

Comment

The Garden, RHS Media, Churchgate, New Road, Peterborough PE1 1TT



RHS/TIM SANDALL

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Celebrating the detail

Editor of *The Garden*, Chris Young

In this issue, we focus on smaller spaces. As anyone who has gardened a limited plot knows, the plants and hard materials you choose need considering in detail – combinations have to really earn their keep, often year-round.

My wife and I loved our first garden: a tiny patch that was no more than a wide gravel path to our front door, along which a row of terracotta pots housed an array of shade-loving plants, and a bed to the left (less than one square metre/10sq ft). Gardening in such a focused way demands a ruthlessness in both plant placement and ongoing maintenance, but it also allows you to make immediate improvements, to truly personalise a space, and to revel in serendipitous harmonies.

One of the criticisms we have received over the years is that *The Garden* only reviews large, expansive, rural gardens. We work hard to try to dispel this preconception, ensuring that – over any given year – we feature gardens of different sizes and styles, and in differing locations. Our intention is to reflect the broad gardening

interests of the 395,000 RHS members.

Many of our features this month incorporate practical ideas for gardening in smaller spaces. From autumnal plant combinations to front gardens, community 'streetscape' gardening to a private courtyard space and a balcony, myriad ways of getting the best from a limited space are celebrated in all their glory.

Smaller gardens are becoming the norm. Look around any new housing estate, or block of flats, and the outdoor space is increasingly limited. The actual number of new properties needed over the coming 20 years is keenly debated, but it seems likely that at least another 5 million will be built. The result is that more dwellings will be put into limited space, so houses with good-sized gardens (such as those many enjoy in the suburbs, as Toby Musgrave explores, pp44–45) will increasingly become a thing of the past. Gardening such plots is clearly how more and more people will be using their outside space in the coming years – but it need not be limiting in either style or content. ●

FROM THIS ISSUE

It looks highly likely that the principles illustrated here will become increasingly important in the future of UK gardens.

Richard Sneesby: **Bring on the rain**

» Pages 74–78

Plant your tinting trees so that they are backlit by the sun... their colours can take on the brilliance of a stained-glass window.

Stephen Lacey: **Plant a bonfire in your garden**

» Pages 34–40

DID YOU KNOW?

Is it a bulb, corm or tuber?

Author: **Mike Grant**, Editor, *The Plantsman*

Spare a thought for that bulb you are popping into the soil this autumn. If it's a daffodil or a tulip then, technically, it is a bulb. But if it's a crocus or gladiolus then it's a corm. And if you are looking at a potato or a dahlia (which you don't plant this time of year), it's a tuber.

These structures, otherwise known as underground perennating organs, differ in the ways they are constructed. A **bulb** is essentially a condensed stem – the small solid bit at the base of the bulb – with swollen, succulent leaves that form the main body of the bulb. These swollen leaves store food.

Corms are also swollen stems, but the stem acts as the storage organ; the succulent leaves are much less bulky than in a bulb. **Tubers** are simpler in structure, being either a swollen root (often in clusters, as in dahlias), or a swollen underground stem (as in potatoes).

There are some plants, such as *Amorphophallus* and *Cyclamen*, for which there is no consistent view from plant morphologists; they may have corms or tubers. Some members of The Cyclamen Society, frustrated by the lack of consensus, refer to 'cyclatubers'. ●

✦ *The Plantsman* is sister publication to *The Garden*; www.rhs.org.uk/plantsman; 020 7821 3401.



Dahlia tubers.



Your ASBO is served

Regular *The Garden* columnist Nigel Colborn on the sacrifice of front gardens

Earlier this year, the Coalition Government announced measures to come down heavily on antisocial behaviour, with emphasis on troublesome neighbours. Under current legislation, anyone with an untidy garden risks prosecution but revised proposals promise greater 'people power'. Known as the 'Community Trigger', and being piloted in a number of areas, official complaints from five individuals or households will be sufficient to force the 'relevant authorities' to act.

For anyone who loves gardens, this seems a desirable idea. How could one not approve of incentives for tidiness, beauty and social order? If abandoned washing machines and litter disfigure a front garden – especially in a chocolate-box village – that would be abhorrent. But does a disorderly plot actually harm others in the community? And if it does, where is the dividing line between harmless eccentricity and behaviour causing 'harassment, alarm or distress'?

Moreover, how will law enforcers recognise

that dividing line? The term 'relevant authorities' should ring alarm bells because local government can be officious and autocratic. Personally, I'd rather people were allowed to be untidy, than have some jack-in-office from the Council instructing them to remove this or clip that for the sake of tidiness.

Suppose a garden is choked with (what neighbours choose to call) weeds? Thistles might grow in profusion, with willowherb and ragwort. But the garden's owner could be a naturalist who rejoices in biodiversity. His plants produce wind-blown seed and cause nuisance but so does red valerian which, though valued and grown by many gardeners, spreads like flu.

A front garden near where I live in Lincolnshire features a litter of lavatory pans and other unsightly objects. Ugly though they are, it is difficult not to be amused by such a nose-thumbing gesture, satirising the prissiness of other gardens. But if five neighbouring households were to take action, they could have the owner prosecuted for antisocial behaviour – a

hefty club with which to bludgeon poor taste.

Lavatory Man's installation is no worse than dead animals in formaldehyde or unmade beds. But if such things are antisocial in gardens – if not in art galleries – shouldn't the 'relevant authorities' also come down heavily on mawkish concrete nymphs, planters shaped like Charlie Chaplin boots and mooning gnomes?

The biggest problem with gardens is caused not by untidiness but by that profoundly antisocial object, the private car. We Britons own more than 28 million of them and the trend is to convert front gardens into parking slots. According to research by the RAC

Artwork by Cynthia Newsome-Taylor (1906–1983) held by the RHS Lindley Library and reproduced in *The Treasury of Flowers*.

Foundation, 7 million of Britain's former front gardens have already been destroyed to provide hard standing for vehicles. That, says the RAC, means that grass and plants have been replaced by an area of paving roughly equal to 100 Hyde Parks.

Think of the runoff from all that hard standing and the increased flood risk. Ponder on the loss of calming, cooling greenery and cheerful colour, the reduction of flowers for foraging insects and, above all, the soullessness of a sterile parking space, compared with the life and joy of a little garden – even if weedy and poorly maintained. Cars have to be parked somewhere, of course, but front gardens are too precious to sacrifice.

If legislation is to be heavy-handed, let it come down hard on destruction of green spaces, both private and public, in towns and cities. Let it be enshrined in all planning law, in all regions, that gardens – including allotments, parks and community gardens, as well as private front gardens – must be preserved for the benefit of nature and of society as a whole.

Neighbours who behave harmfully and offensively are criminals and should face penalties. But legislation aimed against untidy gardens would be meddlesome and difficult to enforce. British residents should strive for the right to do what they want, with their own gardens, as well as tolerating what others do with theirs. But that right should carry the proviso that, in the interest of the environment, gardens are preserved and maintained as living, green, plant-rich spaces for all time. ●

MORE IDEAS

Contrasting front gardens feature among the smaller spaces reviewed on pp43–58 >>



RHS/NEL HEWORTH

Interesting game for gardeners

The Garden columnist and designer Mary Keen



RHS / NEIL HEPMORTH

'Desert Island Flowers' is a good game. Recently, over a gardeners' lunch, three of us swapped choices with one another. We aimed at indispensables, the eight plants we would always want to have in any garden we made, however small.

Top of the list came a shared taste for *Geranium*

Rozanne ('Gerwat'). Peter wanted *G. psilostemon* as well, but I thought *G. Patricia* ('Bremat') was probably better, because it does not need staking. We all suggested *Euphorbia* (I like *E. characias* subsp. *wulfenii* 'Lambrook Gold') and *Crocsmia* 'Lucifer'. Jane wanted any of the new mildew-resistant *Monarda*, but I find they run away to different places; Peter loves *Scabiosa columbaria* subsp. *ochroleuca*. We argued a bit. At the time, nobody chose a rose, although thinking back, I would probably always want *Rosa x odorata* 'Mutabilis'. *Phlox paniculata* 'Blue Paradise' got plenty of votes, although I worry about lack of moisture in any year except this sopping summer.

Iris pallida subsp. *pallida* is a favourite of mine, as it keeps its leaves. We grow plenty of tall miniature bearded, but they cannot be described as indispensable.

For my desert-island collection I would insist on a snowdrop – and it has to be *Galanthus* 'S. Arnott', the scented tall beauty, which never fails to see me through February. We did allow shrubs, but left out fruit and veg. A new find is *Daphne x transatlantica* Eternal Fragrance ('Blafra') which really does flower all summer and comes in pink or white. I would not want to be without that now.

I remember trying to get a desert-island list out of Christopher Lloyd. At first he was livid at the notion that one could have so few favourites. But he did then come up with some predictably provocative choices: a spotted laurel, *Aucuba japonica* 'Crotonifolia', *Canna* 'Wyoming', *Dahlia* 'Hillcrest Royal' and *Lobelia cardinalis* 'Queen Victoria'. At the end he added *Anemone x hybrida* 'Honorine Jobert' without which all of us said we would find it hard to live. He also chose *Crocus speciosus*, one of the few flowers to brighten the last days of autumn.

Over lunch it seemed easy to suggest and reject things, but if gardeners were really restricted to only eight plants, what a serious affair that would be. ●

A favourite of Mary Keen's – *Iris pallida* subsp. *pallida*.

RHS LINDLEY LIBRARY



The power of front gardens

Nick Turrell, writer and garden contributor to *The Sunday Times*



JEANETTE SUMNER AND

Before moving to our house in Surrey five years ago, I'd never had a front garden so as soon as we moved in, I set to work ripping out the existing one and redesigning it. I had no idea just how important this was to going to be and how much of a stir it would cause with the neighbours.

One day, a neighbour complained that he used to enjoy walking past my front garden and was disappointed that I'd 'ripped it all out'. This reaction, although understandable, was the last thing I needed; shortly after completing the garden, the Lehman Brothers bank collapsed and my business ground to a halt. My life was shattered. Through those difficult times, however, there was always something pretty to see every time I left the house; I can't tell you how good that felt.

As the garden developed, I could see it was starting to

endear itself with the neighbours, too. Even those who had been suspicious at first looked and smiled as they walked by. Strangers would stop, chat and take photos; one told me it cheered her up so much she'd changed her route to work just to walk past. Before long others started asking about the plants I'd used; those same plants later appeared in their gardens. A few years on and the strangers and neighbours have now become friends.

As a nation we get top marks for our back gardens but only a 'could do better' for those at the front. This has to be a howler of an own goal for society. Front gardens break the ice, they turn anxiety into acceptance and galvanise communities. They are more than just gardens; they are important social bridges that encourage dialogue, a building block of community. And yet we neglect them en masse. There isn't a back garden in the land that could achieve all this.

Is it not time we embraced front gardens instead of paving them over? If just one small garden like mine can cheer up a local community, imagine what thousands of them could do. ●

DO YOU AGREE?

Please send your comments to: The Garden, RHS Media, Churchgate, New Road, Peterborough PE1 1TT or email thegarden@rhs.org.uk (please include your postal address). Letters may be edited for publication.

Nigel Colborn on the value of gardens
p21