation. On the same day we saw the white-flowered *Symphytum orientale* growing in a shady place below a section of Ludlow's old town wall (fig. 7). A native of western Russia and Turkey, I first saw this species growing in and around Cambridge Botanic Garden, from whence it no doubt spread by seed. It is naturalised in many parts of Britain, especially in eastern and southern England, and is normally the first of the robust comfrees to flower. To prevent it from seeding around in the garden, simply remove and destroy the old flowering shoots once the flowers have faded.

Another plant that can seed around in suitable situations is *Echium pininana*, seedlings of which I have several times planted in my garden. These don't always survive to flowering but I enjoy the big, bold rosettes of bristly leaves before they succumb. Two or three self-sown seedlings have appeared in the dry border near our front door, where they provide a striking accompaniment in spring to *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii* and a yellow-flowered and fragrant *Coronilla valentina* subsp. *glauca* (fig. 8). When frosts are forecast I generally cover the echiums

with fleece, much to the bafflement of early morning postmen and paper boys!

Once April gets underway there are perennials in my garden performing in variety. Leading the way is a sturdy clump of *Arisaema ringens*, whose curious hooded flowers shelter beneath a canopy of bold, trifoliate smoky-stalked leaves (fig. 9). Of all the species I have grown and tried to grow, this remains the most reliable, and one of the most distinctive.

Other favourites I grow are the species and cultivars of epimedium, both the yellow-flowered, western Asiatic *E. pinnatum* subsp. *colchicum* and *E. perralderianum*, and their hybrid *E. x perralchicum*. The first of these was a collection I made in 1979 in a wood above the Black Sea in Abkhazia, an internationally recognised autonomous republic of Georgia. It is an eager runner and has required several thinnings to prevent it from taking over, but is the perfect ground cover for shade where space is not a problem. Its leaves remain green until late winter, when I remove them to make way for the developing flower racemes and new leaves.

I have also grown a good number of the Chinese species, and was fortunate enough to be one of those involved in the introduction

of the wave of new species which entered our gardens in the 1980s. My very first species introduction was that of *E. acuminatum* from 'Emei Shan' (Mount Omei), Sichuan in 1980. Not all the species I planted here have flourished however, and today I am left with a small though interesting selection, together with several of the numerous hybrids which have since appeared. One of these I recently acquired is the charming *Epimedium* 'Milky Way' with its sprays of white star-like blooms, while the young foliage emerges an attractive wine-red (fig. 10).

Two years ago I was given a potted plant of *Viola* 'Heartthrob', which immediately attracted me with its comparatively large, heart-shaped green leaves possessing a bold central dark-purple stain (fig. 11). Publicity photographs I have seen of it on the web show it with equally attractive pale to dark-violet coloured flowers with a white throat – a pretty combination – but it is worth growing for its foliage alone, which for me is at its best outside from spring through summer.

Another perennial I have been growing, this one in a large pot, is *Pilea matsudai* 'Taiwan Silver' (fig. 12), a non-stinging member of the nettle family *Urticaceae*. One might mistake it for a nettle too



Fig. 7 *Symphytum orientale*



Fig. 8 *Echimium*, euphorbia & coronilla



Fig. 9 *Arisaema ringens*

Fig. 10 *Epimedium* 'Milky Way'Fig. 11 *Viola* 'Heartthrob'Fig. 12 *Pilea matsudai* 'Taiwan Silver'

were it not for the large leaves, boldly toothed and prettily ribbed, and painted above with two white stripes. The variegation of the leaves is striking; a real eye-catcher. Two things to remember however: it is a rapid grower with multiple sappy stems to 60cm or more, which soon flag in dry weather. Secondly, it is not particularly hardy unless grown in a warm sheltered place. I cut mine to the base in autumn and move the pot into my cold greenhouse over winter. It is easily increased by division.

A visit to John Massey's garden at Ashwood Nurseries in late May provided a wealth of interesting plants (no surprise), including drifts of a beautiful foxglove, *Digitalis* 'Limoncello' with sumptuous spikes of large, luminous lemon-yellow blooms from pale green buds (fig. 13). They were growing in a border with a dark shady background, against which they shone like torches. It is a biennial plant, but well worth growing from seed. By way of contrast, in a sunny border opposite were planted bold groups of dame's violet, *Hesperis matronalis*, both white and violet flowered (fig. 14). These two contrasting plantings perfectly demonstrated John's flair for placing shrubs and perennials where they will flourish and attract attention.



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Fig. 13 *Digitalis* 'Limoncello'



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Fig. 14 *Hesperis matronalis*

The following day we attended a memorial gathering of some 250 friends and family of the late Veronica Cross, who died on 10th April. Many well-known figures from the gardening world were there, and stories about Veronica and her love of plants as well as horses, were shared on a day punctuated by gentle rain. We were all invited to wander in the gardens where over many years Veronica had planted a vast array of perennials and woodies, and it was then I came across a beautiful young tree that was new to me: *Davidia involucrata* 'Lady Sunshine' (fig. 15), its leaves displaying a bold irregular border of creamy-white; one of the most striking variegated plants I have ever seen. Veronica would have smiled to know that.



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Fig. 15 *Davidia involucrata* 'Lady Sunshine'

Visiting a Suffolk garden open for charity in July, I was impressed by a sizeable clump of *Phygellius x rectus* 'Moonraker' (fig. 16) growing

in a sunny border: its long erect panicles of drooping, pale-yellow, tubular flowers attracting a host of insects including bees. This striking and reliable sub-shrub or perennial is one of a number of clones raised and named by the late Peter Dummer, for many years Master Propagator and prodigious raiser of good garden hybrids at Hillier Nurseries. Other clones of this hybrid he named are *P. x r.* 'Salmon Leap' and *P. x r.* 'Devil's Tears', both with flowers in the orange-red spectrum.



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Fig. 16 *Phygellius x rectus* 'Moonraker'



Fig. 17 *Clematis x durandii*



Fig. 18 Rosy Hardy with *Verbascum undulatum*



Fig. 19 *Scutellaria tournefortii* backed by *Hedera pastuchovii* 'Ann Ala'

The owner of the garden told me that she regularly cut back the old stems of her plant almost to the base in late winter, to encourage a fresh crop of strong new growth.

On the same day, in the garden of our friend the garden photographer Michael Warren in Ipswich, I was reminded not for the first time of the qualities of *Clematis x durandii*, an old hybrid (*C. integrifolia* x *C. lanuginosa*) raised in France in about 1870 (fig. 17). The dark blue, four-sepalled flowers are produced from June to September on plants that rarely exceed 2.5m, which makes it the perfect subject for the smaller garden where it can be trained to a wall or fence, over a large shrub, or into a small tree such as an apple. Michael was growing it with other clematis on a fence, and a lovely sight it was too. One of its parents, *C. lanuginosa*, was first introduced to British cultivation from China by Robert Fortune in 1850, since when the true species has apparently been lost, though its quality of flower and gentle growth rate are found in many of its hybrids. I was thrilled therefore in December to receive a small seedling of the wild plant (what a Christmas present!), which I hope to grow on for future propagation; wish me luck!

A visit to Hardys Cottage Garden Plants in

July introduced me to two special plants: *Verbascum undulatum*, a monocarpic Greek mullein whose striking two-year-old, non-flowering rosettes are succeeded by dense, erect columns of yellow flowers (fig. 18). Rosy Hardy also showed me an unnamed scutellaria which we subsequently identified as *S. tournefortii*: an herbaceous, clump-forming perennial to 60cm, rare in cultivation but hardy and attractive with erect spikes of small, two-lipped, creamy-white flowers (fig. 19). Native to Turkey and northern Iran, it is suitable for shade in most soils.

From the small and white to the big and bright. A visit to the RHS Garden Wisley in early November was particularly memorable for the powerful clumps of *Kniphofia bruceae* I found growing in a border at the southern end of the old house, close to the now defunct main entrance to the gardens (fig. 20). The erect, stout-stemmed spikes of pale yellow flowers from pale, orange-tinted buds were truly awesome even from a distance, and these were supported by bold, green, arching to drooping foliage. I had never come across this species before, and on checking the literature I discovered an intriguing tale of a plant first discovered in bushland in South Africa sometime before 1800.



Fig. 20 *Kniphofia bruceae*

It seems not to have been found again until 1954 by a botanist, Eileen Bruce, after whom it was named. In the wild where it remains rare if not endangered, it is known to produce spikes up to 2m or more, hence the name 'giant poker' given to it by one of its admirers. Whether such heights can be expected of it in British cultivation remains to be seen, and will depend on climatic and growing conditions. It has

been grown successfully in the comparatively balmy conditions of the Ventnor Botanic Garden on the Isle of Wight.

The British weather, like our politics last year, was totally unpredictable: the long hot spells of summer followed by ferocious winds and biblical rain. As I write these notes in early January of the New Year, the weather continues in its extremes of wind and rain. The politics meanwhile,

who knows? Like most gardeners I shall be relying on the world of plants and plantspeople to provide the positive and pleasant highlights in my life; that, together with a loving family.

I cannot end this article without expressing my concern and sympathy for all those members whose gardens, if not their lives and properties, have been affected as a result of floods or other catastrophes. 🌸