



As you might expect of a well-travelled plantsman, the Hampshire garden of **Roy Lancaster** is filled with beautiful and rare plants, many with fascinating stories attached. Roy reveals what his plot means to him, and introduces ten of his most treasured plants

# Step into my living library

**‘HOW BIG IS YOUR GARDEN?’** is a question I am frequently asked by those who, having read my articles or attended my talks, imagine that I own acres rather than square yards. In fact, my garden, in a ‘leafy suburb’ near Southampton, is one third of an acre (1,350sq m) bounded by my neighbours’ hedges, principally cherry laurel. Our house is late Victorian (1896) with a small garden to the front (north) and a larger, sloping area to the rear (south). My wife Sue and I moved here in 1982 from the chalk of Winchester, attracted in part by the nature of the soil. In the front, our garden is acidic Bagshot Sand over gravel, providing a place to grow plants that like good drainage; at the rear is London Clay, suiting a wide range of plants. So, two different soil types, a relatively sheltered site and the four walls of the house promised me ample opportunities to try a wide range of

temperate plants – and so it has proved. Let me say right away that my garden reflects my passion, including my idiosyncrasies, for the plant world. It reflects too, my need, given my freelance career since 1980, to have as many plants as is reasonably possible growing ‘under my nose’, readily accessible for reference.

## My growing collection

Within a few years I assembled a varied collection of trees, shrubs, climbers, conifers, perennials (including bulbs) ferns and grasses planted out in beds and borders, together with a collection of less-hardy plants in pots placed around the house, especially on the sunny patio. The same mix has been pursued to the present day. Many plants I have eventually given away, releasing space for new arrivals, while others have inevitably died or grown too large and have been removed. ▶

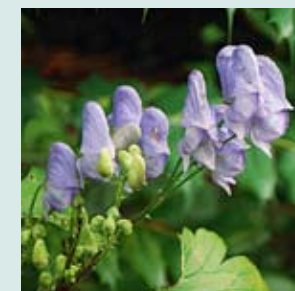
**ON HOME GROUND** For all his travels, Roy Lancaster’s garden (above) is one of his favourite places.

## TREATS FROM ROY’S GARDEN

Below is a small selection of some of the plants that Roy most enjoys growing in his own garden (continues on p835):

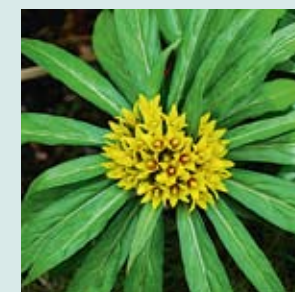
### *Aconitum japonicum*

I love so many of the monkshoods but this has to be my favourite. It flowers in September in the shady lower end of our rear garden, producing a large clump of loosely arching stems to 1.2m (4ft) with large, deeply lobed leaves, reddish tinged in autumn, and dense bold clusters of big, pale blue-helmeted blooms. I could hardly believe my eyes when they first appeared.



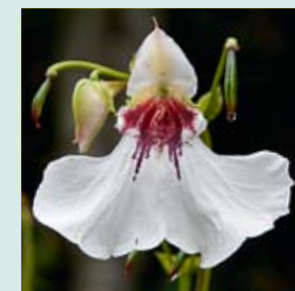
### *Lysimachia paridiformis* var. *stenophylla*

This relative of our native yellow loosestrife I have seen in the mountains of western China where it enjoys moist shade. Here it is an evergreen (in truth, wintergreen) perennial with 30cm (12in) shoots and terminal ruffs of long-pointed leaves. From these in summer erupt clusters of golden-yellow flowers.



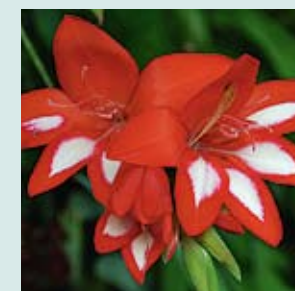
### *Impatiens tinctoria*

I have grown several *Impatiens* but this giant reaching 1.8m (6ft) or more is my favourite. I first saw it flourishing in the garden of the late Patrick Syngé. He told me he introduced it from the Rwenzori Mountains in East Africa. Its white, long-spurred flowers have magenta stains in the mouth and appear from mid-summer until the first frosts. I protect its dahlia-like roots over winter with a mulch.



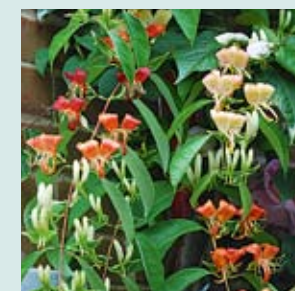
### *Gladiolus cardinalis*

Having read about this plant and habitat in South Africa’s Western Cape ‘in sheer cliffs close to waterfalls where the roots are constantly drenched in water’, I had long given up on it. Then I saw it flowering in a friend’s hilltop garden. Thanks to his generosity, I have two plants, one in sun and one in shade in our rear garden. Over the last two years both have flowered in June.



### *Lonicera calcarata*

This magnificent Chinese honeysuckle has reached 8m (26ft) on the south wall of the house and would double or treble this were I to live in a skyscraper. Its paired flowers in the leaf axils from May into June turn from white through apricot to rich orange, with all three colours on the same shoot. Collected by my friend Mikinori Ogisu and planted in 1998, it is proving virtually impossible to propagate.





### Plants that tell a tale

The origins of the plants are equally varied. Some have been given to me by friends, some I have exchanged or bought, and many are of wild origin having been collected by myself or others. At any one time I have grown up to a thousand different plants in the garden, all of which have been recorded in my notebooks or on cards. Given that all have stories to tell, I regard the garden as both a living library and a celebration of the plant world. Like any collector, I enjoy the buzz of growing plants new and unusual, as well as tales of the people with whom they are associated – gardeners, nurserymen, plant hunters, sea captains, adventurers and others. I also appreciate the appearance of plants and their effect on the senses and the

memories they awaken. (Some of my favourites are shown on these pages.)

Sometimes this means that I will be strolling round the garden, delighting in the plants as individuals, aware of their histories and origins. At other times, seated perhaps, I will be enjoying the equal pleasure of watching the movement of stems in a breeze or the play of light on leaves and, often, the activities of bird or insect visitors.

### Garden for all the family

Like many gardeners I value those moments when I simply stand and stare just as much as I do those planting and pruning. There needs to be time in the gardener's life for thinking as well as doing: both can in equal measures stimulate, relax and refresh.

**THREE-WAY SPLIT** To the back of the Lancasters' house is a terrace and lawn; beyond this, marked by a low hedge (below), Roy has created an area of mixed planting.

As for the garden's design, I don't mind admitting that any such features are thanks to Sue's influence. I have been happy to accommodate her suggestions on this, which have been at no detriment to my plant collections – no more than those of our children's play activities in their earlier years when cricket, croquet, football and other games were joined in with gusto by their parents. After all, a family garden should be more than a collection of plants, and the sounds of laughter are just as therapeutic as the sounds of silence. ■

Roy Lancaster VMH is a member of the RHS Woody Plant Committee

**i** Sue and Roy Lancaster's garden is not open to the general public

## TAKE A VIDEO TOUR

@ To see more of Roy Lancaster's garden, and the plants of interest growing there, as well as more insights from Roy on how it has changed over the years, visit [www.rhs.org.uk/thegarden](http://www.rhs.org.uk/thegarden) and follow the links with the December issue



The trees Roy has planted at the back edge of the lawn are (from left to right): *Carpinus fangiana*, silver-green-leaved *Sorbus wardii* and *Acer triflorum*

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## TREATS FROM ROY'S GARDEN

Below is a small selection of some of the plants that Roy most enjoys growing in his own garden (continued from p833):

### *Mahonia huiliensis*

Regarded by some as a selection of *M. duclouxiana*, this fine-looking evergreen shrub, collected by Mikinori Ogisu in China and planted in our rear garden in 1999, has now reached 2.4m (8ft) tall. Its bold, pinnate leaf rosettes are spectacularly crowned in September with long, erect, multi-fingered racemes of glowing, golden-yellow flowers. I find it quite irresistible.



### Acer 'White Tigress'

One of the best snake-bark maples, this tree has smooth green bark marked with silvery stripes, particularly good on young stems. The bold, bright green leaves turn butter-yellow in autumn and its pleasing vase-shaped habit to 9m (30ft) would adorn any garden on almost any soil. Mine, growing in the front garden, was planted in 1994, and was a gift from a nurseryman friend in Ohio.



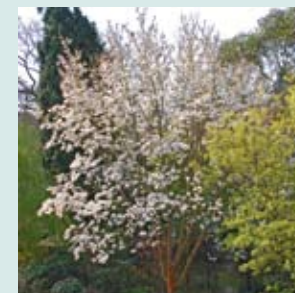
### *Davidia involucrata* 'Sonoma'

Chinese dove trees are among my favourites, but this slower-growing selection is notable for its extra-large flowers borne on plants of a young age and small size. My specimen, just 2m (6½ft) tall, produced 19 blooms this May with bracts as much as 20cm (8in) long. Quite spectacular, but plants are not as yet freely available.



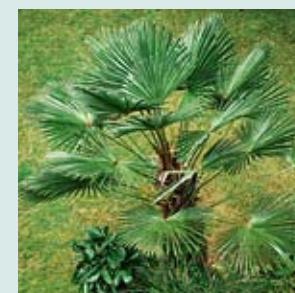
### *Magnolia cylindrica*

Introduced as wild collected seed from the Shanghai Botanic Garden in 1984, my tree now dominates the rear garden. It has a patina of orange algae on its shaded stem and its crown is decorated with white, pink-based blooms in April, followed in September by knobbly, red-pink fruits. At 12m (39ft), this is the British and Irish Champion, according to the Tree Register of the British Isles.



### *Trachycarpus wagnerianus*

This handsome tree of uncertain origin has reached 3m (10ft) having been planted south of the house in 1996. Closely related to taller *Trachycarpus fortunei* (Chusan or windmill palm), it differs in its smaller leaves with shorter stalks and stiff, non-drooping segments. Its shaggy, fibrous stem and yellow, branched flower clusters in May add to this palm's appeal.



PHOTOGRAPH: ROY LANCASTER