

Horticulture but not as we knew it

The Garden columnist and designer Mary Keen



RHS / NEIL HEWORTH

At the RHS Chelsea Flower Show this year I began to think that horticulture, as most senior gardeners know it, is finished. If wild plants are in the ascendant, could it mean that the activity of growing rare and difficult flowers appeals to the present generation rather less than it does to readers of this magazine? It was a thought that began to solidify after I talked to Graham Gough of Marchant’s Nursery in Sussex. He is a bit gloomy about the future of selling plants and thinks that most people under the age of – say – 40 are principally interested in growing things that they can eat.

Of course things change, and gardens are as subject to fashion as any other art form. But before we started growing plants that are not native here, few flowers bloomed after midsummer. I love the naturalistic look

and encourage all forms of self-seeding in my own garden, but that is a different thing from wanting exclusively wild flowers. Mingled borders were around in Victorian times; modern versions use a repeated matrix of plants to mimic nature. I was surprised to read of the new Jubilee Walk at Penshurst Place, Kent designed by George Carter, where he wants the plants to stay in groups, ‘so that you can still read the composition’. The plants at Penshurst are apparently easy old favourites, but I doubt that this kind of traditionally grouped border will appeal more to the next generation than the wilder look of Sarah Price’s ‘The Telegraph Garden’ at this year’s Chelsea Flower Show, or those meadows that we are seeing all over the Olympic Park.

The wild look is certainly easier to manage than high horticulture. But ‘new gardeners’ have not gone off the idea of plantsmanship because it is too demanding. Growing vegetables is famously hard work. It is, I fear, a fashion thing – and that is rather sad for those of us who love garden flowers. ●

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Hard lessons in vegenomics

Garden designer and allotmenteer Emma Bond



EMMA BOND

As food prices continue to rise, more gardeners are growing their own fruit and vegetables, both to save money and to enjoy high-quality, pesticide-free produce. Well, that’s what they tell me. As a new allotment grower, I’ve started wondering just how cost-effective it is

– or whether all the work and outlay involved cancels out any financial savings.

The initial investment of time and money making a plot or garden workable will invariably exceed any possible economies on shop-bought produce for at least the first year. Of course, as I was starting from scratch, I had to buy basic tools, timber, seeds, plants... and all that backache ointment. Then there’s my own time to consider. No-one ever tells you what incredibly hard work it is. In the first few months, I spent more than 70 hours – two working weeks – cultivating, strimming,

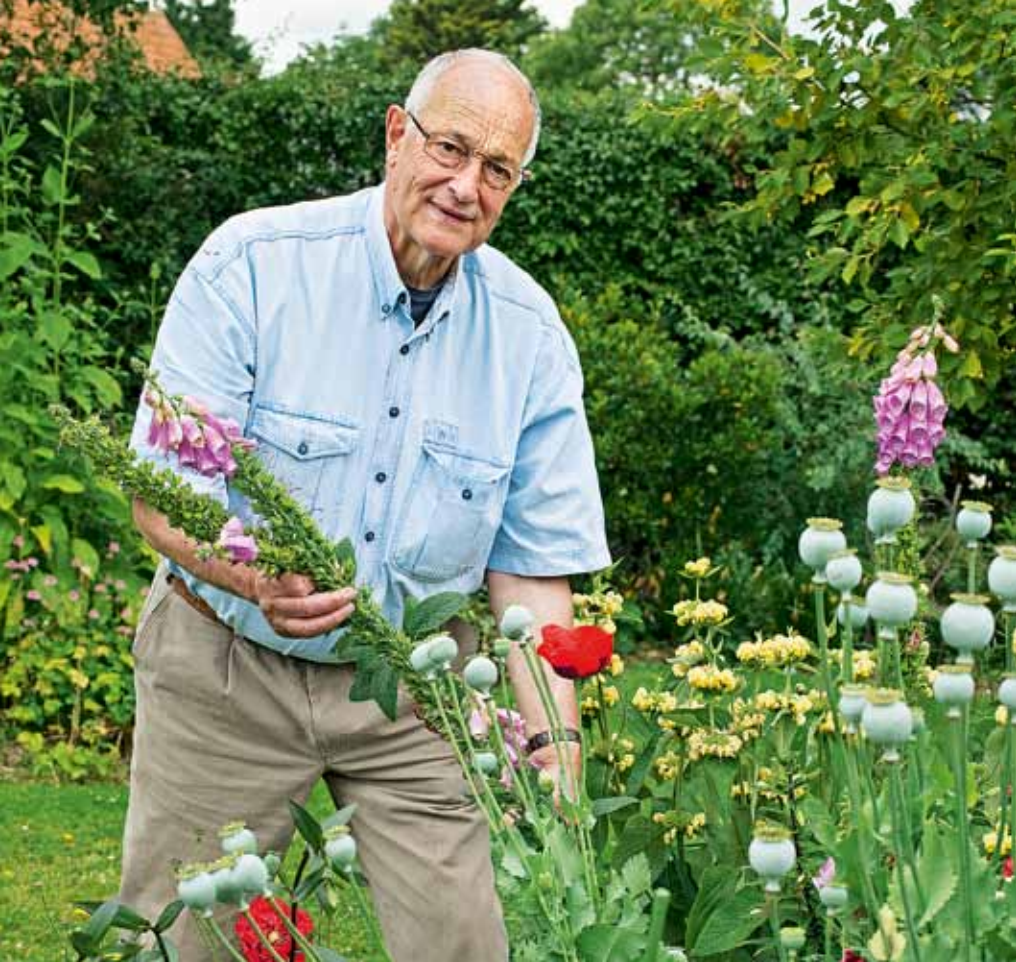
weeding, sowing, planting, fighting off slugs, snails and cats as well as keeping on top of bindweed and nettles. Yet with all that weather (and I did plant late) I have still to eat a single mouthful of produce from the plot.

It surprises me how many people seem to grow things they don’t particularly like. Surely much more sensible is to grow the vegetables you most want to eat? I also want to grow those that are the dearest or hardest to find in the shops. So at the latest count on my plot there were about 30 different fruit and vegetables, including beetroots ‘Chioggia’ and ‘Burpee’s Golden’, dwarf French bean ‘Purple Queen’, carrot ‘Purple Haze’ and asparagus peas.

I now notice that much of what is written about growing vegetables and saving money says ‘could’. You ‘could’ make savings. Nothing categorically states that you will. A lot of time and particularly effort has gone into my allotment so far, and sometimes I feel I’d have been better off having my vegetables delivered by hamper from Harrods. But when I pop my first home-grown peas out of their pods I am certain that, just like childbirth, all of the pain and effort will suddenly be worthwhile. And maybe next year – let’s hope – it will be much less expensive. ●

DO YOU AGREE?

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Watercolour dated 1818 by William Hooker of Shropshire damson (*Prunus insititia* ‘Prune Damson’), from one of 10 volumes known as *Hooker’s Fruits* which were commissioned by the RHS to help standardise the nomenclature of cultivated fruit.



But there are so many now, and every year more. How do you choose?

There is much at stake. As well as new hybrids, gardeners need dependable plants that last for decades. And, as this year’s RHS Plant of the Year contest showed, ‘hot ticket’ plants can sometimes obscure more lasting treasures. The foxglove hybrid *Digitalis Illumination Pink* (‘Tmdgfp001’) was the obvious winner. Nothing like it has been bred before. Colour and habit are delightful and, compared with other entries, the plant was in a league of its own so won by a massive majority. But it did not get my vote.

The runners-up, though more modest, out-classed that foxglove in several ways. Garden pink *Dianthus Memories* (‘WP11 Gwe04’) is a good replacement for 19th-century favourite D. ‘Mrs Sinkins’, having her virtues in spades but none of her faults. Pinks fans could still be growing *Memories* in 2068, two centuries after the introduction of the older cultivar.

The plant that received my vote was deep blue *Hyacinthus orientalis* ‘Royal Navy’, bred by Dutch breeder JS Pennings de Bilt. With its intense colour, fragrance, sturdiness and Victorian character, this is a hyacinth everyone will want for their Christmas bulb bowls. Instinct tells me, too, that both runners-up will be popular long after the fancy foxglove has become a memory.

So how can we filter the best from that accelerating avalanche of new plants? There is a limit to what can be assessed in RHS Trials – but they, and other trials, are important. And it is crucial that reliable and communicative experts such as Graham Rice, Fergus Garrett or Roy Lancaster continue to provide informed commentary.

Ultimately, the consumer will determine a plant’s success. Just think, though, how much time – not to mention garden space – could be saved if breeders spent less energy producing weekend wonders and concentrated more on developing plants that become long-term, disease-free garden favourites. ●

Breeding frenzy

Garden writer and regular *The Garden* columnist Nigel Colborn

What happy days they were, when nursery catalogues were published annually. As the growing season progressed, one noted desirable plants and by the time each eagerly anticipated list arrived, desiderata could be ordered with calm deliberation.

What a contrast to today’s constant bombardment of email offers, supplements, fliers and irresistible promotions. Suppliers analyse every purchase we make nowadays, probing our desires and aiming future mail-shots at the very heart of our personal taste.

If the torrent of promotional material results in sales, we must be the most voracious consumers in gardening history. And, where plants are concerned, our passion for novelties, however bizarre, has become unquenchable.

Recently, we’ve had a glut of questionable introductions. Why, for example, would anyone want pink blueberries? If they were tastier, higher yielding or easier to grow

than other selections, would those not be their selling points? But ‘Pink Lemonade’ blueberries, like ‘Redlove’ apples or those repulsive pineberry white strawberries, are clearly marketed for their novel colours.

The trade has always had a penchant for marketing gimmicky plants. There is no harm in that unless it discourages breeders from developing sound cultivars that will serve gardeners reliably for years.

Flashy plants look fun on paper – or on your computer screen – but often disappoint in real life. Black petunias turned out to be a non-event. And since a foxglove’s beauty lies in its freckle-throated, tubular flowers, why would anyone want the grotesquely shredded *Digitalis purpurea* ‘Pam’s Split’?

Besides novelties, some breeders are also drowning us in a flux of new introductions where a gross excess already exists. How many more roses, clematis or hostas can we absorb? Is the world really thirsting for yet another skewbald heuchera?

When David Austin began to introduce retro roses, they were justifiably successful.