

## A SHADY GARDEN IN AUTUMN

*Helen Mount*

I have generally thought of the shadier parts of the garden as being mainly of spring interest, and that may well be true when considering the spring bulbs, hellebores, hepaticas and primulas. However, over the past few weeks, I've been looking at the borders anew and enjoying what they have to offer in the autumn, beyond the *Cyclamen hederifolium*, which continues to be a star performer at this time of year.

There are two main shady parts of this one-acre garden. The first is situated at the bottom half of the garden and contains around a dozen large trees, including several oaks, pines and willows; a liquidambar; *Crataegus prunifolia*; gleditsia; *Acer campestre*, plus a few fruit trees and numerous shrubs. The trees here provide shade during different parts of the day, and there are several borders containing shade and woodland perennials as well as shrubs and bulbs. On our very heavy, yellow slipper clay, there is standing water during prolonged periods of rain (usually winter and spring), then it dries out like concrete and forms considerable cracks in the summer and autumn.

In this part of the garden, the colchicums are blooming and giving great pleasure, and the various ferns, particularly the Japanese painted ferns (*Athyrium niponicum*) have settled well and are forming good clumps where the borders have been raised above the worst of the wet. *Liriope muscari* is a plant that some find difficult to get to flower well, but I wonder whether it has something to do with the clone, as I too have struggled to grow it in the past. I now have several clumps divided from a large potful, given by a friend a few years ago and, wherever I have it in this garden, it flowers consistently in September/



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*Liriope muscari* alongside  
*Pulmonaria* 'David Ward'

October, whatever the weather and wherever I've placed it, although it is sited mostly in shade. There is one clump on the edge of the border at the side of the house which is in full flower and this illustration shows a clump with *Pulmonaria* 'David Ward' in virtually full shade. Both plants have required watering this summer [2017] and 'David Ward' almost succumbed when a persistent mole's excavations added to the dry conditions, leaving roots dangling in thin air. *Podophyllum* 'Spotty Dotty', close by, was another potential casualty but, to date, they have all survived and are doing well.

*Geranium nodosum* can be a bit of a thug, with its seeding tendencies, but what an asset where conditions are difficult, and dry shade certainly falls into that category. The one that appears most in this garden has mauve flowers, but variations pop up and some have darker markings, making a welcome departure. There is also a white form but, whatever the colour, they all flower over many weeks and are still going here in the latter half of September in sun or shade, wet or dry. A relatively new addition to this border has been



**The darker-flowered form of *Geranium nodosum***



***Roscoea* 'Spice Island'**

*Roscoea* 'Spice Island'. This is currently sporting several purple-pink flowers along burgundy stems, and I'm a convert to this genus.

The second shade area runs alongside the house adjacent to a neighbouring property, where there is a variety of mixed hedging growing up to height of about 8ft. There is also an oak tree and a large bay tree, which make it the prime candidate for an award as Dry Shade Area of the Year! It is in shade for most of the day and stays very dry during the summer months, therefore demanding some watering. However, there is a limit to how many watering cans of stored water can be carried up and down the garden. As this area is not seen from the house, it tends to get rather overlooked, despite being a relatively good place for galanthus.

One of the best performers in this second border has been *Heuchera americana* 'Autumn Bride'. In spring, its fresh pale green foliage complements the emerging leaves of deciduous shrubs and perennials, as well as the flowering bulbs, but in this latter quarter of the year it takes centre stage. It is positioned almost directly under the oak referred to earlier, in one of the driest parts of this border, as well as one of the shadiest. However it never fails to impress with its large palmate foliage topped with a froth of white flower spikes, which attract numerous bees. Its autumn leaf colouring also makes an impact, and I feel it should be more widely grown.



***Heuchera* 'Autumn Bride'**

Also in the same border is what is now called *Eurybia divaricata* (formerly *Aster divaricata*). This is another plant more than tolerant of a variety of conditions, including dry shade, and it has been placed in several parts of the garden. With its wiry black stems and starry white flowers, it lights up the border at this time of year and, although it does seed around, it doesn't have thuggish tendencies on



*Eurybia divaricata* lights up dry shade



*Aster peduncularis*

our soil. Another daisy, *Aster peduncularis* (formerly *Aster asperula*), is one of my favourite edge-of-woodland plants in this border. It's a very gentle runner, with the most delightful, strong purple, ray florets that have an almost metallic sheen in mid to late September.

Last, but not least, is another relative newcomer to me; a *Lysimachia* hybrid called 'Candela'. *L. clethroides* and *L. ephemera* grow relatively well here, but do not reach the heights observed in gardens with more moisture. This is no bad thing, as they can need staking when they get too tall, but this little plant reaches around a foot in height and produces distinct spikes of white flowers, earning it a place in the autumn border.

The *Crataegus prunifolia* leaves have begun to change colour, and the pink fruit on the *Euonymus alatus* are about to burst forth with their orange seeds. They are a reminder that autumn is here, and there will be the more to look forward to, as the liquidambar develops its richly-coloured tapestry and the pollarded stems of *Salix alba* var. *vitellina* 'Britzensis' lose their leaves, then glow in the early evening light. Enjoy your gardens, before leaf sweeping takes over!



*Lysimachia* 'Candela'

