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Living with drought

Janet Sleep

Fig. 1 Narrow south-facing border beneath a large wisteria, self-sown echiums and lychnis, some in the paving.

This may seem a very dry subject (sorry, couldn't resist) but given the predictions about future climate maybe we should all pay it more attention. The big irony is that I am writing this while the rain deluges in torrents outside – not really a surprise, because if it were not raining I would be out there gardening! There was a time, not too long ago, when I would have been cavorting in the rain, jumping up and down with glee, relishing every last drop, and sending up offerings to the rain gods – I do, after all, live in the semi-desert we call Norfolk and value the wet stuff rather highly. Now, being older and wiser, I make do with a lot of smug satisfaction.

Now, in 2017, we have had a very dry winter and a very dry spring – nothing new there – and yet this has been probably the best early season I can remember for the garden. We have had wave after wave

of blossom, all lasting better and longer than before, and no real stress apparent anywhere. How come?

Well, we have been a bit lucky. We have had few pinching late frosts or biting east winds, those 'lazy' East



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Fig. 2 Shade lovers along the cross path, early evening. Newly laid hedge in the background.



Fig. 3 *Primula veris* hose-in-hose form in a raised bed in shade.

Anglian winds which don't bother going round you, just go right through you, horrible and extra drying. When we have had rain, it has come down in torrents and has therefore had a chance to penetrate beyond the first inch or so. In fact, we have missed out on the equinoctial gales altogether. We have had many pleasantly warm days but little of that destructive raging heat (testing providence this). Even so, all the work I have done in the garden over many years has helped. Here is how.

First of all, I have created both external and internal windbreaks and planted either trees for shade or used large shrubs as if they were small trees for the same effect. Both trees and shrubs regularly have their crowns 'lifted' and thinned, to give a lighter, more dappled shade and to prevent dense rain-shadow effects. This has created many areas which are light/bright



Fig. 4 *Rodgersia pinnata* 'Superba' just coming into flower; if kept moist it will look handsome until October.

but which get no direct sun except in the early morning or very late in the day. Too much overhanging shade is detrimental, so you have to be a bit disciplined about packing in too many shrubs.

Fig. 2 shows the kind of area that I mean, sunlit but in the early evening. Shrubs to the left and in shadow are *Heptacodium miconioides* and *Azara microphylla* 'Variegata',

Azara serrata and one of the taller berberis. They are all splendid contributors in their own right and I can thoroughly recommend them. The heptacodium has recurved and grooved, handsome leaves, and flowers usefully in September; the azaras are evergreen and deliciously scented of ice cream. The path runs east-west and the border on the left is north facing.

It is home to some of the more demanding ferns like *Adiantum venustum* (the sheet of pale lime green at the rear) and *A. pedatum* (more erect and handsome with its splayed fronds). Some of the finer epimediums and podophyllums like it here, and there are masses of yellow and white erythroniums in between. The adiantum is so happy that I shall have to watch it, for it is making a bid for a takeover. Towering over the fern area is *Leycesteria formosa* Golden Lanterns, with pink-flushed lime foliage and elegant habit; it will flower in late summer. In the central section, where the paths cross, there are special snowdrops, trilliums, and some very fine primulas, doubles on the right and Jack-in-the-Greens on the left, all grown from Barnhaven seed. The latter all have a ruff of green surrounding each

flower, like an individual posie, and I have a patch of whites and another of silver-laced, maroon reds on the go. As with all primulas, if you want to keep them going then split and move frequently – just after flowering is best.

The stone path is itself contributing to the microclimate by preserving moisture in its vicinity, and I suspect it alters the temperature somewhat too. More important than this, however, is the quality of the soil in these beds. It started off a heavy loam, nicely water-retentive, but it's had years of mulching on top. In fact, if there is one thing that you can do to defeat drought, then mulching is it. I restrict garden compost to the deeper-shaded dry areas, it inhibits weed regrowth a bit and makes a nice wodgy blanket. By confining this to



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Fig. 5 *Paeonia* 'Gansu Hybrid' – a seedling from the rockii stable and appreciating good soil, shelter and some moisture.

restricted spots, I can keep an eye out for weeds and keep on top of it. Elsewhere we use as much as possible of our shrub prunings and thinnings in the form of shreadings, laid directly on the soil in autumn and winter when all the big pruning is done and there is little herbaceous material



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Fig. 6 North-facing narrow border receiving any run-off from the paved area in front. Old sink acting as a wet pot just visible to the keen-eyed.



Fig. 7 Tiny gravel garden with raised bed at the rear acting as host for *Matthiola incana* and others.

to get in the way, and before the bulbs have begun to make a move. Yes, this does mean working out there in November, December and January, but with any luck you can get most of it done before real winter sets in. The books tell you not to do this, of course, but I have never noticed any problem at all and the rawness of the cover

has reduced nicely before the plants get going later on. The sharp-eyed among you will notice the newly laid hedge in the background to Fig 2. The process began last winter, when at last we'd found a skilled hedge-layer. It turns out that stacks of material must be cleared out of the hedge before the laying starts: some, like

bramble, must be burned, but lots of stuff gets turned into mulch as you go.

Fig. 3 shows another of my special primulas – *Primula veris* hose-in-hose, a double version of the cowslip where one flower sits inside another. In the days when Elizabethan gentlemen wore long stockings, the fashion was for wearing one set inside another (hose in hose) – hence the name. Cowslips grow like weeds here so I probably do not need to be quite so protective of this form, but I have it in another semi-shaded raised bed filled with compost, just in case. It shares a bed with *Athyrium* ferns, *Corydalis* 'Tory MP', haberleas and anemenopsis and the like, which all dislike drying out. If the beds are positioned where you pass on the way to the greenhouse or the postbox then you will notice if rescue watering is necessary. Fig. 4 shows another area in just such a position, near the birdbath and within a few feet of the back door. Rodgersias must have moisture and this is the only spot in the garden where I can be quite sure I can catch them before they fry and scorch – but worth every effort.

Paeonia 'Gansu Hybrid' (fig. 5) – just as luscious – is not quite so drought sensitive but it appreciates a sheltered site and would soon look miserable if in full sun, like an over-exposed photo, and if windswept, those delicate tissue petals would be a wreck in an instant.



Fig. 8 *Cercis canadensis* 'Forest Pansy' is late into leaf, allowing the other plants maximum access to any rain in this exceptionally dry, sunny border.

This plant can be seen from the kitchen window, thus making the washing up less of a chore. It is in a receiving site (collecting run-off from the upper level), in a narrow bed just below the house terrace, and is nicely half-shaded by *Cornus kousa* var. *chinensis* 'China Girl' and some other easy, small trees. The paving exists at the lower level too and the peony can get its feet under some thick York stone which it plainly appreciates. Even if you don't have much of a drop in level to collect moisture, you can create receiving sites by angling stone paving towards the border you want to be favoured. Fig. 6 shows just such a border where the ferns and hydrangeas are thriving. The glossy, crimped leaves

of *Asplenium scolopendrium* Crispum Group show just how healthy they are.

Sunk into this border is a flooded, old brown sink in which stand some pots containing *Primula florindae* in its copper/red forms and some lovely astilbes. None of them would be growable elsewhere in this garden. Of course the sink eventually dries out which is a signal for me to water, and while the sink is filling the other bits of the border get some water too.

You can see from all this that there are parts of the garden where I do water and where I can grow a few special plants that specially need watering, but they are restricted in area and concentrated to best effect. It is no use trying to spread

your efforts (and water) too thin. Even here I have tried to mitigate the worst of the drought and make the best of what water there is. However, the rest of the garden needs a different approach. There are plenty of plants that demand full sun and which can stand a lot of drought. Some are seen in Fig. 7 in my tiny gravel garden. The *Allium karataviense* growing in a carpet of *Sedum spurium* and dominated by a self-sown *Geranium palmatum* have enjoyed almost total neglect from me. There is a compost mulch over the gravel – more so in the low, raised bed at the rear, which probably gives a bit more heart to an otherwise very unforgiving, stony soil.

The Cedric Morris irises, perennial stock (*Matthiola incana*), some good agapanthus, spire-like *Eucomis pallidiflora*, and even *Paeonia mlokosewitschii* love it here. The stock is heavenly scented and worth a bit of effort to keep it going for another year: take all the seed pods off, except for just a few on one plant to save exhaustion setting in. Sow the seed directly it is ripe, when the pods turn a nice parchment colour, and transplant the seedlings out next spring.

Figs 8 and 9 show two views of a big, full-sun border with the added disadvantage of root-robbing by the giant yew with its rambler rose on one side. Yet there is interest in this area at all times of the year and it gets very little in the way of watering. The yew and box topiary is supported by a backbone of low, informal,

silvery green hedging made by a 'snake' of *Euonymus fortunei* 'Emerald Gaiety'. The topiary and *Cercis canadensis* 'Forest Pansy' (heavily pruned) which has a very angular branch system, provide structure all year. The acanthus is handsome most of the year but I could never recommend it, for once you have it, it is immovable – lovely, but a beast. *Cistus* and *x Halimocistus*, together with young plants of *Grevillea*, *Cordyline* and even a seed-grown *Genista aetnensis* take up the space nearest the yew. Establishing new plants, even when they tolerate, even demand, dry sun, is very slow in such conditions; but the slower they grow the tougher they will be. Eventually the broom will produce a fountain of yellow in July, while casting almost no shade.

Extra height is given in this border by a *Clematis* 'Etoile Rose' growing on an obelisk. Now clematis like moisture but this one is growing in very dry, sunny, rooty soil and it flowers non-stop from late June to September. It is heavily mulched but otherwise is left to get on with it. In fact, I have found that all clematis grow better on obelisks than they do up a wall. The wall sucks up any moisture available of course while the slender metal structure provides solid support but takes nothing away.

Fig. 1 shows another difficult border, south-facing and narrow, below the house window. All these plants love it here despite the big wisteria and its huge root system. On the left is delightful *Geranium* 'Stephanie' and the glossy, crimped-leaved *Bergenia* 'Mrs Crawford'. 'Stephanie' flowers to match the wisteria.

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Fig. 9 The sunny border, view from the house. This has to look good all year as it is in such a prominent position.



Fig. 10 Self-sown thriving in cracks in the brick paving, even *Ligularia dentata*.

The bergenia has pretty white flowers but it is the leaf that I grow it for. Self-sowers are allowed some freedom here from the big, handsome *Echium pininana* to the readily expendable *Centranthus ruber* and the white form of *Lychnis coronaria*. A huge (soon to be summer-pruned) *Euphorbia mellifera*, the honey spurge, dominates near the house – its scent knocks you over as you fight your way inside. Although not apparent in this photo, silvery helianthemums are growing in small chimney pots just sitting on the bricks; they get

a clip over after flowering to keep them neat. Like a lot of mediterranean plants, it would be winter wet that would see them off and, if grown too lush, they would be straggly as well as vulnerable in the winter. The chimney pot solution suits them just fine and allows for the deep root run that they really crave.

I am going to leave you with a conundrum. Look at Fig. 10 where there is an apparently healthy greenhouse border – except that it isn't. The plants are all self-sown and get attention only when I cut them down when they

get in the way or when they go over, and all are growing in cracks in the paving – and that includes the ligularia. Now 'any fule kno' that ligularias, with their large, floppy leaves, relish good soil and moisture. They do not get any of that here, yet they are as happy as Larry along with bomb-proof chrysanthemums and eryngiums. I expect that nature is trying to tell us something. Plants just like getting their feet down under a cool blanket and the bricks are just mulch by another name. Food for thought I think. 🌱

Janet Sleep works on the principle of 'hope for the best but plan for the worst', applicable as much in gardening as elsewhere in life.