



# The overloaded ark

Garden writer and *The Garden* columnist Nigel Colborn faces difficult choices



RHS/NEIL HEWORTH

In an idle moment this summer I counted all of our outdoor containers. A total of 82 were planted with tender summer material – some as single plants, others in composed groups. Tender plants were also dotted about the borders to boost colour while perennials took a breather.

These plants are precious and all of them (or their progeny) must be over-wintered frost-free. However, all we have to accommodate them is a 2.5 x 4.5m (8 x 15ft) greenhouse kept to a miserly

3°C (37°F) minimum temperature.

If there is a master plan for nursing tender collections through winter I have yet to find it. We could build another greenhouse but it, too, would become over-stuffed and we would want a third. A true professional would be pragmatic, saving the cream and dumping the rest. But how do you prioritise when every plant has its own story?

Many of those in our garden are treasured because of who they came from – and every year, there are more. This autumn we have

many unidentified salvias, each one known as 'one of Alice's' after the generous gardener who donated the cuttings to us last autumn.

Among my plants are rare cultivars, sought after for years and valued beyond pearls. And species such as *Pelargonium abrotanifolium* – of negligible garden value, but the first truly wild pelargonium I ever saw, growing in its native South Africa.

Overwintering plants as young cuttings saves space but gardens need whopping non-hardies, too. Oleanders need to be tall, and flashy shrubs such as *Alyogyne* or *Tibouchina* only impress when they are as big and busy as old-fashioned opera sopranos. And you can't fit many of those into a little greenhouse.

February brings this crisis to a giddy climax. Small cuttings that ticked over quietly throughout winter now grow faster every day, rapidly filling up the space we had saved for seed-raising. The tender plants continue to take up space, as do my treasured cultivars. There is an inevitable overcrowding in our greenhouse at this point, and we must cull surplus plants. Throwing out healthy young plants, particularly when spring is on the way, is easy to describe – but agony to carry out. ●

# Inspired by meadows

Anne Wareham, author of *The Bad Tempered Gardener*, on seeing what works for your patch



CHARLES HAVES

If you have a large, old, ecologically and historically valuable meadow, I think you should treasure it. It would be especially good if you refrained from digging it up in order to sow a 'wildflower meadow' of Day-Glo, largely non-native, annuals.

But if you have a smaller area (from a couple of square yards upwards) of rough grass, in which I include most people's lawns if they have escaped 'treatment', maybe it's worth a little experimenting.

I recently visited John Sales (former Chief Garden Adviser for the National Trust) who has been doing exactly this for many years. He has several small areas of what was pasture divided into different regimes. All are cut in September – late for those who model their meadow care on the old agricultural timings, but it makes sure everything can seed. One part is cut fortnightly until the middle of May, and this suits orchids and much other later flowerers, which keep going until August. Another part is a nuttery with coppiced hazels, and here *Iris latifolia* has been added – with grass cleverly disguising its foliage, which goes 'off' badly before the flower arrives. The iris have bounced all over the place – along with wild daffodils, anemones, martagon lilies, fritillaries and

common spotted orchids.

We have experimented at my garden, Veddw in South Wales, too. Enthusiastic wood anemones and violets grow in the old, unploughed meadow grass. Lazily – and ecologically – I decided to leave it as grassland and plant into it. Not everything has worked, but many things have: small white daffodils (good with white anemones in spring), martagon lilies, crocosmia, campanula and daylilies are thriving among those plants we can call British native wildflowers, if we don't call them weeds. It is certainly an area that doesn't need weeding.

Your little patch will have its own ecosystem, climate and potential specialities. Anything massed among grasses looks special – the green of the grass makes flower colours glow. Experiment by trying a range of plants, using different mowing regimes, and building on what thrives. If the grass is too coarse or too keen, scratching the surface in autumn and sowing semi-parasitic yellow rattle will sort that out in time. We don't experiment enough in gardens: give these types of meadows a try. ●



ANNE WAREHAM

Anne's meadow mix of wild and garden plants.