Comment

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

Letter from the Editor

Plant protection for who?

Editor of The Garden, Chris Young

Probably the most popular aspect of gardening is buying plants. Whoever tires of the thrill of purchasing a new plant? Whether you go to a local garden centre or rare plant nursery, there is normally something to tempt you to buy.

It is this excitement of plant choice that is at the heart of our gardening heritage – after all, RHS Plant Finder 2013 lists more than 75,000 plants in cultivation in the UK. The unpredictable, oft-pilloried British climate should be celebrated as it allows us to grow such a wide range of plants.

Now this choice is at risk from proposed European Commission legislation (News, p8) that covers all plant crops – in agriculture, horticulture, vineyards and forestry. The draft legislation aims to ‘improve consumer protection… by insisting a definitive description of each plant is documented’.

The intention may be sound (to ensure European Union consumers are protected when they buy an item), but shows a lack of understanding of the gardening market. Our industry thrives on plant breeding innovation, and on new plants coming to market without unnecessary bureaucracy or delay.

At the nub of this proposal is the requirement for each plant to be fully described so that plants sold can be checked against their descriptions. These, it is suggested, will need to be more detailed than descriptions made when adding specimens to the RHS Herbarium. Most plants currently on sale would need to be described before they can be marketed or sold, therefore incurring costs and considerable delays. The net result could be a substantially diminished range of plants on offer to home gardeners. Organisations (such as the RHS), growers, breeders and other interest groups are keen to encourage feedback to MEPs and the Commission.

While challenges of EC legislation continue, the thorny issue of what makes a plant ‘home grown’ is more apt than ever. In this edition, Sally Nex explores what makes a ‘British grown’ plant (Analysis, p13). When you buy a plant, do you consider its country of origin? Examine its health and size? Perhaps its cost? Or maybe, I would suggest, it is the beauty, novelty and excitement of growing something different. Let’s hope that continues unchallenged.

I remember being horrified in the 1970s when, finishing a garden tour, we got back on the bus to find the secretary of the local horticultural society standing up at the back waving a bag and taking out green leafy bits shouting, ‘Who wants one of these?’ In her defence, the culture was different in those days – it was considered quite OK to help yourself to ‘slips’ (cuttings).

David Stevens:
A garden born of Vulcan

Planting is chosen not just for its suitability for a harsh environment but to extend the patterns that swirl in from the omnipresent dark lava flow.

FROM MY GARDEN

Just a little slip? It’s still theft

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

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My favourite method of finding new plants is that of Lady Moore, one of the greats of early 20th-century Irish gardening, who would remark, ‘Has it got a little brother?’ So charmingly put, so hard to refuse.

A couple of Norwegian gardening friends told me a story the other day about a woman plant collector who was caught, red-handed, at Gothenburg Botanical Garden in Sweden. Challenged by a staff member, and trying to leave, she flung bags of plants at him. Apparently some unusual plants had been disappearing and staff recognised the woman, as they had been sent a picture of her from colleagues in the horticultural world. I’m told it is common knowledge who she is, and she is often seen on garden tours and charity events. (By the way, tradition has it that in Norway only stolen cuttings root…)

In another audacious heist, as visitors left, the garden owner noticed that scarce *Trillium ovatum* f. *hibbersonii* had a wilted stem. On investigation with a spade, he discovered a cheap disguise – the root had vanished and the stem stuck back in again. Beware the light-fingered plantaholic.
Loving the limelight
My plant of Hydrangea paniculata ‘Limelight’, growing in my front garden, had produced more than 50 flowerheads (below) by September this year.
Donald Bibey, Devon

Pick of the plums
I spent most of my summer holidays before the Second World War picking plums in my father’s Worcestershire orchard.
First came the small, purple ‘Early Rivers’ (unsinspiring but early), then ‘Pershore’. This was quite unlike the fruit mentioned in your feature (The Garden, September, p68) as they were purple, not yellow, and a good cooker. The plums were harvested fully ripened; they were collected in late afternoon by God’s Wonderful Railway (the Great Western) and were in the shops the next morning. The ‘Pershore’ you write of sounds like the plum known to us as ‘Yellow Egg’, wholly golden yellow when ripe. It was bland and tasteless, but our favourite for stewing. For taste, raw, nothing touched the queen of plums, ‘Belle de Louvain’ – large, purple, sweet and best eaten in the bath to let the juice run off. Oh, for a bowl of Belles now!
Keith Chester, Slough

Perfect imperfection
It was a pleasure to read about how to make the best of your lawn (The Garden, September, p63) and I am aware that many people take great pride in their weed-free, carefully honed lawns. But I was cheered by the Editor’s comment (September, p17) that lawn imperfection can be justified by today’s environmental demands.
What if you never sought perfection in any area of gardening? Can the wrongly placed plant or the self-seeded upstart give as much pleasure as the plants in a carefully planned and executed designer garden? Is an overgrown garden simply a mess or a place where nature’s determination to win is all too obvious, but pleasurable?
We should step back and admire less-obviously designed plots with their imperfections. Or perhaps the status earned by employing a designer is too high to be resisted?
Clare Lorenz, Edinburgh
Mary Keen, Comment, p23.

Marmite moment
I was sorry to learn some readers (Letters, August, p17) did not find Helen Dillon’s view on men and lawnmowers amusing. I have never cared much for women’s legs or for my lawn, but have loved gardening for most of my life (some 33 years).
Having come to enjoy her musings on plants and gardening, I was happy to see that Helen would be writing regularly for The Garden. As a garden writer and lecturer myself, I have learned how important it is to add a touch of...
More on moths
Kate Bradbury wrote how garden tiger moth numbers have decreased by 92 percent since 1968 (Comment, September, p23). It was interesting because I found one (inset below) on my doorstep in early August.

I wonder if the fact that I live near the South Downs National Park may have been a factor as to why the tiger moth was in my garden?

Thomas Martin, Brighton

Andrea Salisbury, RHS Senior Entomologist, replies:
As its name suggests, garden tiger moth (Arctia caja) was once a common garden insect, particularly in southeast England.

The distinctive, hairy caterpillars feed on various herbaceous plants and the colourful adults may be disturbed during gardening activities. The decline in numbers means that, sadly, few gardeners are fortunate enough to have this moth in their garden.

In wider praise of Latin
Lia Leendertz’s piece on the use of Latin names (Comment, September, p23) has provoked discussion (Letters, October, p16) and continues to find general agreement:

I enjoyed Lia Leendertz’s comments on botanical Latin. It reminded me of a mountain flower holiday in Switzerland during which I held a lengthy conversation with a Japanese gentleman, entirely in Latin. He would point to a mountain plant in great delight and say ‘Gentiana acaulis’, for example, then I would point to another and name it in Latin. We then shook hands and went our own ways.

Ivan Smith, East Sussex

I agree entirely with Lia on the use of Latin names – and it does not only apply to plants.

Having spent more than 30 years travelling the world dealing with weeds, insects and diseases, using Latin names was the only way of avoiding ambiguity; biologists in most countries were completely familiar with them. If you know Latin names, you can converse with almost anyone you meet.

Windsor Griffiths, Powys

of humour when trying to capture the reader or listener’s attention. It makes them focus on what you are saying, and therefore they will listen when you are trying to communicate the really important bits, too. I hope we shall read many more tales from Helen – I found her recent piece on swift moths delightful (Comment, August, p15) and now I also know what has been eating my peony…

Tommy Tønsberg, Norway