Comment

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

RHS / TIM SANDALL

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

It must be awards season

Editor of *The Garden*, **Chris Young**

How many times have you been asked by friends or family to recommend a really good plant to grow? We know, from research, that for many RHS members it happens rather a lot. As you might imagine, for those of us working on this magazine it happens quite often, too. When you are put on the spot to suggest something, personal knowledge comes into play and so often you find yourself choosing a plant you have grown – and succeeded with.

However, with the arrival of a revised, up-to-date RHS list of Award of Garden Merit (AGM) winners, we should now find it much easier to recommend, and indeed grow, good garden plants. They are the best of their type, as decided by specialists and experts on RHS Plant Committees.

Whether grown under trial at RHS Garden Wisley (and, increasingly, other RHS Gardens, Partner Gardens and nurseries) or approved for an AGM award by committee discussion, the gardening public can be assured that an AGM plant meets stringent criteria – namely: excellent for ordinary use in appropriate conditions, available, of good constitution, essentially stable in form and colour, and reasonably resistant to pests and diseases.

Plants are forever changing and new breeding or strains enter the gardening market. Some, such as seasonal bedding, change at such a rate that their inclusion into the AGM would be unsustainable, but the new list does include many more ever-popular roses, magnolias and – significantly, to some – indoor orchids (see News, p9).

This current review of the AGM list, which John Grimshaw outlines so well in this issue (pp45–48), together with the new RHS hardiness ratings (see pp68–69), are useful tools in a gardener's armoury, whether buying plants for yourself or recommending to friends.

Peer review

✤ The Garden Media Guild's **Garden Publication of the Year** was awarded to this magazine at the end of last year (News, p8). Recognition by our peers means a huge amount to everyone who works on the magazine; the team hopes RHS members also feel this award is deserved.

FROM THIS ISSUE

"As you wind uphill through farmland towards the plateau where it sits, only a horizontal line of trained lime trees hints at the island of sophistication ahead."

Sarah Higgens: Bellevue Ballue

» *Pages 52–55*

JANE SEBIRE

FROM MY GARDEN

Labels remind me of past defeats

Author: **Helen Dillon,** gardener and writer living in the Republic of Ireland

I adore my garden shed. It's a place of deep peace and a wonderful escape, just out of earshot of the doorbell. If I hear footsteps approaching I rattle stuff around on the bench to make people think I'm busy. Inside, it smells of earth and dust and is warm enough for gazing out of the cobwebby window thinking of nothing in particular, perfect for catching the low February sun when I'm doing the annual clean-up.

After 41 years, the contents of the shed mainly consists of things I'd better keep, just in case: numerous bits of wire and string, nails and screws, pencils that need sharpening, assorted recipes for potting mixes written on the wall, obscure old packets of seed and heaps of old plant labels – like old love letters best left unread, as they remind me of the umpteen plants I've lost.

I think it was plantsman EA Bowles who first mentioned the Irish comment 'It died on me', which suggests that out of pure mischief the plant set out to expire. The truth is altogether different: I almost certainly killed it, usually because I forgot all about it and allowed it to get smothered.

Like people, plants can be divided into those that do the squashing and those that get squashed; in the garden I'm forever agonising whether to rescue the squashee or move all surrounding plants – and heaven knows where I'll find space for that lot.

In winter, loitering in my shed is a rare, quiet time for solving such eternal garden dilemmas: usually where a certain plant would like to grow and – just as important – will I enjoy looking at it there?

ILLUSTRATION: AMANDA RIGBY

Letters

CONTACT US
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RHS

Many plants bring uplifting colour and scent to winter gardens, including *Hamamelis* (witch hazel).

Mistletoe success

Jonathan Briggs on mistletoe (*The Garden*, Dec 2012, pp61–64) was interesting.

I used to keep beehives under an old apple tree. During winter, droppings from birds would occasionally land on the flat metal roofs of the beehives. Some of these droppings contained mistletoe seed that germinated in spring. The seeds were firmly glued to the metal – but if the roof was wet, germinated seed could be removed with care and transferred to suitable host trees. The main problem was, once lifted, the seed had lost its stickiness, making the transfer difficult. However, I had about 50 percent success in establishing mistletoe plants.
Michael Nelson, Worcestershire

RHS / SIMON GARBUTT

Can germinated mistletoe seed be 'transplanted'?

Believe it or not

There was a wry smile on my face as I read Matthew Biggs' conclusion that rhubarb would not control clubroot (Comment, Dec 2012, p15).

I moved to my present house in the late 1950s, and we were soon self-sufficient in fruit and vegetables. Everything grew well, apart from brassicas – clubroot devastated the crops.

My neighbour suggested I try a piece of rhubarb in the planting holes. I cut 10cm (4in) lengths of rhubarb, and sliced each in half vertically so that the brassica root could be sandwiched between the two pieces. In the first year clubroot was greatly reduced, and after three years was non-existent. Forty years on, there has not been any sign of clubroot, so rhubarb is worth a try.
Alfred Callis, Norfolk

Shoreline plantings

Anthony Hamilton may be unfair to Bexhill-on-Sea when he criticises the use of *Griselinia littoralis* as coastal hedging (Letters, Dec 2012, p14). Until winter 2010 I had a healthy hedge of *Griselinia littoralis*, but now only one plant remains. In no way can this be blamed on salt spray or wind – but possibly on harsh winter conditions, even in a sheltered spot in the garden.
Jacqui McLeod, Durham

✤ We would advise against planting *Euonymus* to replace the hedging at Bexhill-on-Sea. Our garden is on the West Sussex coast and a *Euonymus* hedge we planted 15 years ago is now dying from euonymus scale. A better alternative would be *Elaeagnus*, which we have found stands up to extreme coastal conditions and does not seem to suffer from pests.
Elizabeth Davey, Chichester

Winter gardens

Lia Leendertz's experience of winter gardens must be limited to poorly designed ones (Comment, Dec 2012, p19).

Each border in my garden is colour-themed, and throughout winter there are flowers. In the purple border *Viola odora* is followed by purple hyacinths; in the pink border *Viburnum* x *bodnantense* 'Dawn' and *Daphne bholua* are followed by pink hyacinths. And *Prunus* x *subhirtella* 'Autumnalis' is underplanted with snowdrops that bloom in early December and flower into March.

At a time of year when my neighbours' gardens are asleep, the scent and colour in my garden has a quiet joy. A garden should lift our spirits all year round, not just in summer.
Georgina Bowman, Wiltshire

Tree disease theory

With increased incidence of tree fungal diseases in recent years, has improved air quality played a part in the flare-up?

It has long been recognised that blackspot in roses was suppressed by an unhealthy level of sulphur dioxide in the atmosphere. Could it be recent outbreaks such as ash dieback are made worse by the fact large populations of trees have been effectively protected for hundreds of years by fossil-fuel burning, and therefore have not built-up any natural immunity?
Anne Jones, Nottinghamshire

✤ Guy Barter, RHS Chief Horticultural Advisor, replies: *'Recent tree disease problems seem to have originated by importation of disease into Europe from other regions, not due to a drop in atmospheric pollution. Much data has been collected by the Forestry Commission on the extensive damage to trees caused by pollution, but this makes no mention of the effects of poor air quality on tree disease. It would be interesting to compare disease (and damage from disease) in areas where pollution has been high with areas where levels have been lower. This work has not been done as far as we know.'*

Too many bees: response to a report on London beekeeping

I would suggest that the issue is not too many bees in London (News, November, p11), but too many people who do not know enough about beekeeping.

As a beekeeper in Southampton, I have noticed that the number of beekeepers here has more than doubled in recent years. The high honeybee population is not 'affecting other pollinating insects by competing for scarce nectar supplies' – there are more than 200 bee species in the UK, each with its own ecological niche. Honeybees have relatively short tongues, while most other bees have longer ones and use flowers honeybees cannot. The few solitary bees with the same tongue length as honeybees work at lower temperatures, earlier and later in the day and during poor weather. Their requirements for food are different, with a bias for pollen rather than nectar, so they do not compete with honeybees.

Honey yields may have dropped in the London area recently, just as elsewhere. The most obvious reason is the wrong weather: low temperatures and low light levels. Poor hive management is another cause. New beekeepers may make mistakes that result in lost swarms or a queenless hive; these do not make any honey for the beekeeper.

In recent years, great emphasis has been placed on wild flowers planted for bees with no mention of trees. Most of my honey comes from trees; a single mature tree in flower is probably equal to, or greater than (in value to the bees), a whole field of flowers. Beekeepers and gardeners must work together – plants need bees and bees need beekeepers.

Urban bees, with access to huge plant diversity that gives pollen and nectar year-round, are at an advantage to rural bees, which have limited access to short gluts when a few crops flower. The greater the number of different sources, the better the chances of one or more 'honey flows' during the year.

I hope this explains why beekeepers are not getting 'honey crops' they expect.
Andy Willis, Southampton

RHS / CAROL SHEPPARD

'...there could be raspberries in your garden from June to the end of October.'
Julie Hollobone: A more fruitful harvest » *Pages 76–78*

ANDREW HAYES-WATKINS

GENIUS OF PLANTS

The many uses of sunflowers

Author: **James Wong,** botanist and garden designer

From the life jackets of transatlantic liners to mopping up nuclear waste in Japan, there is much more to annual sunflowers (selections of *Helianthus annuus*) than meets the eye.

First domesticated 5,000 years ago in what is now southern USA, these prairie plants have become a major global crop for their oil-rich seeds and, increasingly, their ornamental blooms. Yet sunflowers were a staple food for many indigenous North Americans: the seeds were ground up to make all manner of cakes and porridges, and the flower buds were steamed and eaten like artichokes. Petals were used to create a golden dye, and the leaves and roots were used to treat a wide range of afflictions from malaria to snake bite.

The pithy stems were once used as the key flotation material in the manufacture of early life jackets, being one of the lightest of all naturally occurring substances. This was a huge improvement on their cork-and-canvas predecessors, such as those used on the RMS *Titanic*, which had a nasty habit of snapping the necks of wearers if they jumped into the water from more than 3m (10ft).

Alternative applications of sunflowers are not confined to history, either. Exciting breeding work is afoot to develop strains with increased amounts of naturally occurring hypoallergenic latex, which could be used to make safer, itch-free rubber gloves, boots and personal-care products. This is potentially life-saving in a world where up to eight percent of people have a latex allergy, which can prove fatal in some individuals.

Yet undoubtedly sunflowers' most unexpected use arises from their ability to absorb radioactive ions and heavy metals. They have been planted on a massive scale to cleanse contaminated soil from Chernobyl to Fukushima, slowly turning toxic wasteland back into fertile farmland.

RHS / NEIL HEPWORTH

Sunflowers may help cleanse contaminated soil.

WWW.RHS.ORG.UK

Highlights from RHS Online

RHS London Show

See who will be exhibiting and plan your visit to the RHS London Plant and Design Show (19–20 February). For details and to book advance tickets, enter 'RHS London Flower Shows' in the search box at RHS Online.

Half-term activities

From butterflies in the glasshouse at Wisley, to scarecrow activities at Harlow Carr, there will be lots of family activities at RHS Gardens during half-term. For details, enter 'February Half Term' in the search box at RHS Online.

Watercolour of *Galanthus nivalis*, *Prunus tenella* and *Crocus olivieri* by Caroline Maria Applebee (c1799–1854).

What's in the bag? It's a media secret

Garden writer and columnist Nigel Colborn on the quality and labelling of peat substitutes

The envelope on my desk contained chunks of plaster, a shard of plastic and flaking remnants of fibreboard. The accompanying note was succinct: 'Should these have been in the seed and potting compost I've just bought?' My reply advised the sender to take it up with his supplier – a budget supermarket.

Raising plants from seed can be a ticklish business and, as experienced gardeners know, good hygiene and a suitable growing medium are essential for success. So to find builders' debris, in something as fine-tuned as seed and potting compost, is scandalous.

Such impurities are probably unusual but retail composts show wide variations in quality. With the drive to phase out peat (by 2020 for bagged media, by 2030 in commercial horticulture), manufacturers have faced tough challenges over the past decade but many have risen to them. Nowadays, most brands perform better than previously, thanks to moisture-holding agents and to more 'root-friendly' ingredients, so good results are easier to achieve. But the dependable, foolproof nature of peat-based composts has yet to be found in modern products.

This is not a plea for using peat. Neither is it an invitation to rehearse the pros and cons of peat. With an approaching ban, we must learn how to do without what was once an indispensable ingredient. The search is still on for products as reliable and user-friendly as those that were based on sphagnum peat.

Discussion with fellow gardeners produces a litany of adverse comments. Modern composts, many say, drain too fast and desiccate. That demands excessive watering which wastes nutrients. Some products have poor physical structure and are easy to over-compress. Composts containing shredded wood can decompose too quickly, many vary in consistency and some are unpleasant to handle.

'The search is still on for products as reliable and user-friendly as those that were based on sphagnum peat.'

RHS / NEIL HEPWORTH

Such negative comments need balancing. Quality has improved in recent years, and amateur composts give better results. And it is clear that suppliers, aware of their products' shortcomings, are striving to further that improvement.

But there is too much mystery about what ends up in the branded bag. Coyness about peat – which many gardeners still want as a main ingredient, even if secretly – is commonplace. Westland, for example, trumpet their main content as 'West +' which, in smaller print, is described as 50 percent peat and 50 percent wood fibre. And there are composts flagged 'with added John Innes', whatever that means. If a John Innes compost formula has been added, doesn't peat have to be an ingredient?

The inclusion of recycled green waste is worrying, too. Central recycling makes sense, for those who cannot, or will not, make their own compost at home. But what ends up in the local authority's composting system? How many of us dump diseased plant material or rampant perennial weeds into the council bin, rather than risking them in our own compost?

And how sterile is recycled green waste? Are there quality checks, based on viable weed-seed content or the presence of pathogens? Do manufacturers sterilise composted waste themselves, before blending it into retail products? With so little information about the contents, one opens each compost pack with some trepidation.

It might help if all bags carried mandatory, detailed information (see News, Nov 2012, p10) – though not as complex and confusing as food labels. If buyers knew precisely what raw materials were in each bag, they would find it easier to make the most suitable choice. Quantitative details of nutritive value would be welcome, too, along with the identity of such additives as water-retention agents. A certificate could confirm that the material has been sterilised and tested.

Such impositions might be irksome for the compost industry, but would help gardeners to know exactly what they buy. Mandatory labelling might also persuade manufacturers to hasten their quest for products that perform as well as old-fashioned, peat-based composts. Meanwhile, we live in hope that a renewable, eco-friendly miracle ingredient will soon be discovered. Perhaps, when it comes, it may even be better than peat.

Everybody likes a good plant swap

Fern Alder, garden designer and speaker, and founder of Full Frontal Gardens

RHS / SARAH CUTTLE

Little could have prepared me for the flurry of activity that would result from a chance idea last spring. My notion was to advertise a couple of plant-swap events in our local park, and I was heartened by the turnout of keen gardeners and gardening hopefuls.

The selection of plant material brought along in just a couple of hours was astounding. A mature *Gunnera manicata* appeared in a huge bucket, causing much intrigue. One of the smallest examples was a tray of 'must have' *Erigeron karvinskianus*, which enchantingly spreads into every crevice and makes my heart skip a beat. Of course, collections of self-seeded *Digitalis*, *Nigella*, *Aquilegia* and *Calendula* all arrived, but were welcome just the same for filling for beds and containers.

Isn't anything a gardener is giving away likely to be a complete thug? Maybe, but for someone these free plants can be treasure. Best of all, because no money changes hands, everyone feels even better and comes away with a smile. I no longer wonder whether to store half packets of seeds, spare bulbs or where to plant out surplus seedlings. For this spring's event, I hope to cause something of a stir with a couple *Tetrapanax papyrifer* plants I have potted up.

Plant giveaways bring together gardeners of all abilities and work on many levels. They help novice gardeners get a first step on the ladder and, for the more experienced, are a chance to swap information, stories, recipes and just indulge our love of plants together. Keen gardeners, it seems, are a breed that really loves to share.

Happily, chance meetings made at such events can lead to longer-term projects and associations. Some community gardening groups have their beginnings at plant swaps. This is another example of plants, in their quiet and unassuming way, magically bringing people together.

✤ Full Frontal Gardens, a community project in the Medway Towns, Kent (see *The Garden*, Nov 2012, pp52–53) is part of the RHS It's Your Neighbourhood Scheme.

DO YOU AGREE?
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Don't lose sight of what to look at

The Garden columnist and designer Mary Keen

RHS / NEIL HEPWORTH

Is too much horticulture (that is, the perfecting of management techniques) the enemy of a good garden? For me the answer has to be yes, but within these pages may not be the best place to air that view.

I want gardens that are, above all, more than just spaces to look at and admire. Yet if you say gardening can be a form of meditation, a poetic experience and somewhere to escape reality, there is a risk of sounding pretentious.

Obsessing about whether to spray your roses or remove thatch from the lawn may mean you miss what really matters. Caring for plants is absorbing, and adds to the experience of being in a garden, but it shouldn't be competitive, nor be a worry. A couple of professional gardener friends once said as we walked round my garden, 'What are you going to do about that?' It was in the wilder part of the garden where snowdrops grow among a few ferns and, later, sweet woodruff provides a gentle covering. I couldn't see what it was they had noticed, and still don't know what they meant. I could have asked but resisted – partly from pride, but more because I liked it the way it was and saw no reason to up the horticultural stakes in an area of the garden where I always choose to linger. I prefer slightly dishevelled places to perfect, tidy plots.

Sometimes people ask me what my favourite garden is and I always answer 'Mine, of course'. It is not conceit. I genuinely love my garden and feel different when I am in it. A few hours outdoors and I'm calmer, happier and beyond caring what is happening in my everyday life. The other thing people say to me, knowing I work as a garden designer, is 'I hate my garden. I wish you would come and look at it.' And I think their hatred has something to do with feeling that it is not perfect, and that they don't know how to make it so.

A garden, like a poem, clears a private space in your head where you can retreat. It isn't about complicated techniques or aspiring to what you see in magazines. It doesn't have to be perfect – and if horticulture gets in the way of a more important experience, then forget it.