

# French connection

Margaret Brown

This last winter and spring seemed to be one long list of horror stories from gardening friends in the UK. Sad emails told of shrub after shrub and plant after plant destined for the compost bin. Here in SW France we too had a much harder winter than usual. At least a week of snow! And many frosty mornings – but the frost usually cleared by 2 pm. Our first huge flakes of snow came in November and neighbours who had tried to cling on to their pots of red geraniums were well and truly caught out. The great advantage of snow is that a garden still in the making, after four years, looks perfect under a few inches of snow. However, the garden is progressing and the work continues, despite 30°C as I write in early August.

On 17th February, a memorial service was being held for a dear friend and fellow Lincolnshire HPS member, Harry Caudwell, in his home village of Friskney. Unable to attend, I walked out into our garden where lots of his plants are now happily at home. In front of me was a shrub he had given us several years ago as a small rooted cutting. *Abeliophyllum distichum* is also known as the white forsythia, although it is not a forsythia but a member of the olive family. Overnight it had come into flower and greeted me with its tiny delicate white flowers, glowing in the morning sunshine.

It comes only from Korea, and is an endangered species and near extinction. It produces simple four-petalled white flowers on thin multi-stemmed branches. The flowers appear before the leaves, making it a very ornamental plant in the early spring garden. For the rest of the year it happily fades into the background. Imagine my surprise to find it covered in buds in August! What a silly year this is. After a cold wet July, our garden now thinks it is spring again.

Summer arrived here even earlier than usual with a really hot April and May. Tulips flowered for a few days and then gave up and my ‘river’ of *Allium hollandicum* ‘Purple Sensation’, planted to ‘flow through’ the cool border, forgot to be purple after about five days and I was left with a ‘river’



Fig. 1 *Abeliophyllum distichum*

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of green! Our purple/deep blue *Scilla peruviana*, usually a show stopper, definitely did not like the early heat and came and went with a whimper! I'm planning to split up the clump in the autumn. The crocosmias are now doing the same thing so I think they'll also be relegated to the not-to-be-bothered-with list.

I had great success this year with my HPS seeds, although some are awaiting pricking out. I can't wait to see what the 'may not come true' seeds will turn out to be! We were delighted when a Dutch lady, now living in the south of France, booked to stay with us, especially as she is an HPS member. She regaled us with stories of her successes with the HPS seeds and how she eagerly awaits each edition of *The Hardy Plant*. She left with a few mementos, of course!

Our best doers this year have been the kniphofias: 'Percy's Pride', 'Timothy', 'Tawny King' and the lower-growing Royal Castle Hybrids. Penstemons are the best ever and they provide excellent ground cover, thus deterring weeds. Very dark red *P.* 'Raven' (fig. 2), and 'Maurice Gibbs' (fig. 3) with its large red flowers and white throat, I would highlight amongst the dozen or so varieties we grow. I am a stickler for not cutting them back until early April. This is one plant that certainly benefits from the winter protection of its old leaves and stems. They are so easy to grow and will repay you with a very long flowering period as long as you keep up with the dead-heading.

My plant of the year would have to be *Gaura lindheimeri* (fig. 4). We grew it in England, but here in the Tarn-et-Garonne we have been much impressed by the way it

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Fig. 2 *Penstemon* 'Raven'

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Fig. 3 *Penstemon* 'Maurice Gibbs'

is used by the municipalities on roundabouts, and in tubs and roadside plantings in the towns. We have used it in the patchwork terrace, where both the white and the pink varieties have bloomed non-stop. I love its loose, gentle, floppy appearance, ideal for an area where we don't stake plants and try to create a more natural look.

*Gaura lindheimeri* (Lindheimer's Beeblossom, Lindheimer's Clockweed) is a species of *Gaura* native to southern Louisiana and Texas. The specific epithet is after Ferdinand Jacob Lindheimer, a German-born botanist who collected extensively in Texas for Harvard University's professor Asa Gray.

An herbaceous perennial growing to 50–150cm tall, its densely clustered, branched stems grow from an underground rhizome. The leaves are finely hairy, lanceolate, 1–9cm long with a coarsely toothed margin. Pink or white flowers are produced from the beginning of spring until the first frost. Several cultivars have been selected for varying flower colour, from nearly pure white ('Whirling Butterflies') to darker pink ('Cherry Brandy' and 'Siskiyou Pink'); in some cultivars, the petals are white at dawn then turn pink before falling off at dusk. It grows best in full sun and can survive lengthy periods of drought.



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Fig. 4 *Gaura lindheimeri*

As we get older we are finding that the spades, forks and ground are getting heavier. So we are planning

to reduce the size of our potager, which will also reduce the amount of bottling, freezing, jam and chutney-making. The added bonus is that we will have room for another hardy-perennial terrace, which in terms of weed control makes life much easier. I would like to add more grasses and I feel a plant-hunting trip coming on!

Gradually, many of our hardy perennials are being spread around the village, to both English and French gardeners. Asters, agapanthus and penstemons are great favourites with our neighbours. Guests from Chartres, very keen plantspeople, took plants too. I also showed them back copies of this journal. When told that it wasn't printed in French they were very disappointed. And before you ask, no, I can't do a translation! 🌸

**Margaret Brown** and her husband John moved from Lincolnshire to Tuc de St Paul in Lauzerte, officially listed as one of the most beautiful villages in France. They much enjoy meeting their B&B guests, especially those who share their enthusiasm for plants and gardens. (For details email [browngarden@orange.fr](mailto:browngarden@orange.fr))