

Ursula Buchan

Oh, you should have seen it... next week



NEIL HEPWORTH

ALL GARDENERS know failure. It comes in many guises. Peas get mildew, polygonatum are skeletonized by sawfly larvae, flowering in carefully planned plant associations doesn't coincide and vital structural box hedges get blight. Some failures and disappointments we can shrug off with a self-deprecating laugh, but others buffet and bruise us, leaving an ache of regret. I knew that kind of failure this summer.

When our daughter said at Christmas that she would like to marry at home on 10 July, I thought how lovely it would be to have large pots on the house terrace, filled with flowering lilies, of a colour to match the pink, cream and green scheme she had devised for church and marquee. I bought and planted bulbs that I thought would fit the bill – *Lilium* 'Vermeer', *L.* 'Belle Epoque' and *L.* 'Antonia' – to flower in July and August. I thought I might have to force them a bit, as they were planted comparatively late, but there was still a good chance they would flower with great distinction at the right moment. I didn't make much of a thing of it with my daughter, thank goodness, for, at the time, we were more concerned with whether the myrtle had survived the winter, and could be picked for her bouquet. (It did, and it was.)

I kept the 40cm (15in) pots in a sheltered place in shade while the roots formed, then put them in the sunshine as the stems elongated. I made intricate and attractive hazel twig structures to support the stems, and examined them daily for signs of slugs and lily beetle. From the second part of June, I watered and liquid fed as temperatures rose and the rain ceased.

Alas, my original intention to force the lilies gently in the glasshouse became buried under a myriad preoccupations concerning tents, caterers, orders of service, mulching, staking and deadheading. In any event, planting them in such large pots had made them well nigh impossible to move about. When I had a moment to think, I was reassured by the sunny weather. I trusted to luck. These temperature-sensitive plants can be forced into flower for Chelsea in May, so surely, I thought, in a warm summer, they would flower in the month when they were supposed to, even taking into account the late planting.

However, that was to ignore the many cold nights in May and June. By the first week of July, it was obvious that the plump buds at the top of every lily stem would not open in time. Almost, but not quite. But almost was nowhere near good enough. As the guests walked into the garden, and passed the tall masses of green leaf and hazel twig in the terrace pots, I averted my eyes. No-one said anything; too polite, of course. The first 'Vermeer' lilies, perfectly pink and cream and green, opened on the Monday after the wedding.

I'm sure I'll get over it. One day. ■

“Some failures we shrug off but others bruise us, leaving an ache of regret”



JENNY BOWERS

Garden talk

Andrew Wilson

Modern gardeners want fewer plants

I AM EFFECTIVELY GETTING OLDER as my clients and students are getting younger – a sort of Peter Pan thing but the wrong way round. Like it or not, my design work and teaching is increasingly changing. A brief from a client of 35 will now be different to that of a client of 55. I do not recall this happening earlier in my career and a casualty is the planting.

Now before I get death threats as a plant hater, let me state categorically that I love plants – I use them in abundance for clients, I teach planting designs, and I tend plants in my own garden. But I have to accept I have dealings with, and work regularly for, people who do not share this love affair. Plants come some way down their list of requirements and it is obvious they have priorities other than gardening – the daily grind including school runs, travel, DIY, shopping, sport, work and relaxation all get in the way.

I was chatting to one of my younger graduates, a member of the internet generation, about his understanding of 'the garden'. He saw a garden as simply another place to socialise, entertain, call, email or work; a multi-use outdoor space that might be favoured over a room indoors. Compartmentalisation, with which many of us have grown up, is vanishing. Definitions of what a garden is, or should be, have altered into wider, more flexible interpretations.

So, what does this mean? As simple planting combinations or even monocultures take over, we see a reduction in diversity. Stylistically, splendid; for wildlife, dull. The horticultural industry needs to refocus on plants that work hard but are not hard work.

Long-termism that has governed our gardens for centuries is replaced by short-termism; the popularity of perennials and annuals increases at the expense of trees and shrubs. Such plants are smaller and more predictable in scale as they mature. They are easy to change or compost if they suddenly prove inappropriate.

Short-termism may even mean gardens without plants at all. (Don't be shocked: such spaces exist and the RHS has already featured two of them at recent shows.) The good news is that those people who come to enjoy gardens at a younger age grow older to enjoy gardens in a much more diverse way, with a real appreciation of plants; it is simply a different approach. We need to embrace rather than shun the reality and take our heads out of the sand. Evidently we all have gardens in common. ■

Andrew Wilson is a garden designer, writer and Chair of Assessors for RHS show gardens



BARBARA WILSON

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