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Fig. 1 *Heuchera* 'Citronelle'

The best plants for pots

Bob Brown

My ideal plant is one that's evergreen, with wonderfully colourful and shapely foliage, and has twelve months of flower. Contrary to comments made on Gardeners' Question Time such plants do exist, or almost exist. I'm a pretty laid-back fellow really, but listening to radio experts and getting ever so slightly worked up go hand in hand.

Any plant which is good enough to go into my tiny garden, where every plant needs to give lots of payback for the space it occupies, is good enough to go into a pot.

Growing plants in pots can increase the apparent productivity of your garden.

You can squeeze in a pot of *Agastache mexicana* 'Red Fortune' between a phlox and helenium or cover a declining oriental poppy with a pot of *Eucomis comosa* 'Sparkling Burgundy', only because they've got their own living system – root and aerial space, nutrients and water. Having a few pots handy is good for making your borders burgeon. I mostly reckon on planting single plants or groups of the same plant in single pots, black plastic pots which'll disappear into the shadows within the border – no one will suspect they're there and you can mix unlikely companions that normally need different growing conditions if together they make a pleasing temporary combination.

If your pots are not used to fill out the border they

can be arranged to be instant gardens – a bit like the main door into the house at Great Dixter or a stand at Chelsea. Arrange them in harmonious groups mixing textures, colours, shapes and sizes.

The only time I plant several kinds of plant in one pot is when I want a continuous succession. Such pots need to stand alone and probably merit something posher than black plastic.

Some plants are simply not suitable for pots, so don't even try. The commonest is agapanthus. You get two weeks of flower and fifty weeks of dull foliage, or dull foliage and compost if the plant is herbaceous. Not good enough. After a year or two the packed roots will force the plant up from the pot like toothpaste and it will stop flowering because you are being too unkind.



Fig. 2 *Heuchera* 'Pink Pearls'



Fig. 3 *Euonymus japonicus* Exstase



Fig. 4 *Trachelospermum asiaticum* 'Summer Sunset'

Contrary to 'expert' advice, agapanthus do not respond well to the Miss Whiplash method of gardening – responding to deprivation and being pot-bound by throwing more and more flower (but still only over two weeks). Plant it in the ground where the sun will fall on the neck of the plant. They'll be happier.

12-month plants

Most heucheras will give 12 months of good foliage and whatever you choose their foliage will never be boring, usually changing colour when growing strongly and with appealing contrasts between overwintered foliage and spring growth. Plant three to a pot if the pot's big enough. My choice is *Heuchera* 'Citronelle' (fig. 1), bred by Thierry Delabroye. It's a hybrid of *H. villosa* and, so far, vine-weevil-proof. I have a big potful sitting outside my front door, unbelievably

cheering on my return home on dreich December afternoons and covered in delicate white flowers from August to October. It's been there since he gave it to me in 2006. 'Pink Pearls' (fig. 2), also bred by Thierry, has more ordinary soft-pink and brown foliage but unbelievable quantities of pretty pink flowers from April till October. Dan Heims' x *Heucherella* 'Redstone Falls' is as good as the foregoing. It cascades over the sides of the pot with buff, pink-red and orange foliage and has white spring flowers. I recently sat on a panel reviewing heuchera AGMs and discovered how out-of-date my knowledge and experience is. Those which had their awards confirmed or newly awarded are probably going to be even better. They'll be listed by the RHS by the time this is published.

Some plants are effectively useful only for foliage. *Euonymus fortunei* and *E. japonicus* have several outstanding evergreen forms with coloured foliage. My favourite is *E. japonicus* Exstase (the Dutch word for ecstasy) (fig. 3). This looks so ordinary until you own it and realise its year-round display of clean bright yellow stays below 50cm even after years of growth. In winter it joins *Heuchera* 'Citronelle' by the front door to lift my spirits. Any variegated *E. fortunei* with

coloured leaves will be good, and like the heucheras these change colour dynamically with the seasons. Pushed to the back with a dark wall behind it, *E. fortunei* will start to climb. Climbing climbers in pots are a problem so remember this.

Trachelospermums are also (self-clinging) climbers (for N, S, E or W walls). If you abandon them surrounded by space rather than suitable climbing media, they will flop sideways, set flower and cease trying. This is true of almost all climbers. *T. asiaticum* and *T. jasminoides* have so many positive qualities they approach that 10/10, 12-month ideal. They are collected and bred in Japan as cult plants so there are many foliage forms with different colours and textures, evergreen and with bunches of cream jasmine-like highly scented flowers. My favourite is *T. asiaticum* 'Summer Sunset' (fig. 4) which I keep as a pet in the black plastic equivalent of a long tom. The young leaves are orange-red and mature yellow and green. Sun must be necessary for the redness to develop because I have one planted to climb a panel fence which is entirely in deep shade and it's only yellow and green. *T. asiaticum* 'Theta' (fig. 5) has long, pointed, dusky grey-green evergreen foliage with a pale midrib and makes a bushy plant in a pot.

My experience of *Acanthus mollis* 'Tasmanian Angel' and *A. 'Whitewater'* (figs 6a & b) when planted in the ground has not been good, both dwindling and dying within 2 or 3 years. However they do well in pots. Mine are in full shade and I think this is important. *A. mollis* is a winter grower and might be summer dormant if the weather is dry enough. *A. spinosus* is dormant in winter and grows in summer. 'Tasmanian Angel' and 'Whitewater' seem to grow all year and are splendid enough in winter to have caught the eye of the plant photographer Jonathan Buckley. They're both variegated. Strongly growing foliage is cream and goes speckly green-and-cream as it ages. The flowers are pink from a cream spike. Both burn horribly in sun so a pot sits in full shade.

Another plant from the southern hemisphere is getting everyone's attention at the moment, sold as *Senecio* Angel Wings. It's unusual as a silver/white leaved plant in having broad foliage. The colouring is defence against high UV light, but normally this results in leaf dissection too. The name Angel Wings is a marketing ploy. It's simply *Senecio candidans* (fig. 7) which grows wild on beaches in the Falkland Islands. Always look to where a plant grows wild to discover how and where and



Fig. 5 *Trachelospermum asiaticum* 'Theta'



Figs 6a & b *Acanthus* 'Whitewater'



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Fig. 7 *Senecio candidans*



Fig. 8 *Dianthus Passion*



Fig. 9 *Dianthus Memories*

if to grow it. These beaches have a mean temperature of 4°C with no frost. 4°C with no frost! That means it's never going to get hot. Even in Britain we get hot sometimes **and** we have frost. Then it's native to gravel and sand beaches. I've just planted it in the clay to see how it does but I have a potful which has now stood two winters looking amazing winter through. I've seen a flourishing plant in the ground which is even older.

My opinion of Carolyn Bourne's Whetman Pinks has varied from meedful (meaning meritorious – meedful is such a good old-fashioned Anglo-Saxon word and I can spell it!) to absolutely fabulous. Ordinarily I can't grow pinks. They hate clay soil – I believe the constant stretching and compression as the soil peds shrink and expand break the felt-like roots. Also my garden is too crowded. Pots are

the answer because I can modify the rooting medium and keep competitors back. *Passion* (fig. 8) has classic, scented red flowers held strongly on short stalks, makes a neat tump of a plant with grey foliage and is rarely without flowers even in winter. I rate it 10/10. *Memories* (fig. 9) which is white gets only 9.5. It's like the old favourite 'Mrs Sinkins' but much better, with a fabulous clove scent and flowers for almost as long as *Passion*.

There are other classic very long-flowering plants. The best-known must be *Coronilla valentina*. Some people have had a bad experience with it but I urge them to try again because it offers so many advantages: the longest flowerer ('Citrina') blooms for 10 or 11 months, the shortest ('Brockhill Blue' and 'Pygmaea') for about five. The flowers are highly scented and always flower in the winter. In bad winters the flowers retreat but then recover. Different cultivars have very different hardiness, the toughest surviving below -20°C ('Brockhill Blue', 'Pygmaea' and the pale yellow 'Lauren Stevenson'), then there's a group hardy to about -12°C (pale yellow 'Citrina', variegated 'Cotswold Cream' and *C. valentina* subsp. *glauca*), and finally *C. valentina* subsp. *glauca* 'Variegata' which dies at about -3°C.

If I had to choose one it would be 'Cotswold Cream' (fig. 10) because the foliage is so decorative for the short period it's out of flower and it's hardy enough.

Grevillea 'Poorinda Constance' (fig. 11) is new to me. I got it from Steve Mules in Cornwall. I planted it by the house wall in October 2017 reckoning that as an Australian it might need coddling. It had been in full bloom since August and there seemed to be more flower buds coming. As I write in late May 2018 it's still in full bloom and you might remember the three, or was it four, beastly icy, drying, sub-zero winds from the east between December 2017 and March 2018. I'm amazed it's still alive, but not only that – it's also never stopped blooming. The nearest performance I've had from a grevillea was from *G. victoriae* which also had continuous flower – but not for as long – and finally died at -19°C in 2010. So it's no news to me that 'Poorinda Constance' is the result of crossing *G. victoriae* with *G. juniperina*. In a pot the roots would be more vulnerable to freezing, but I'll try it because the house wall gets crowded.

The most serious contender for 12-month flowerer is *Anisodonteia* 'El Royo' (fig. 12). This is a hardy upright shrub to 2m (although it can be kept smaller). It came to me from Mally Terry (a Western

Counties member) who got it from a small nurseryman who later died so the trail went cold. It sounds like a Spanish variety but there's no evidence of it in Spain. For a long time I seemed to be the only person offering it worldwide but now it's got around – which is good. The flowers are pink and lavatera-like, look fabulous in December and February under my winter-flowering cherry and maybe have their lowest point in June. Who cares in June?

Late spring to autumn plants

Penstemons are not good pot subjects but currently I'm beginning to think that the 'Elgar Series' might get my attention (fig. 13). First they're shapely plants, broader than tall, not gawky, have fine foliage and look acceptable even in March which must be the low point for penstemons. Then they're fairly tough too although not evenly so. 'Elgar Nimrod' has the best survival record for me, the others disappearing after a few years. I get flower from May to November. (As an aside, maybe I ought to stop expecting penstemons to be perennial and start bedding them out.)

Verbena officinalis var. *grandiflora* 'Bampton' (figs 14a & b), bought in 2011, is still a delight and I continue to take visitors to look at it. Garden verbenas come from South America.



Fig. 10 *Coronilla valentina* 'Cotswold Cream'



Fig. 11 *Grevillea* 'Poorinda Constance'

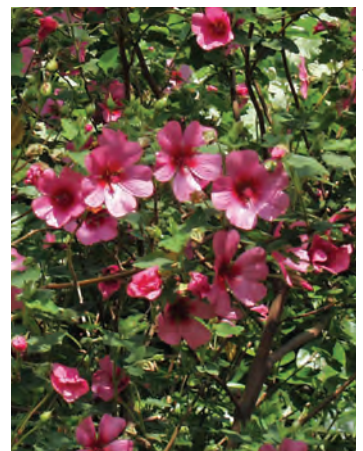


Fig. 12 *Anisodonteia* 'El Royo'



Fig. 13 *Penstemon* 'Elgar Nimrod'



Figs 14a & b *Verbena officinalis* var. *grandiflora* 'Bampton'



Weirdly, this is a British native – vervain. Pots of it are good because if it's planted in the ground and shaded by adjacent plants, the glorious red-black glossy leaves go greener. Elevated in a pot in full light that foliage is stunning, especially in winter when the hummock of black basal growth glints in the low sun; then from June to October it begins to make a gypsophila-like cloud of tiny purple flowers. It self-seeds on my clay – only enough for me to be grateful, but I suspect that on gravel drives or more open soils self-seeding might be a problem.

The plants resulting from the hybridisation of *Linaria purpurea* and *L. dalmatica* are variable in colour, sterility, size, shape, individual flower size, flowering period and, for a nurseryman this is the most important, ease of propagation. Currently Olive Mason's *L.* 'Dial Park' (fig. 15) is the best. It's a shapely 60 x 55cm ('Peachy' can be 200 x 90cm), the foliage is glaucous grey, the large flowers a pearly purple shading to white and the flowering period April to October and grey basal foliage over winter. I have hopes for *L.* 'Lemon Cream' which is certainly sterile, long-flowering and a wonderful colour but, crucially, how easy will it be to propagate from cuttings?

Alstroemerias are good in pots because they flower

more or less continuously from June to October and can really make a border burgeon. Currently I'm enjoying Indian Summer (fig. 16) with dusky grey-purple leaves and orange-red and yellow flowers. The leaf colouring is due to anthocyanin and confers some extra frost tolerance on the plant, so late frosts when the shoots have emerged and early frosts in the autumn have less effect than on other varieties. Then there's Rock 'n' Roll (fig. 17). It seems to me that people either find it offensive or are groupies. I love its sheer effrontery and rebellion. Don't forget alstroemerias prefer a bit of shade.

Anything that self-seeds into paving, walls and old brickwork will make a good pot subject. *Erigeron karvinskianus* (fig. 18) might be king with a confusion of lawn-daisy-like flowers on wiry stems from late April to November. The shape is right for pots, flowing over and out of the pot, and the more sun it gets the pinker the flowers become. It's basically pink and white but the variety 'Lavender Lady' is unsurprisingly lavender coloured especially with full-on UV and has a paler middle. Moving the pot around the garden I've discovered that adjacent citron yellows and violet work well with it.

Fuchsias are not really my thing, especially the heavy-flowered froufrou

ones whose flowers are broader than long and fall in the mud. The hardy *magellanica* types and the jester-like 'Genii' and *F. microphylla/thymifolia* cultivars are fabulous, but not really pot subjects. However I'm smitten with the tender 'Walz Jubelteen' (fig. 19). I got three small plants in May 2016 since when they sit potted earning their space from late spring to November. The flowers, which are peachy-pink and cream, look out rather than hang down. The flowering is indeterminate (rather than determinate) which means that flowers will continue to be produced as long as the shoots are growing. It's very nice.

Summer holidays

One of the problems with keeping plants in pots is that most of them need watering – you can't rely on rainfall or the 14-year-old two doors down. He or she'll do their best but one plant or another gets missed and it'll be a corpse on your return. Yes, you can install automatic drip watering and putting pots in saucers can be useful but I find it easier and altogether more satisfying to use drought-proof plants. There are some above – *Erigeron karvinskianus* is one, *Senecio candidans* might be another and heucheras will cope.

Succulents certainly work and I've done great combinations in pots. One

features *Manfreda variegata* 'Spot' (fig. 20). The *Plant Finder* stubbornly refuses to distinguish between manfredas and agaves even though the plant list which is a concatenation of taxonomic opinion worldwide does distinguish. Manfredas are agave lookalikes but are spineless, have rubbery leaves, and each rosette reliably flowers after two years with impressive spidery brown-and-white flowers. They are dramatic architectural plants with colourful leaves often figured and marked. Also in the pot is a toughish aeonium bred by Trewidden Nurseries in west Cornwall, *Aeonium* 'Trewidden'. Both the aeonium and the manfreda are tender here in the English Midlands. *Manfreda virginica* (which is herbaceous) is claimed as hardy by some littoral nurseries but Evesham is about as far as you can get from the sea and it falters then dies after a winter.



Fig. 15 *Linaria* 'Dial Park'



Fig. 16 *Alstroemeria* Indian Summer



Fig. 17 *Alstroemeria* Rock 'n' Roll'

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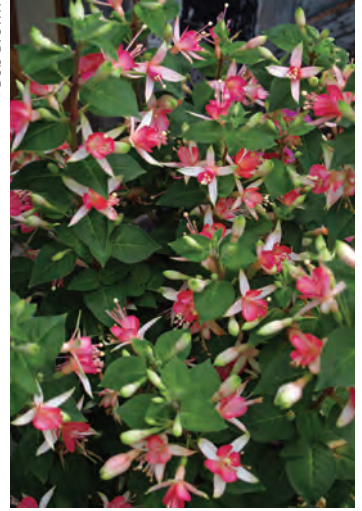
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Fig. 18 *Erigeron karvinskianus*

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Fig. 19 *Fuchsia* 'Walz Jubelteen'

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Fig. 20 *Manfreda variegata* 'Spot'

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Fig. 21 *Echeveria* 'Mauna Loa'

If you want hardiness in your succulents, sempervivums and sedums work well, but keep the compost lean or they get too big and soft and rot in the winter. There are plenty of hardy agaves too, varying in their hardiness between H4 (-10°C to -5°C) and H7 (below -20°C). Sadly most of the most colourful and spectacular kinds are not in this range. Plant the tender ones and risk death over winter or grit your teeth and replant each spring.

The classics like echeveria and aeonium are really good. When you replant *Aeonium* 'Zwartkop', pith it. This unobtrusive operation which destroys the tiny growing point in the centre of the rosette stops it going up and forces branching. Little is worse than finding your prize *A.* 'Zwartkop' smashed, lying on its side because it's top-heavy. I once planted *A.* 'Voodoo'

in the ground simply to stop it blowing over. It was left over winter and survived two winters in all. It must be the hardiest. My personal favourite echeveria I got from Brian and Heather Hiley years ago. It's 'Mauna Loa' (fig. 21), with enormous hot-lava-coloured foliage. A potful sits in a tiny patch of full sun but sadly it has to go in November.

My final recommendation for plants to survive two or three weeks' absence in summer are the ferns in the genus *Polypodium*. (Figs 22, 23 & 24.) Many are native. Think about where you've seen them growing wild, critically as epiphytes on tree trunks and in the crook of trees. This is usually somewhere in western Britain but even Cornwall can have two or three weeks without rain. The leaves curl in when the plant is dry but quickly recover. The range of cultivars is so good that you'll be tempted and might overdo it.



Fig. 23 *Polypodium scolieri*

Being very discriminating, I have only one pot in the garden. It gets moved about from full shade to nearly full sun and seems oblivious to its surroundings. Polypodiums can't be described as evergreen because in June

and July they're herbaceous. I trim the leaves off when they begin to discolour in May, exposing the teddy-bear-coloured rhizomes. There are better things than so it's pushed out of sight under a tree.



Fig. 22 *Polypodium 'Whitley Giant'*



Fig. 24 *Polypodium macaronicum*

Try growing some perennials in pots if you haven't already. You'll feel much more in control than you might if they were grown in the ground and there's such a range to choose from. Wot fun! 🐛

Bob Brown has had a life-long obsession with hardy perennials, widened and much honed since he started his nursery Cotswold Garden Flowers 29 years ago on an isolated acre of unpropitious alkaline clay in Worcestershire. He is known for having opinions (many very critical) about all the 16–17,000 kinds of plants he's grown or tried to grow. He has been vice chairman of the Herbaceous Committees of the RHS overseeing trials for the Award of Garden Merit (AGM). He's holder of the Veitch Memorial Medal awarded for the science and advancement of horticulture.