

Comment



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



RHS/TIM SANDALL

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Finding a silver lining

Editor of *The Garden*, Chris Young

Whenever you publish a headline such as '2012 drought predicted to be "worse than 1976"' (as we did in News in April), you can be sure of two things: we were either going to have months of torrential rain, or it was going to be a drier summer than many of us have ever experienced. As we all know, it has turned out to be one of the wettest on record.

But from my gardening perspective, the summer of 2012 certainly wasn't a washout. For those of us (I hold my hand up) who left some of our spring planting a little late (including a quince tree, bush roses and a few front-of-border fillers) we have mercifully got away with plants establishing well, thanks largely to the rain. My nightmare prediction of having to rescue my new additions with watering cans filled without the aid of a hosepipe luckily didn't materialise.

And for plants that were already in the ground, the amount of growth they put on from May onwards was truly astonishing. My hornbeam and yew hedges have produced up to 40cm (almost 16in) of growth.

The bird cherry (*Prunus padus*) in our front garden, planted as a small whip for our now eight-year-old son, is romping away; as are our four-year-old evergreen oaks with their light beige-pink new leaves thrusting forward. Plants I usually have to coax through our dry summers here in East Anglia (such as shade and moisture-loving perennial *Mukdenia rossii*) have shown their satisfaction at having consistently moist soil at their feet. Those that suffered after winter cold, such as common myrtle, have shown renewed zeal for life, throwing out new growth at every turn.

The result, in my garden at least, is that many of my plants have never looked better as we head towards autumn. Of course there have been some casualties, including those eaten by the eye-wateringly large numbers of slugs and snails, but the net gain has been most welcome. Sure, it would have been nice to have spent more time in the garden, rather than enjoy it from under an umbrella or from the dry of the house. But from my plants' perspective, it has been one of the best growing seasons in a long time. ●

FROM THIS ISSUE

“Woodbury Cottage is one of the best small gardens I have ever seen: finely tuned, colour co-ordinated and packed with tried-and-tested, choice plants.”

Val Bourne: Organised into ascending order >> Pages 32–37

FROM RHS ONLINE

Autumn show highlights

Celebrate the season with three colourful autumn shows: the Malvern Autumn Show (29–30 September); RHS London Harvest Festival Show (9–10 October); and RHS Shades of Autumn Show (23–24 October). For tickets and more details, visit: www.rhs.org.uk/shows

DID YOU KNOW?

Offering bonus nectar points

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

Plants need insects and other invertebrates to aid survival in several ways. Best known is where a nectar or pollen reward encourages insects to pollinate a plant's flowers.

In some plants nectar is dispensed from glands on parts other than the flowers. These are called 'extrafloral nectaries' and usually occur on stems, leaves or leaf stalks. They may be sunk into the plant tissue, or raised as a blob or on a short stalk. They usually attract ants, which in turn defend the plant from herbivores such as aphids and caterpillars. Nectar from extrafloral nectaries is usually different to that from the flowers, often lower in sugar and higher in amino acids – this is more attractive to ants and discourages them from robbing less-palatable floral nectar.

Extrafloral nectaries are found on common garden plants such as cherry, elder, poplar and willow (as glands on the leaf stalks); also on the leaf teeth of tree of heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*, below), the stems of passionflowers and even the leaf axils of Geraldton waxflower (*Chamelaucium uncinatum*), a leptospermum-like shrub often found in flower bouquets. ●

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



GETTY/VISUALS UNLIMITED

An ant feeding on an extrafloral nectary of *Ailanthus altissima*.



Lantana camara, painted by Elizabeth Smith about 1780. The RHS Lindley Library holds works by Elizabeth and her three sisters.

Focusing on which rules to break

The Garden columnist and designer Mary Keen on treating focal points with care

Garden design schools teach all sorts of things about focal points and the widths of paths. This can be fine for public places, but it often means that private gardens suffer from design overload. Besides, rules are made to be broken and I think it is time some precepts were challenged.

If I was teaching at a design school, the only rule I might make is to stick to what you know, to your own style. If defining what you like seems hard, start by narrowing it down to what you hate. Make a checklist of words such as formal/informal, bold/gentle, peaceful/stimulating, ancient/modern. Choose your own words, then make sure you work to your own brief. Anything that fights your concept will never belong. What a place needs above all is unity of purpose.

Focal points will not suit many gardens. Traditional urns and statues are misfits now,

unless you happen to live in a stately home. If you check Google Images for inspiration for focal points in garden design you get the plonkiest thing I ever saw. A straight path leading to a statement conifer, via a circle enclosing a birdbath.

In any garden what is intriguing is the idea that there is somewhere round the corner to explore. I want to be led on. Not stopped dead in my tracks by some horticultural equivalent of a policeman holding up his hand. A seat can work, because at least it is an invitation – not a red light – although it will need something to look at. If you cannot manage flowers, the branches of someone else's tree, a bend in the path, a door or a gate, or just a patch of sky will do.

I saw the maddest example of a skewed focal point at a garden that majors on the unexpected, where an odd arrangement of asymmetrical yew hedges surrounds a seat that can only be approached from the side. To sit on it you have to creep round a corner; once sitting, I wondered what I was supposed to see. It looked out over a bed of flower-free cranesbills and into a bank of laurel. Head on, the quirky hedges were intriguing, but this view was only possible if you walked on the geraniums.

If ever there was a case for a focal point, here was the perfect example. I suggested a second seat under the laurel for appreciating the

asymmetrical hedges. This other, antiphonal seat might echo the hedge arrangement in reverse. Or be a calmer composition, so that one seat reversed the perverse. Then those seated could look at each other and

wonder who had the best viewpoint.

Received wisdom – the seat at the end of a path – is fine. But you have to ask how the rule will translate to your own place. 'Does it work here?' should be a constant worry. Is it doing what I want it to do? A gardener's best tool is a scrutinising eye. The feature or plant associa-

tion admired in someone else's border may never seem settled out of context.

Take the question of narrow paths: I refuse to believe that the only acceptable width should be 2.1m (7ft) or more. This Gertrude Jekyll measurement ensures that two can walk abreast without troubling one another. We know Jekyll never liked Edwin Lutyens to walk behind her for fear that he noticed how large she was. But in our own gardens, surely one of the ultimate pleasures is stealing a quick walk alone before breakfast, or nipping out at that moment when dusk hangs in the air and the place is scented and peaceful. Narrow paths mean you brush against plants and have to slow down. Ask yourself if a saunter or a stroll may suit you better than a forced march down a broad track.

Although we have plenty of groups visiting our garden, I never lead them round as a group, because the paths are really narrow. But I do manage their expectations by giving them a sheet of paper which is headed in bold type 'What matters here'. Your own place will come across much more powerfully if it sticks to what works for you. Why let design diktats spoil what ought to be a private affair? ●



RHS / NEIL HEWORTH



When tiny terrors become little angels

The Garden columnist Lia Leendertz



RHS / NEIL HEPMORTH

Schools are back. Gird your loins, teachers. Breathe a sigh of relief, parents. You are now able to pass whole minutes without hearing the word 'Mummy?' and drink a cup of tea while it is still hot.

The children of Bradley Barton Primary School in Devon will be eating sugar snap peas about now.

I know that, because I watched them sow the peas just before the holidays. To be exact, I watched two seven-year-old boys lift a plank across a bed, stand on it to thickly sow a line of seeds, fetch pea sticks and construct small teepees – then slowly write out a label ('No buddy step on the pees!!!!') and water everything in.

Now, I know seven-year-old boys. I have one myself. He's not one to do much writing without a fairly constant level of what I will euphemistically call 'encouragement'. He doesn't see the need for it. It's not even that these were necessarily better-behaved kids: of the large group I met, several apparently struggled in the classroom. There was no way I could have picked them out: they were angels in the garden.

What Bradley Barton Primary understands is that gardening gives children a reason to learn, and a purpose behind questioning and concentrating. Children there get two hours gardening as part of their school week, and they blossom. Not every school can do what this one does, but many gardening clubs will be starting into gear over the next few weeks and I salute those that run them: finding creative ways around holidays that fall at sowing time and harvesting time; encouraging and fielding endless questions (overheard: 'Can you sow seeds in a sock, miss?' 'Let's try it'); and providing seven-year-old boys with an urgent and pressing reason to pick up a pen and get busy with the exclamation marks. ●



RHS / JULIAN WEIGALL

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.



For information concerning all aspects of plant names visit the Hortax website: www.hortax.org.uk

In defence of botanists

James Armitage, Senior Botanist at RHS Garden Wisley and Chairman of the Horticultural Taxonomy Group



RHS / BARRY PHILLIPS

Does that plant's name really have to change? It is a question I hear often – and who can blame gardeners for becoming frustrated with botanists when they learn that their *Stipa arundinacea* should be *Anemanthea lessoniana* or the plant they have been happy to call *Dicentra spectabilis* must now bear the unwieldy handle *Lamprocapnos*? The impression is that such name changes represent a wilful effort to inconvenience; change just for the sake of it.

Such criticism is unfair and misplaced. Much nomenclatural change is simply unavoidable and a consequence of a plant having been named more than once, the same name being used for more than one plant or a name being used in a way not originally intended.

Other changes are due to advances in understanding and differences in taxonomic opinion. This variance of outlook among botanists is hardly surprising when the same system of naming must serve the purposes not just of gardeners, but also of conservationists, plant breeders, phylogeneticists and ecologists.

However, the needs of horticulturists now feature more than ever in the decisions taken concerning plant names. The botanical rule of priority meant the name *Chrysanthemum* was lost for common garden plants in favour of older *Dendranthema*, but the disruption caused to gardeners led to *Chrysanthemum* being conserved. In addition botanists, in advocating change, now take seriously their responsibility to inform gardeners through the internet and in publications such as *The Plantsman* (sister publication of *The Garden*) of the reasons for, and consequences of, their proposals.

Further efforts at public engagement are made by the Horticultural Taxonomy Group (Hortax), an independent committee of botanists and horticulturists with a mission to make information on all aspects of plant naming readily available and understood.

An understanding of why and how garden plants are named can add much to our appreciation of them. Classification is an ongoing process, the aims of which include the establishment of a stable set of names. Which is what everyone wants – including botanists. ●