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## A look on the bright side

Alex Pankhurst

Fig. 1 *Omphalodes cappadocica*, self-seeded into the gravel garden

When a garden is described as a ‘blaze of colour’, do you wince inwardly and picture a mass of begonias, pelargoniums and petunias, blaring out their brash summer colours? Not our sort of garden then. Hardy Planters tend to go for a more subtle effect. We favour softer colours that blend with each other, within a framework of carefully placed foliage. Don’t we? If asked, I would say precisely that about my own garden. Yet, thinking about it, I grow and treasure some plants whose flowers are just as strident as those oft-despised bedding plants.

The first of these starts flowering in March. *Omphalodes cappadocica* ‘Cherry Ingram’ (fig. 1) sets the spring zinging with the brightness of its piercing blue flowers. No messing about with mauve or pink tones; just strong, unadulterated blue. In my garden it forms a clump

that I pass by daily, and it’s so cheering. ‘Winter is over’ it announces, ‘a new season’s excitement is on the way’. The flowers last for weeks, but eventually do form and disperse seeds. Pleasingly, some of these have made small plants in the gravel garden, while another chose the pondside, so they don’t seem to be fussy. A few differ from the parent

– *O. c.* ‘Cherry Ingram’ is itself a large-flowered selection made by that knowledgeable gardener. One of the seedlings went on to produce flowers that were pale pink. It’s certainly pretty, and I appreciate its rarity, but contrary to my normal colour preferences, that subtle mauvey-pink just doesn’t cut it. It lacks the parent’s wow factor.



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Fig. 2 *Phlox subulata* ‘Emerald Cushion Blue’



Fig. 3 *Phlox subulata* 'Temiskaming'

In May, as the omphalodes goes to seed, a creeping *Phlox subulata* starts shouting from the gravel garden. My favourite is the more commonly seen, mauve-flowered, *P. s.* 'Emerald Cushion' (fig.2), but this loud one is *P. s.* 'Temiskaming', named after a town in Ontario, Canada. Coming from that part of the world, *P. subulata* has no trouble with our

winters. The wonder is that it's shrugging off the hot, Saharan conditions of the gravel garden in summer. This plant isn't just surviving, it's spreading with strength and determination (fig. 3). I cut it back every autumn, yet by May it's bigger and stronger than ever, a sheet of exploding cerise, which draws the eye irresistibly. It's simply magnificent. Subtlety, what

subtlety? And who cares?

If elegant refinement is the watchword, a nearby honeysuckle would be hard to beat. Decades ago, it was bought as *Lonicera x americana* (fig. 4 – though now that we have images on the internet, I am a little doubtful about the accuracy of this name). It was planted to climb up a tall tree, and I was aware of its flowers only via wafts of scent in mid-May, drifting down from the crown. Unfortunately two years ago the tree had to be felled, and the honeysuckle was likewise cut to the ground. I didn't expect it to survive, but it has spent the intervening time considering, and this spring burst into life, producing flowers at knee level. They open out cream, with just a hint of pink near the stalk, and gradually turn pale yellow. Understated, classy – oh yes. Trouble is, the word 'insipid' also comes to mind. Especially because on the other side of the house another, quite different, honeysuckle is doing its thing.

*Lonicera x tellmanniana* (fig. 5) was planted against the newly built perimeter wall in 1996. The bricks were rather starkly orange, so I thought it might be fun to have the lonicera's flowers chiming with the colour. But alongside it was a *Trachelospermum asiaticum*. Well, I didn't know what strong growers they both were. Now they battle it out, and the orange wall is completely



Fig. 4 Honeysuckle bought as *Lonicera x americana*



Fig. 5 *Lonicera x tellmanniana*



hidden. So much for that little conceit. They needed to be tough too: it's an unpromising place – west facing, with poor, extremely dry, soil. But *L. x tellmanniana* is a cross, made in Budapest in 1920, between a yellow-flowered Chinese honeysuckle, *L. tragophylla*, and *L. sempervirens* from the USA's southeast. And clearly it possesses hybrid vigour. It defies cold and drought, and in late spring produces many flowers, which are a deep, strong orange, an unusual colour for that time of year. Somehow, I like it.

Orange can be a difficult colour to place, but *Helianthemum* 'Orange Phoenix' has become a firm favourite of mine (fig. 6). *Helianthemums* enjoy the arid conditions in this garden, and often produce seedlings. Not this one though. It sets no seed, possibly because the flowers are double. But also it may be a hybrid, as it behaves differently from the others. Unlike them, it isn't easy to propagate from cuttings or runners, instead just spreading quietly as a clump of dark green leaves. In late May it is covered with deep-orange blooms. I like them, and also the glossy, healthy green of the broad cushion that remains, still effectively smothering weeds after flowering is over. The plant only seems



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Fig. 6 *Helianthemum* 'Orange Phoenix'



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Fig. 7 *Lychnis viscaria*

to have been in existence for about sixteen years – anyone know its origins?

That orange is deep enough not to jar, yet is best kept away from 'sticky nellie', which takes the eye a few weeks later. The name is fun. Doesn't seem to be in any book, but that's what my mother knew it as. It's the magenta-pink *Lychnis viscaria* (fig. 7), which is actually a British

native, although rare here; more commonly found in Europe, and east into Asia. Vernacular names such as 'clammy campion' and 'sticky catchfly' refer to its faintly tacky stalks, discouraging insects from crawling up to steal its nectar. Margery Fish lamented that she lost hers if not divided and replanted regularly – although that may have been the double form.

Fig. 8 *Silene armeria*

Best not tell mine, as it spreads into a modest drift which requires, and gets, no attention whatsoever. It grows among a crowd of plants in a 'cottagey' bit of the garden, where it has to fight for space, and suffers drought every year. I value it because it forms a

Fig. 10 Larkspur (*Consolida ajacis*, syn. *C. ambigua*)Fig. 9 *Delosperma sutherlandii*

patch of cheering colour in early summer. And despite producing lots of seed, these only go on to produce one or two plants, in places they see fit. I've tried the white form, but it simply hasn't got the stamina of its louder cousin.

*Silene armeria* possesses stamina of a different kind (fig. 8). It's a self-seeding annual which I've grown for more than fifty years, in each of our four gardens spanning that time. Not a nuisance seeder, just a plant that can be relied upon. It ignores drought, positively revels in poor soil, and gets on with the flowering business. Probably advisable not to let it anywhere near a day-glo orange marigold of course, but surrounded by gentle blues, greys and pinks it is very pleasing.

A plant that rewards in a different way is another bright pink. It's a delosperma I received as a present a few years ago,

from an acquaintance who lived by the sea. I planted it beside the drive, without much hope of it surviving the winter, which none other of its kind have done for me. But this thing is just amazing. It forms a dense carpet, covered with vivid, magenta daisies for week after week in summer (fig. 9). It smothers weeds, jeers at winters and just wants to tell everyone, 'Look at me – I'm wonderful'. Enquiry reveals that it's *Delosperma sutherlandii*, from South Africa. It's uplifting just to walk past this colourful spread.

I find Larkspur (*Consolida ajacis*, syn. *C. ambigua*) a bit of a puzzle (fig. 10). It was a stalwart annual of cottage gardens, which ours had been once, despite our predecessor's efforts to make it all lawn and conifers. And in due course up popped some lovely larkspur, from seed





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Fig. 11 *Anagallis monellii*

which must have bided its time in the earth. Since then I have tried sowing seed where I want that deep-sea blue, but it's obstinate. Only grows where it wants to. Well, that's 'character' in a plant, and has to be respected. There are different coloured forms – pale blue, pink, and white – but they hold no attraction for me; it's the royal blue that's so exciting. I only wish each spike lasted longer.

Perhaps I'm a 'blue' junkie. Because there's a less hardy individual whose colour just takes my breath away. *Anagallis monellii* is a relative of our scarlet pimpernel, which I do

have in the garden, but not intentionally, finding it a sly little weed that sneaks into plant clumps and proves difficult to remove. *A. monellii*, its Mediterranean cousin, wouldn't be able to hide if it wanted to – the intense blue of its many flowers is just riveting (figs 11 & 12). I first saw it about eight years ago in a small nursery selling mostly bedding plants, and was completely smitten. Sometimes it comes through winters, but more often it expires. I find it possible, but not easy, to propagate from cuttings, and it doesn't often self-seed. So, not a particularly



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Fig. 12 *A. monellii*

obliging plant. But I must be missing a trick, because the catalogue people don't seem to have the same trouble. And it's a summer thrill I wouldn't want to miss out on.

One might look askance at a neighbour who chose to paint their front door that startling blue, but extreme colours do have their place in the garden, like their equivalents in human society. When extroverts and exhibitionists are met with in life, we call them colourful characters. And they enliven things. Just best not to encounter them en masse. 🌸

**Alex Pankhurst** has battled with her drought-ridden Essex garden for more than four decades, learning lessons every year.