

Just the Wrong Side of Wild

Helen Lamb

Our third of an acre 'cottage garden' lies at the bottom of a river valley. Idyllic at times; not so much when the river rises apace. It's mainly sand and gravel with a band of horrid marl snaking through, which the trees struggle to push their roots beyond, a neutral pH and a dry and hungry soil.

Being an avid HPS member for many years, I've tried to grow... EVERYTHING. We've aspired to be 'green' yet failed miserably because of our desire for moisture lovers, acidophiles, rare woodland beauties and fewer weeds. We've leaky piped much of the garden, nuclear attacked with pesticides, nematodes, flames even, to tackle hateful bugs such as vine weevil and pernicious weeds such as that dratted little yellow *Geum*.

For a few years all in the garden was rosy. And then my work got in the way. REALLY got in the way. I stopped gardening. The rare and delicate succumbed under the tenacity of stronger, more resilient opportunists. The labour-intensive beauty we were creating gradually diminished in depth and variety. I felt so guilt ridden and so overwhelmed by the scale of the task needed to pull it back from the brink that it was simply less painful to turn the other cheek. My husband valiantly soldiered on with the hedges, lawns and veg plot but he was fighting a losing battle.

Enough doom. I've retired. I've gone outside, taken a deep breath and found that there are indeed benefits to all this chaos. Nature's bounty is finding a balance. Wildlife has arrived in abundance. And I have learnt which plants are survivors.

The small pond and stream planted around with *Cornus* and underplanted with geraniums in variety, *Omphalodes*, primulas, thalictrums, camassias, rogersias, *Alchemilla* and bulbs galore are naturalising beautifully because I've not been tinkering. The leaky pipe has stopped leaking though. The bog's not boggy. *Geranium phaeum* has undoubtedly won. But amongst the drifts of *G. phaeum* a pair of bullfinches eat the seeds, young nuthatches come to bathe in the stream and damselflies dart to and fro then hang from *Iris pseudacorus* to lay their eggs in the water.

Roses are tough. Those planted in the hedges have coped remarkably. *Rosa californica* 'Plena' is enormous and very distinctive. The delicate creamy yellow of *Rosa cantabrigiensis* ranges high through *Ilex aquifolium* 'Silver Queen' and sparkles next to the rather subtle *R. roxburghii*, abuzz with honey bees. The soft colours of the richly scented musk roses 'Felicia', 'Penelope', 'Buff Beauty', 'Cornelia' (she'd been very slow to start but is now climbing through a russet apple tree) promise hips galore and are happy to be grown in long grass. By the herb garden, *Rosa mundi* has spread via layering to be a mass of the maddest flowers, an interesting contrast to *R.* 'Ferdinand Pichard' and *R. gallica* var *officinalis* (I'm planning to make rose petal harissa with that). *R.* 'Scharlachglut', a scarlet hussy of a rose, flowers her socks off all summer and naturally, has enormous hips... In the moody border, *R. glauca*, *R.* 'Tuscany Superb' and *R.* 'Charles de Mills' battle it out with a cut leaved *Sambucus nigra*.

Itea illicifolia clammers up the north side of the house, along with *Jasminum officinale*, *Vitis coignetiae*, *Akebia quinata*, *Lonicera sempervirens*, *Hydrangea*

petiolaris etc. We discovered the hard way that *Itea* is a food plant of the hornet when one evening we wondered what that loud rasping noise was above our ensuite bathroom. Very scary - a veritable hornet's nest. We had to get a man in.

In the gravel garden, *Genista aetnensis*, a wonderful July flowering tree which casts virtually no shadow, tops drifts of *Cistus* sp., *Perovskia*, *Phlomis russeliana*, *Stipa gigantea*, *Knautia macedonica*, *Eryngium planum* and *Acanthus mollis*. Red *Centranthus ruber* and *Origanum* have sown themselves around, of course. The benefit is that the Hummingbird Hawk Moth visits on a hot day - a joy to watch.

The main herbaceous border, previously lovingly dug and enriched, is exhibiting survival of the fittest. Oh dear! Surprising winners are double *Delphinium* 'Alice Artindale', *Polemonium* 'Lambrook Mauve', *Campanula latiloba* 'Alba', *C. lactiflora* 'Prichard's Variety' and 'Loddon Anna', *Hemerocallis* sp., *Veratrum nigrum*, Pacific Coast Iris, *Eupatorium cannabinum* 'Flore Pleno', *Galega x hartlandii* 'Alba' and *G.* 'His Majesty', *Geranium maculatum* 'Beth Chatto', *Aster novae-angliae* cvs, *Euphorbia sikkimensis* underplanted with *Galanthus elwesii*, *Macleaya* 'Spetchley Ruby' and *Aconitum carmichaelii*. Hollyhocks bring it to life in summer and the *Clematis viticella* cultivars bloom in abundance. *Clematis* 'Gravetye Beauty' and *C. x durandii* are spectacular and quite a surprise.

So, to all those I've loved and lost, I'm so sorry. I'm just left with the labels to love. I'm going to try again now I have time and energy to bring to the garden. I'm going to work with nature rather than try to stretch the bounds of possibility because of obsession and acquisitorial tendencies. If you see me at an HPS meeting toying with some delicate, acid and damp loving rarity, please stop me. Thrust a happy sun worshiper at me instead and be my conscience. (I'm keeping the newly planted *Cardiocrinum giganteum* though and tending it carefully, lily beetle and slugs permitting. Just can't resist, you see.)

Oh, and the benefits of the 'wrong side of wild' gardening continue. A huge swarm of bees has just arrived and gone down the inglenook chimney. I think we need that man again....