

Winter Performance Again

Margaret Edmunds

I am responding to Rob Cole's article in the last Newsletter, 'A Winter Performer' and would like to reinforce his assessment of *Erica carnea* from my own experience. It is truly a worthwhile performer in winter.

Like Rob, I followed the fashion of the sixties in a garden that has long been left behind, but I have every reason to rejoice that my predecessors in my present garden did the same thing.

First of all, in the front garden after decades of growth, there are swathes of *Erica carnea* in two shades of pink and white - colourful, frost-proof, wind-proof and not a weed in sight. In the summer they form an unassuming background to plants I have added such as lavenders, geraniums, and sedums. It is such a trouble free arrangement and pleases me because I dislike working in front gardens!

But more important are the *Erica carnea* planted on the bank that I see from my bedroom window at the back of the bungalow. Six feet from the back of the building is a retaining wall, about three feet high, with two feet of level planting space before a sloping bank rises quite steeply to the garden proper (mercifully almost level). There are just two plants of the heather, each four feet across. One is upright and the other has cascaded down the lower part of the bank trying to escape from the embraces of one of three 'dwarf' conifers, planted in the fashion of the time to accompany heathers by people who believed 'dwarf' meant three or four feet, not thirty-four!

It was several years before it occurred to me that I didn't have to put up with that dark green barrier, blocking out the sky and the sun. I kept the one shielding me from the North East, but removed the other two thus transforming the view from my window and enabling me to create (what has turned out to be) a delightful winter garden.

The key plants, the anchor plants, are of course the heathers - a lovely rose pink, in flower from November through into April. At first, they are accompanied by patches of snowdrops and *Cyclamen coum* planted in the pockets of soil amongst the rocky outcrops, followed by *Crocus chrysanthus* 'Blue Pearl' and *Crocus tommasinianus*, *Chionodoxa* and *Tulipa turkestanica*. Here, too, is *Ranunculus calandrinoides* (a plant we discussed at the February meeting).

Then they enhance the blooming of *Daphne mezereum* f. *alba* planted behind the retaining wall, and hellebores in shades of deep burgundy, pale pink and white.

When they have faded, they become a weed-proof backdrop to *Phuopsis stylosa*, *Geranium* 'Brookside' and G. 'Orion' as they tumble down the bank.

Even if I could, I would not choose to grow summer flowering heathers because at that time of the year there are so many plants more versatile in flower and foliage needing space. But *Erica carnea* is indeed a great asset in winter.