LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Autumn’s growing choices

Editor of The Garden, Chris Young

Each season has its highlights: this is one of the greatest joys of gardening in the UK. From bare winter stems and occasional blooms backed by a crisp blue sky, to myriad colours of late-spring bedding or the full-on drama of borders in high summer, the turning of the year brings constant evolution to our gardening landscape.

And then there is autumn, known, of course, for its burnished leaves, its misty mornings and wan, watery sun. But what of its horticultural value? Are October and November as potentially exciting and interesting for gardeners as other months?

In recent decades, the palette of plants that add visual interest at this time of year has substantially increased. Even though many of these have been in cultivation for some time, it is their popularity – and uses – that have changed. Today, ornamental grasses such as Miscanthus or Pennisetum; autumnal leaf colour from shrubby stalwarts such as Hydrangea quercifolia and Euonymus alatus; late-blooming perennials such as Persicaria and Rudbeckia; and the ongoing influence of the New Perennial movement espoused by plantmen such as Piet Oudolf: these are just some of the ways our gardens now have the potential to be much richer in interest late in the year.

This issue brings the sheer diversity of autumn gardening to the fore. Belgian garden-designer Chris Ghyselen uses flowers and foliage in his garden, mixing and matching to ensure that his domestic space is full of interest and drama. So too at world-renowned The Bressingham Gardens, where Phil Clayton uncovers the insatiable appetite of the Bloom family for inspired planting combinations. Still on seasonal plants, John David focuses on one of the brightest and most arresting of autumn bulbs: southern African Nerine. Their bold, often vivid flower colours are real late-season treats.

With clever planting combinations and a refined understanding of when and how plants flower, change colour or form seed, our potential for making colourful and stimulating autumnal gardens has never been richer. And as a result, our confidence in making exciting autumn gardens can never have been greater.

FROM THIS ISSUE

The Bressingham Gardens are too often overlooked...
Even if you think you know what Bressingham has to offer, pay a visit and prepare to be inspired.

Phil Clayton, Great Garden Visits: The Bressingham Gardens

FROM MY GARDEN

Spreading the love

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

Down on my knees weeding, secreted in the border, I heard a visitor lecturing a young couple about plants that should never be tolerated. She was poking her umbrella at poor Corydalis lutea. OK, it is a mad coloniser by seed, but what a cheerful small plant, and how easily pulled out.

Her next victim was Centaurea montana, a resident of gardens for centuries. ‘Seeds everywhere,’ I heard her say, at which point I had to rise in defence. ‘I love that plant,’ I said, struggling to my feet, adding, ‘and you often see those lovely intricate flowers on early tapestries.’ Not impressed, her party drifted off to the opposite border.

I guessed there would be trouble. Sure enough, her umbrella was soon quivering with disapproval at the sight of a billowing mass of white willowherb (Chamaenerion angustifolium ‘Album’), one of the most beautiful plants I grow. In my youth I was terrified of its rampant habit, but now I am no longer prepared to deny myself such exquisite white spires so just yank out surplus plants after flowering. How about pretty pink Convolvulus althaeoides? Agreed, it should never be allowed in a bed, but is nicely controlled when grown in a gravel path.

My long-established Romneya coulteri actually emerged through the floorboards of the henhouse, while glamorous, scarlet-flowered Chilean scrambler Berberidopsis corallina now extends 15m (50ft) along the wall. It is a shame to be frightened of colonisers; many are too good to miss. Just don’t let on when trying to sell a bit of a spreader at a plant sale: people will think you are unleashing something horrific.
Letters

Bedding on display
I was amazed Nigel Colborn (Comment, August, p19) was so negative about Victoria Embankment Gardens in London, as this park is known for its fantastic displays. Where else did bedding look good in June, with cold weather lasting until that month? If Nigel had visited in August he would have admired some of the most innovative displays I have seen for a long time. The use of plants is not necessarily the same as in domestic gardens, but it gives people ideas to try. I was an apprentice in those gardens in the 1960s and can honestly say that the displays are as good now as they were then – and also have a modern touch. Well done to Westminster’s Parks Service for keeping up its summer displays.

Ken Crowther, Essex

As Nigel rightly says about seasonal invented bedding schemes, the French invented bedding and their displays continue to put ours to shame. We have seen many lovely displays in French villages (above); the colour and range of flowers they use attract a host of butterflies, bees and hummingbird hawk-moths.

Juliet Leeves, Surrey

Deterring weevils
Unlike Mary Keen (Comment September, p21), I have been fortunate not to encounter vine weevils recently. After an infestation some years ago, I started to topdress the many pots in my garden with a layer of sharp gravel. This appears to have deterred both adults and grubs. I have not seen this method recommended – or perhaps I have just been lucky.

Maureen Berry, Dorset

All in the name
Lia Leendertz (Comment, September, p23) is completely right about the importance, simplicity and universality of Latin nomenclature. However, we should remember that the naming of plants in Latin began simply because Latin was the learned language of Europe. Before Carl Linnaeus brought order to taxonomy, there were often as many different Latin names for a single plant as vernacular ones: indeed, the Latin ‘name’ was often an unwieldy full definition of the plant.

Bearded iris: must-have classics or brash newcomers?
Mary Keen’s remarks on over-hybridized modern bearded irises (Comment, August, p21) provoked a range of responses:

I have to defend Tall Bearded iris – glorious beauties in all their wondrous range of colours. In 1993, a Kelways catalogue inspired me to plant a rainbow-ordered iris border. It was a challenge, and took some years to refine the colour sequence. The border begins with Iris ‘Spartan’ (a deep red), continues through the spectrum to subtle chartreuse-green I. ‘Green Eyed Lady’ and ends with purple I. ‘Night Owl’. All the colours are there, and in full flower it is an unforgettable sight.

Stephanie Richards, Gloucestershire

I have been bemoaning the trend towards ever more frilly and gaudy iris for years now, and agree with Mary Keen. Modern cultivars have lost the original charm and strength of form of the iris flower. They are not as harmonious nor as prolific as ones rescued from other people’s gardens. It is heartening to know that I am not alone, and that I may be able to add to my collection with some new cultivars.

Ann Aldred, Anglesey

We acquired 200 cultivars of older rhizomes, and a selection of ‘modern’ irises from Cayeux Nurseries in France. The newer hybrids are more ruffled and can be top heavy, but many older cultivars are just as competitive in colour combinations. We did not follow a specific planting scheme - if you plant enough irises they become their own master, and you just enjoy the show.

Andrew Colson, North Yorkshire

France: proud of its seasonal bedding.

A real puzzle
I have a strange tree in my garden (right). Bought as Araucaria araucana (monkey puzzle), it is 20 years old and nearly 5m (16ft) tall. Yet its branches are upright and have not spread, so is it unusual?

Ray Long, Shropshire

James Armitage, RHS Principal Scientist Horticultural Taxonomy, replies: Despite the ubiquity of Araucaria araucana as a garden plant, RHS Plant Finder has never listed a single cultivar of this species. A colleague says that, even in the wild, the tree exhibits little variation. It is therefore surprising to see this striking, fastigiated form which promises to make an interesting addition to our garden flora.
Higher climbers

The Vigna caracalla photographed at Tynings Climbers (The Garden, August, p49) appears fairly unimpressive in comparison with our own plant. We have been growing this fragrant climber for many years in the Alentejo region of central and southern Portugal, and we give seed pods to friends. Our climate (extremely hot in summer) seems ideal for this semi-tropical plant, and we expect a densely flowering show for almost three months in summer when our snail vine blooms. With sharp winter frosts in winter, we cut our V. caracalla to about 1m (3ft) high, then cover it with fleece. It springs back with renewed vigour each year and will easily cover an arbour.

Carole Edlmann, Portugal

Having enjoyed Roy’s visit to Tynings Climbers, I would like to see more articles on conservatory plants. Mandevilla is spectacular, as are plumbagos, passionflowers and brugmansia – all of which I grow. I would advise anyone building a conservatory or orangery to include a soil-filled bed in order to grow climbers successfully.

Louise Curling, Co. Tipperary

‘…few things excite me more than seeing a plant that is new to me’

Roy Lancaster: The Abbey Nursery Pages 70–73

Genius of plants

The cult of the monkey puzzle

Author: James Wong, botanist and garden designer

It may have been the pride of Victorian park planting with its spiky green leaves and spreading umbrella-like canopy, yet the monkey puzzle tree (Araucaria araucana) is everything but a quirky lawn centrepiece in its Southern Andean home. Sacred to the Mapuche-Pehuenche people of Chile and Argentina, who rely on the tree’s large pine nut-like seeds (piñones) as a staple food, monkey puzzle forests are so highly regarded by locals that their relationship with them is considered akin to being part of an extended family.

Boiled, roasted, baked into breads and cookies, brewed into beer or used as animal feed, the large, protein-rich seeds of monkey puzzles have been a keystone of the indigenous diet since long before the arrival of Europeans. With each mature female tree capable of producing up to 9,000 arrowhead-shaped seeds – which store extremely well and even fall to the ground for easy harvesting – piñones are still an enormously popular food, vital to local culture and food security.

But the Mapuche’s reliance on monkey puzzles does not stop with food. The tree’s high-quality timber is their main source of firewood; its resin is highly valued in traditional medicine to treat a wide range of conditions from headaches to menstrual pains. Images of female (domopewen) and male (wentrupewen) trees are central figures in the local folklore and religion, and three-day-long fertility ceremonies, held in the shadows of ancient trees, attract as many as 8,000 people to pray to them for good harvests.

Even the tree’s botanical name derives from the Spanish for the Mapuche-Pehuenche ethnic group, the Araucano. So there is, surprisingly, a sacred native South American totem in many British parks. Who knew?

Wild About Gardens Week 25–31 October

To support local biodiversity, the RHS and The Wildlife Trusts are encouraging local groups to help wildlife in their area. For more, visit: www.rhs.org.uk/wildlifegardensweek

RHS autumn shows

Harvests are plentiful after a warm summer. Visit the RHS London Harvest Festival Show (8–9 October) and RHS London Shades of Autumn Show (22–23 Oct) for the best of the season’s crop. Tickets on sale at www.rhs.org.uk/shows
Taming the wild

Writer and The Garden columnist Lia Leendertz finds beauty in the wild – and in the artifice of horticultural endeavour. Where do the conflicting calls of wilderness and control lead?

We have developed a slightly odd family habit. Wherever we go on holiday, to sleep on sinking air beds and battle with tiresome wasps, there will come a day when my husband will produce an Ordnance Survey map of the immediate area and lead us off on a goose chase around twisting country lanes and over barely maintained stiles.

What he seeks are standing stones, burial chambers and barrows, but not the type you will come across signposted with brown heritage signs and serviced by a nice car park and a National Trust café. There are hundreds of lesser-known examples of our prehistoric foibles tucked away on farmland, in woods and on moors, many on obscure public footpaths. You have to search, scramble, be bold and not give up if you want to find them.

The rewards of all this endeavour can be great. One blue-skied day in summer we first-gear-ed up some terrifyingly windy hills to the edge of Dartmoor, found a place to pull in, and set off across the moor, not another soul in sight. The weather had been hot and dry and the moor was honey-coloured, the long grass pale and strawlike, stretching away from us in waves for miles around. An utterly wild landscape, as close to wilderness as I ever get to lay eyes on. Then, as we came over a rise in the ground, there appeared below us the most perfect circle of grey stones.

It was astonishingly beautiful, this sudden and unmistakable evidence of a human hand. The kids ran to it, wanted to be in it, and then to endlessly circle it. This is ‘our’ bit of the moor, we humans have claimed it – and ever so slightly tamed it – albeit a long, long time ago.

‘There is always a battle between the domestic and the wild in every garden, even in my relatively little urban patch.’

Personal appeal

At the other end of the spectrum of human intervention on the landscape, I once visited the Walled Garden at West Dean in West Sussex – which 10 gardeners keep maintained to near-Victorian standards.

The hand of the gardener can be seen everywhere, in the perfectly trained trees where every wayward shoot is nipped in the bud before it can get ideas above its station, in the rich, weed-free soil, and in the patiently tended poker-straight rows of vegetables.

Describing it I realise it sounds a little uptight, but I found myself breathing a contented sigh. Your eye never falls on anything troubling, there are no tangles of growth, waiting in the wings. If not the most beautiful garden I have ever visited, it is certainly the most satisfying. It is a place where the human has completely won, for now at least.

There is something of a relief in this level of domesticity that I think is at the heart of the gardening urge. I love the wildness of the moor but I recognise a certain primitive exhalation of breath and unclenching of the shoulders on dropping back down the winding lanes away from it and reaching villages, hedges, postboxes and fields. I can understand the desire to put a reassuring human stamp on the wilderness – it makes me smile to see it.

There is always a battle between the domestic and the wild in every garden, even in my relatively little urban patch. I don’t like my garden to be weedy – although it usually is to a greater or lesser extent, with nature taking the upper hand and showing me who’s really boss. I love that act of reclaiming it. Pulling weeds out of borders, training trees, constructing large and perfect stone circles; all of this helps us to fool ourselves that we are in charge.

And all these grand thoughts lead me to something as prosaic as placing an order for some yew hedging, in a plan to create something more solid and controllable and undeniably domestic in the garden, around which the inevitable chaos can swirl. It is an archetypal idea that underpins so much of gardening today: give your garden strong man-made structure, and let the planting run free. My inspiration may be different – from the wilds of Dartmoor to the refined precision of West Dean – but I’m certainly not the first.
Drawing swards over meadows

Writer and regular *The Garden* columnist Nigel Colborn VMH on what we mean by ‘meadow’

A visitor last summer asked why we had no wild poppies in our meadow. I explained such annuals were not grassland plants and would grow only where moles or ants may have damaged the turf enough to provide bare soil. This led to the inevitable comparison with the splendid Olympic Park ‘meadows’ of 2012.

That term ‘meadow’ applied to drifts of annuals, makes me uneasy because loose definitions cause confusion. Meadows consist of grass, with or without associated broad-leaved plants. They can be diverse, with a floral sequence from spring cowslips to autumn colchicums – but always within grass.

Garden lawns can be converted to meadows but need time. Ours has taken eight years and though diverse and flowery, still has some way to go. You can start a meadow from bare soil but that takes longer and the system still has to be based on grass, mown at least once each year.

To cloud the issue further, there’s also the term ‘prairie’. This name, for the grasslands of Midwestern North America, has become associated with a specific planting style. Big grasses usually figure, with semi-naturalised clumps of flowering perennials. With an incredulity bypass, such schemes reflect the more flowery parts of America’s central plains so ‘Prairie Planting’ seems to fit.

Nigel Dunnett’s magnificent plantings in the Olympic Park, like the colourful tides of short-lived species behind the Glasshouse at Wisley, are not meadows. Cattle would not graze happily in such places and the plants would make rotten hay. It is hard to know what to call such cultures but ‘meadow’ won’t do. They are more akin to annual vegetation on disturbed waste ground, or tilled, fellowed farmland.

Our visitor’s poppy question underlines the confusion and demands clarification. ‘Annual meadow’ is self-contradictory. This year, we broadcast seed of corn cockles, corn marigold, poppies and cornflowers onto a patch of bare, cultivated ground. It was pretty all summer and loud with bees and will therefore become a continuing feature in our garden. For want of something more apt, we are calling it the ‘arable’.

Gardening in the future

What will life – and our gardens – be like in 2100? Author Marek Kohn offers some suggestions

By the end of this century many of the children playing in gardens today will still be alive – and probably will relish whatever shade their ever-shrinking, hotter gardens can offer. The world will have changed even more than they have by then, but we are already able to foresee some of the most important elements that will shape our world – and how these forces may affect the gardens of the future.

Global temperatures by 2100 are likely to have risen significantly as the planet’s climate changes. The Atlantic Ocean will buffer the British Isles from climatic extremes, as it always has. This will change the relationships between the UK and everywhere else. Outsiders will envy the cool damp of the north and west, which may increasingly seem like a relic of a vanished world.

This will draw more people to the already-crowded island of Britain. They will want to come here because life in general – not just in the garden – will be easier than elsewhere. People will live more densely as demand drives up property prices, and because dense packing (in flats or terraces) is energy efficient.

As a result, big gardens will tend to be the preserve of the wealthy, or shared communal spaces. Water will be a limiting resource, especially in southern England, which will struggle with dense populations and punishing summer droughts. Many gardeners may have few options other than succulents and gravel.

Gardens will inadvertently become nurseries for a changing countryside. Most of tomorrow’s wild plants are probably in our gardens now, and will spread beyond their confines, for better or worse, as climate alters.

Or perhaps our native plants will prove more resilient than we might fear. After all, our gardens are full of plants demonstrating (admittedly with our help) that they can thrive in climates for which they weren’t designed. They could be a sign of hope for the future of Britain’s long-suffering native plants.

Marek Kohn is author of *Turned Out Nice: How the British Isles Will Change as the World Heats Up*. For a video of his talk at FutureFest, see: [www.futurefest.org](http://www.futurefest.org)
RHS Plants

A monthly look at four plants that have won the RHS Award of Garden Merit (AGM), the Society's highest plant accolade

Zauschneria californica

‘Dublin’ (syn. ‘Glasnevin’)

A low-growing, deciduous subshrub with narrow, grey-green leaves. Bears loose terminal spikes of vivid scarlet, tubular flowers up to 4cm (1½in) long in summer and autumn. A fantastic plant for poor soil and dry gardens, with a long flowering period.

✦ Size: height: 30cm (12in); spread: 60cm (24in).
✦ Likes: needs full sun and well-drained soil.
✦ Hardiness rating: H4 (-10 to -5°C / 14 to 23°F).

Persicaria affinis

‘Darjeeling Red’

Formerly known as Polygonum affine ‘Darjeeling Red’, this spreading, semi-evergreen perennial forms a mat of pointed, dark green leaves, which often redden in autumn. Dense spikes of small flowers open pink, becoming dark red as they age.

✦ Size: height: 25cm (10in); spread: indefinite.
✦ Likes: moist soil in sun or part-shade.
✦ Hardiness rating: H5 (-15 to -10°C / 5 to 14°F).

Pear ‘Beth’

An attractive dessert pear with good quality, smallish but well-flavoured fruit. Heavy, regular crops from mid-August until early September; the fruit do not store for long once picked. In frost-prone areas grow as an espalier against a sheltered south- or west-facing wall. Requires another pear such as ‘Conference’ or ‘Concorde’ for pollination.

✦ Size: depends on rootstock and pruning regime.
✦ Likes: full sun, well-drained soil.
✦ Hardiness rating: H6 (-20 to -15°C / -4 to 5°F).

RHS Plant Trials in 2013

Current highlights at RHS Garden Wisley Trials Field:
✦ Saxifraga fortunei.
✦ Autumn colour on viburnums and blackberries / hybrid berries.
✦ Autumn crocus.

For more, visit: www.rhs.org.uk/trials

Results from some past trials are available in full-colour printed bulletins. To find out which are available, email: trials@rhs.org.uk. Alternatively, contact: The Trials Office, RHS Garden Wisley, Woking, Surrey GU23 6QF. Bulletins require an A4-size self-addressed envelope, and a donation of £2; cheques payable to Royal Horticultural Society.