



Fig. 1 Rosette of lime-encrusted leaves on *Saxifraga longifolia*

One of the benefits of having one's own photographic images of plants is that, once captured, they become securely lodged in the memory. Over the years, in the process of reviewing these images, they become like old friends and, as with friends, some go on to become favourites. Also, as with real human

friends, it's not always easy to account for what earns them such a secure place in our affections (fig. 2).

So it is with me and *Saxifraga longifolia*. The image (fig. 1), as well as obligingly including the label, shows the characteristics of this plant's rosette in all its geometric perfection. This

alone makes it one of my favourites. I have never grown it, never owned it, never touched it, never so much as smelled it – but there it is, lodged securely in the filing cabinet of my mind under 'I like it'. It was one of the many alpine plants we encountered in the specialist glasshouses at Harlow Carr many years ago and, once spotted, everything had to stop while my camera captured its perfection. At the time I did garden on quite limey soil, so presumably I could have attempted to grow it, although I would have had to construct something mimicking the Pyrenees or Atlas Mountains. But perhaps I would have been disappointed because it spends about five years getting to flowering point, before dying (it is monocarpic).

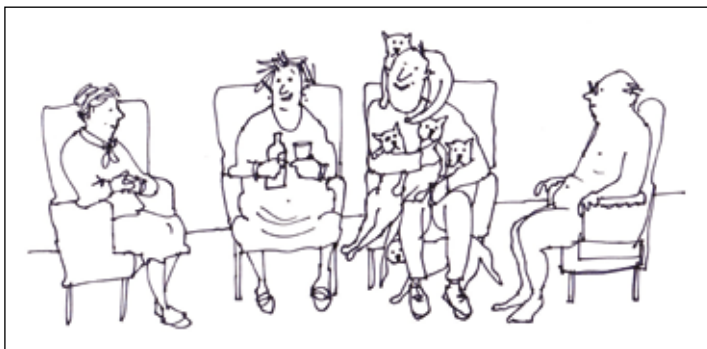


Fig. 2 The particular appeal of friends is not always immediately apparent

## I know what I like

Judy Harry

I suppose I might have gone on to research it and discover that the more frequently grown hybrid of which it is one of the parents, *S. l.* 'Tumbling Waters', will live on after flowering. But I did none of these things: I just loved it on sight for its lime-encrusted rosette, and left it at that.

There is no doubt that visits to public gardens, or private gardens open to the public, are a great way of expanding one's plant knowledge. Botanic gardens in particular fulfil this role, as they often include plants for their horticultural interest, not simply their looks. So it was that, having been born and brought up far inland, I first met sea plantain *Plantago*

*maritima* (fig. 3) planted out as a large patch in Kew Gardens; it stopped me in my tracks. By this time you must be thinking 'what strange tastes this woman has'. What I loved about it was the contrast between the relatively flat leaf growth and the elegant vertical flower stems. It was all green of course, but that didn't matter, it was the form that caught my eye. So now, something like forty years later, I live where this plant is absolutely at home, and I have planted a bit of it in my garden. What I hadn't previously appreciated are the tiny creamy-yellow flowers, which are fleeting but add to this plant's charms. Another reason to like it, for me anyway.



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Fig. 3 *Plantago maritima*

Conditions in our new garden are at the opposite extreme of those in our previous one and so, having been catapulted into a totally new gardening environment after decades of what I had considered quite wide experience,



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Fig. 4 Island beds at Bressingham Hall



Fig. 5 Herbaceous borders at Newby Hall

I find I am back to square one: a kind of horticultural snakes and ladders. This has led me to develop a revised set of 'likes', and in particular to appreciate the benefits of island beds, which I had previously found interesting but not particularly attractive, nor relevant to my own gardening. I remember



Fig. 6 Crashing about

clearly when the late Alan Bloom made a name for himself as a proponent of this way of gardening with perennials. In the 1960s, at the front of Bressingham Hall and in the large area called The Dell, he established island beds for perennials which were quite revolutionary at the time (fig. 4). Herbaceous borders had until then been the preferred way of growing perennials, usually seen from one side only and backed by walls or hedges. Taller plants were at the back, grading down to the low-growing ones at the front. The effect could be stunning, and can still be seen in many gardens both public and private, especially if space allows for a wide grass path

between a pair of such borders (fig. 5). But there are problems inherent in this style, with the need to stake or somehow support the taller plants being the main one. The rear wall or hedge can create bouncing or funnelling winds so that plants are battered and bent by increased wind speeds. Such staking is labour intensive, can be costly and is an absolutely infuriating job if you have left it a bit late when, as Christopher Lloyd so aptly put it, you crash about like an elephant causing more damage than your staking can possibly put right (fig. 6).

With island beds (fig. 7) which are seen from all sides, and which are also subject to winds coming from all sides,



the plants create their own environment as they mature, with the taller ones providing both shelter and support for shorter plants around them. I now garden where the 'prevailing' wind comes from the north, south, east and west, since there is little shelter from trees or even hedges on our island patch. We are working on this, but we're reluctant to do too much

and possibly take away from our enjoyment of the surrounding panorama, which includes open moorland and the sea. As a result, new flower borders have by default become island beds, and I have seen at first hand just how they work (fig. 8). As long as the beds include some really tough and self-supporting taller plants, a micro-climate does build up and the wind is sifted and



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Fig. 7 Island beds create their own environment



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Fig. 8 Island beds work well in our exposed garden

slowed, no matter where it comes from, providing shelter for adjacent softer-stemmed and shorter plants. I would like to be able to say this was planned: in reality, by following my usual policy of 'bung it in and see what happens', I've accidentally learned how this technique works in practice and have, of course, grown to like it.

In previous articles I have described some of

the plants that I've been able to establish in our new garden, and several have proved to be particularly useful in this respect. They include a semi-wild, strong-stemmed but unnamed Michaelmas daisy; *Lysimachia ephemenum*, maintaining its rather understated elegance in the winds, no matter whence they blow; and *Lysimachia verticillaris*, showing



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Fig. 9 *Sidalcea* 'Rose Queen'



Fig. 10 *Iris sibirica* at Burnby Hall

admirable willingness to get on with the job, regardless of conditions. You may be thinking that these are all rather ordinary – not to say weedy – plants. I think that in this challenging environment, they are the answer to a gardener's prayer.



Fig. 12 Tansy and *Lysimachia ephemerum* create a natural windbreak



Fig. 11 *Hesperantha* stood up to the October gales

Other tall but wind-resistant plants have also proved themselves. A *Sidalcea* (fig. 9) came from my daughter's nearby garden, having been dug up and replanted in full growth without apparently noticing the move. But the fact that we garden on almost pure peat means that the plants respond to such treatment as if they were being moved into a vast new container of potting compost. *Cirsium rivulare* 'Atropurpureum' has lived up to its specific epithet indicating its liking for riversides, and settled enthusiastically in a particularly soggy spot, while several HPS seed-raised *Iris sibirica* 'Mixed' (fig. 10) have yet to reach maturity, but look happy. I am hoping their flower stems will resist wind damage. In drier spots, foxgloves have already proved to be surprisingly

wind-resistant. These are of the 'wild' sort and not too top heavy, which I think explains their survival. Evergreen *Libertia chilensis* (syn. *L. grandiflora*) with its wiry stems, in common with other New Zealand plants, also thrives in this climate. Finally, at the end of the season, *Hesperantha* has amazed us by standing up to October gales with admirable aplomb (fig. 11).

A plant that has come back into my gardening life after many years' absence is tansy. *Tanacetum vulgare* is one of those old-fashioned cottage garden plants, grown as much for its practical uses as for its appearance, and with a strange scent (fig. 12). Nowadays, since we have got used to the smell of a variety of cleansing, anti-bacterial substances, the scent of crushed tansy leaves seems less strange.



The flat heads of long-lasting yellow button flowers are held on strong 1m-tall stems, above foliage so wonderfully intricate and fern-like that even serious pteridomaniacs might be lured into growing it. And it is a lot easier to grow than some of the ferns they love! In fact, you might say it is too easy to grow, as it establishes and increases with alarming rapidity.

Low-growing edging plants play an important role in island beds, forming the base of the 'triangle' with the tall and medium-height plants. This has led me to appreciate once again some plants that I have known for a long time, but had forgotten about. Both are from the vast *Geranium* genus, and what performers they have been in this newly planted patch! The annual *G. robertianum* 'Celtic White' emerged from a batch of mixed hardy geranium seeds, and I was very pleased to see it. I know from previous experience that it has a lovely fresh, clean look, with its tiny pure-white flowers and green ferny foliage. Fortunately it doesn't seed quite as freely as its relative herb Robert, *G. robertianum*. Also in this batch was *G. pyrenaicum* f. *albiflorum* (fig. 13), another old friend. More sprawling than *G. r.* 'Celtic White' and with an amazingly long flowering season, it kept providing a sparkling white



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Fig. 13 Long-flowering *Geranium pyrenaicum* f. *albiflorum*

froth of flowers well into autumn. Another frothy plant, one that I probably wouldn't have given any consideration to had I not seen it in full flower in the garden centre, is *Sedum album* (syn. *S. athoum*, fig. 14). To give this furiously spreading plant a place

in the garden might be considered foolhardy, were it not for its impressive floral display, and so it has earned a place in the free-draining edge of one of our borders.

Earlier in the season, the baseline to the island beds is provided by various

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Fig. 14 This good selection of *Sedum album* earned itself a place in the beds

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Fig. 15 Plants raised from HPS seed of *Primula japonica* 'Apple Blossom'

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Fig. 16 *Godetia* 'Double Azalea Mixed'

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Fig. 17

that *Leucanthemum* does well here, I bought *L. x superbum* 'Lacrosse', a low-growing variety whose flowers have spoon-shaped petals. I am hoping it will look as lovely as it does on the label!

New gardens take a lot of filling, especially while we wait for perennials to get into their stride, and using annuals is a common solution to this problem.

I have found that their quick growth creates shelter at the edges of the island beds, allowing the perennials among them to build up strong root systems. Hence we have had generous displays from nasturtium and calendula on the orangey end of the rainbow and, from the pinky-purple side, a glorious display of *Godetia* 'Double Azalea Mixed' (fig. 16). Nobody would call them subtle, but we have very much enjoyed their exuberance and lip-smacking colour, which persisted well into autumn.

Fortunately, gardening is still a hobby which allows us, with nature's consent, to grow what we like, where we like, and how we like – and I have certainly been liking all these plants (fig. 17). 🌸

moisture-loving, acid-tolerant primulas. It is a real thrill to have, for the first time in my gardening life, conditions that these plants really like, and I hope in time to build up a reasonable collection. During our first winter and spring here I sowed HPS seed of *Primula japonica* (fig. 15) and *P. bulleyana*. Thank you to all you generous donors of seed, who have provided me with masses of plants and colour, in a remarkably short time. I have learned that cutting off the spent flower stems is a very worthwhile exercise as they are soon replaced by a new flush of flowers. Finally, knowing

At the risk of being repetitive, **Judy Harry** points out that as gardeners, we never stop learning. Isn't that marvellous?