Gardeners often talk about their garden’s microclimate – whether it is a ‘sun trap’ or a ‘frost pocket’. Yet in reality most gardens contain a range of conditions, each specific to the location and each with a slightly different set of light levels, soil conditions and rainfall amounts.

But perhaps the one area of the UK where weather and climate have the greatest influence – be that horticultural or human – is by the coast.

In this issue we delve into three gardens (from p53), all with different horticultural responses to their varied conditions and locations – from the rugged north Devon coast to expansive sands of East Sussex. In addition, four coastal gardeners give their take on why their horticultural endeavour is so rewarding, whether it is beachcombing on the Isle of Mull or working in the benign environs of the Isle of Wight. Stepping back a few paces from the seafront, Phil Clayton continues our ‘Great Garden Visits’ series at Abbotsbury Subtropical Gardens, also shaped and influenced by its maritime location.

There are two clear similarities with all of these coastal gardens, whether small or large, northern or southern. The first is that owners have had to create shelter to aid plant establishment. Without windbreaks to reduce exposure, especially to fierce winter gales, planting cannot begin. Indeed in one garden, owners altered the shape and size of raised beds to reduce wind damage. Once shelter is in place, and after understanding how plants best survive in these conditions, gardening can start with a mighty zeal.

The other link between these gardens? The sky. As an inland gardener, with limited views over my garden wall, the breadth of the sky at the coast is a great joy. Be it storm clouds thundering in, or a panorama of blue on a summer’s day, the link between land and sky is a constant. It also reminds us that any of our horticultural successes are at the mercy of the weather – no matter how well you manipulate your microclimate.

Neonicotinoids update: to see how the two-year withdrawal (News, June, p10) of these chemicals may affect some gardeners, see RHS Advice, p26.

My great gardening hero is Christopher Lloyd. His remark ‘Look after late summer and the rest of the year will look after itself’ will forever be stuck in my head – I’ve always wanted a good show for overblown August.

I could run out of adjectives trying to describe the brilliance of my late-summer display: Dahlia including luscious ‘Admiral Rawlings’ and ‘Dovegrove’, a red single; my beloved Salvia confertiflora; late agapanthus in variety, planted in the beds or plonked in borders in their pots; Canna including whopping ‘Musifolia’ and ‘Erebos’; plus the tallest, last to flower, graceful dieramas (Angel’s fishing rods or wandflowers). Doesn’t this all sound horribly smug?

Until disaster struck. Thinking one of my peonies looked faint, I decided to dig it up and see. Up it came, along with a heaving mass of white, segmented caterpillars, about 4cm (1½in) long, with light brown heads. The roots were completely hollowed out, hanging like empty skin.

When I sent a caterpillar off to the RHS Advisory team for identification, the answer was ‘the larvae of the swift moth’. Now, my only happy peony is a Paeonia mlokosewitschii which is beside a metal trellis – my reckoning is that the swift moth is aeronautically challenged and cannot cope with both egg-laying and flying near such a barrier.

There is one good thing about their horrid larvae. Whereas robins adore vine weevil grubs, when offered these succulent, fat caterpillars they’re simply over the moon. And, the parting comment of my RHS answer? ‘Only found in very weedy gardens’. We’re a bit less smug around here these days.

...they discovered that raised beds make effective windbreaks, providing they are elliptical in shape, with the highest side facing into the wind.

Nicola Stocken: Working with the wind

My late-summer show scuppered

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Local savings

Garden centres can be expensive (Letters, May, p22). I would urge your readers to seek out small local nurseries for their plants. We generally charge about half the price demanded by large garden centres. There have been huge increases in the wholesale price of potting compost, pots and other materials (I'm not even going to start on the weather) and we have had to pass some of this on to the customer, but we still maintain reasonable prices.

Not only will your local nursery provide better value, but also an investment of time and passion that comes only from cultivating plants on site and nurturing them to sale. Gardeners benefit from local knowledge and diversity. By supporting independent outlets, you can help prevent the slow decline that blights many local nurseries for their plants.

Heather Richardson, Rainham Horticultural Society, Essex

Power of flowers

As a health professional working for a mental health trust, I have seen how the power of nature can help patients. I visited an elderly lady at her home. She pulled back the curtains in one room to reveal hanging baskets and containers ablaze with colour. Her son planted them, and she said the sight of them lifts her mood better than any medicine. Some of our service users love growing fruit and vegetables on an allotment. It has improved their diet and increased their activity levels. So gardening is not only to be encouraged in schools, but also in hospitals.

Jennifer Campbell, Birmingham

Double bloom

I thought you might be interested in the strange conjoined flower on my Dorsicum plant (above). The double flowerhead is on a single, double-width flattened stem and resembles an exotic butterfly or bird of paradise.

Ray Wilkinson, Kent

Fascitation, here in Dorsicum is common in the daisy family.

Double bloom

My friend and I went to the Malvern Spring Gardening Show and looked at the School Gardens. They were all of a high standard, each one inspired by a book. The children manning the gardens were committed, enthusiastic, and happy to answer our questions.

This is something we should all encourage. If the RHS can do more along these lines, and also work to encourage the involvement of secondary school pupils, it will benefit us all.

Ray Wilkinson, Kent

Double bloom

As well as promoting communal work, it has been developing a new 1ha (2.5 acre) school garden for one of our local primary schools, which will be open to the public in the summer.

May, p27)

Garden makers

My wife and I have been involved in horticulture for more than 30 years and have been developing a new 1ha (2.5 acre) garden in a corner of the garden, not in a rush and without a design.

Anne Warreham (Comment, May, p27) describes what we have achieved perfectly when she says: ‘being able to contemplate the place, its moods, its light, its temperamental and problems over a long period of time.’ We can now say we are ‘garden makers’.

Debra and Marin Cronk, Kent

‘As soon as I saw its clustered, flame-scarlet daisy flowers I was reminded of my first meeting with this tender shrub’

Roy Lancaster: Tyning Climb

Pages 48–51

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Following the plot

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May, p27)
In praise of seasonal planting

Garden writer and The Garden columnist Nigel Colborn on public bedding schemes

It seemed a lovely idea: a Sunday stroll through London’s Victoria Embankment Gardens to enjoy the summer bedding. But although it was late June, most of the beds were unplanted and bare soil made the otherwise leafy park look ugly. If the beds had been grassed over, permanently, would it be a loss?

Seasonal plantings are not everyone’s idea of wise, sustainable gardening. Raising tender plants uses energy and, with twice-yearly stripping out, flower beds are hardly wildlife friendly. Many bedding cultivars are sterile, of little value to pollinators and most are over-fed, often with artificial fertilisers.

But bedding plays an important role in public planting and need not be costly to the environment. Using hardy plants reduces energy consumption and, with wise selection, insects can benefit, too. Wallflowers, tulips, crocuses and violas all provide sustenance to spring bees. And for summer, single-flowered dahlias, penstemons, zinnias, and most hardy annuals are magnets for butterflies, bees and hoverflies.

Long tradition
Bedding was not a British invention – the French were planting it from the 1600s – but our hunger for new plants and the Victorians’ love of floral displays put a British seal on the style. During the British Empire that style was replicated across the world – and still persists in many places in the Commonwealth.

As an art form, seasonal planting is part of our heritage and too valuable to be lost. Beds are designed to be glimpsed in passing, or to show colour from afar, rather than be closely admired on a daily basis.

That is why pomp and pizzazz are essential parts of their character, and why they are needed around important buildings. The red pelargoniums decreed by Queen Victoria are as important to Buckingham Palace as the Guardsmen’s uniforms. And a rectangle of orange Tagetes, edged with blue lobelia with a Ricinus plonked into the middle looks fine in a park, even if you pass it daily. But the same scheme would soon bore you to tears outside your kitchen window.

Yet bedding has another, possibly greater value. Community projects, particularly RHS Britain in Bloom, are most effective where everyone buys into the scheme. Strong local government input is essential, through parks and public green spaces; without that, community projects can falter.

Public bedding schemes, whether planted by councils or by Britain in Bloom volunteers, are the most obvious manifestations of the scheme’s activities.

Regardless of what you think, colourful seasonal planting wins people over and can persuade individuals, in their own small way, to become involved. Thus, bedding or floral decoration becomes the driver for the more diverse activities that are so important for greening communities.

So however refined your tastes, and whatever you feel about massed floral ‘bling’, its effects can be beneficial. In public places, a sea of bilious heucheras, carpets of striped petunias or regiments of tulips may distress you – but if they do, perhaps it is wrong to curse the bedding. Instead, we should question the choices and combinations of plants and suggest more imagination and creativity is needed.

When filming for RHS Garden Wisley’s centenary 10 years ago, the camera lingered amidst a summer bedding scheme of scarlet Dahlia ‘Bishop of Llandaff’ planted with Verbena bonariensis, creating a purple glow above them. Not only was the colour combination wonderful in strong summer sun, but the flowers were crowded with insects, including hundreds of painted lady butterflies. Both plants are outstanding, whether massed or deployed in less formal schemes. They need little energy to raise and thrive with minimal aftercare, making them near-perfect for seasonal planting.

Victoria Embankment Gardens 30 years ago were well known for their innovative, exciting and diversely planted bedding schemes. Perhaps it is time Westminster City Council rediscovered its form and went back to showing the world – including London tourists – that bedding can be as gorgeous, and as relevant now, as it was in Joseph Paxton’s day.

As an art form, seasonal planting is part of our heritage and too valuable to be lost.’
Avoiding border prima donnas

Mary Keen, writer and The Garden columnist

I have never known my irises flower better or longer than they have done this year, which is a puzzle after all our recent soaking summers. But that’s gardening: just when you think you know an incontrovertible horticultural truth – that irises demand months of sun on their rhizomes – you discover that many don’t.

I have a small collection of the kind of irises that are known as Miniature Tall Bearded, which they use in America for flower arrangements. Mine are mainly un-named and collected from old gardens. Iris specialist Claire Austin came to see them a few years ago and agreed that overbred bearded irises have become such aristocrats in their rich colours and elaborate ruffles that they are hard to fit into many planting schemes. She has been working on breeding more unimproved, old-fashioned flowers because she thinks they are such strong survivors.

Hybridizing of irises has gone too far. Big, brash and bright, they come in every colour of the rainbow in two, three or four shades per bloom. Imagine peach, lilac, purple and orange in one flower. Most are striped, mottled, frilled and scented, with stubby golden beards. There is something so foppish and exotic about modern bearded irises, you dare not put them with something as common, say, as aquilegias. Also, they are picky as princes about their living arrangements. They need props for their swollen heads and like to keep their own company. With our irregular weather, it may be best to stick to those that cope with conditions without staking.

Any iris you find in a garden that has been long neglected will be tough. Claire thinks large clumps are better at surviving bad weather than newly planted rhizomes and says rain in spring when they form flower buds can help. Soft violet-blue-flowered Iris pallida subsp. pallida is the one most gardeners can identify. I would not want to be without it, but the pale brown and lemon-yellow ones that came from local gardens here are my other indispensables. I call them Daneway and Misarden after the places they were found. I hope Claire Austin Hardy Plants will soon find a way to offer these and other strong irises to gardeners.

How garden plants span the centuries

Matt Haddon, garden designer living in Yorkshire

Occasionally someone asks you a question that really fires the imagination. This happened to me recently when I was asked if I could design a garden with a medieval theme. As a medieval historian by training it was an idea I took up with some relish, keen to dispel any notions that the Middle Ages, from the fall of the Roman Empire to the blossoming of the Renaissance, was an era during which human culture waited to be rediscovered.

I started with the Capitulare de Villis, a legal document issued by the court of Charlemagne around AD800. Its plant list is interesting not only for the glimpse it provides of plants deemed to be essential, from cucumbers and peaches to roses and lilies (all of which must have been freely available), but also because it was deemed necessary to legislate on this at all. Perhaps those with horticultural responsibilities were using their skills to grow plants that were not those specified – were there too many ‘sweet-smelling flowers of various colours’ being grown?

With further reading of Piero de’ Crescenzi’s early 14th-century Liber ruralium commodorum (Book on Rural Arts) and the earlier Roman de la Rose by Guillaume de Lorris, it became clear that key elements in medieval gardens were those for which we design today – with an emphasis on features that appealed to the senses of sight (plentiful flowers), sound (birds calling from the trees) and scent (the perfume of the flowers: in a time without sewerage systems a sweetly scented retreat may have been all the more important).

Above all a medieval garden was described as a garden filled with plants: ‘fragrant herbs and flowers of every type [that] not only delight by their odour, but their flowers also refresh the sense of sight by their variety’. The annuals and perennials in our borders today, sourced from the vast range of plants discovered around the world in the intervening years, and with years of breeding for improved scent and colour by dedicated horticulturists, are therefore the timeless ingredient that help to link us and our gardens with those from centuries ago.