



Fig. 1 *Rubus tricolor*

C*aveat emptor* is not the name of some exotic plant. ‘Buyer beware’ is practical advice that we gardeners, as much as anyone, are inclined to ignore. This is a mistake: you may be taking home something you didn’t know, didn’t want, or even didn’t know you didn’t want. Sometimes however, you get a pleasant surprise. Here are three examples of surprises I’ve found pleasant.

The long one

A few months ago, I revisited a small family nursery I had been to previously, about twenty years ago. On both occasions, I came away with a small assortment of value-for-money plants, but the result from my first visit was the

more interesting one. I had bought a mystery plant, in a small pot without a label. It had neat little leaves: shiny, rich green and pale beneath – thick, textured, with reddish bristles. It was demure. The woman who ran the nursery could, she said, only think that it was ‘an alpine’. In my ignorance, I took it.

I still have it – a lot of it. It isn’t an alpine. After a few months in its pot it decided to explore. Its stems grow 2m or more a year, in most directions. It is tough. It zips along the garden’s boundary fence, and if we have a friend’s sheep in the field, they eat it enthusiastically. It is rather a ‘shy flowerer’, but has occasional fruits that, other than being bright orange, look like small blackberries.

The long and the short and the tall¹

Martin Spray

Alpine indeed! If it’s not *Rubus tricolor*, it’s something very similar (fig. 1). And I’m glad to have it. Yes it can be a nuisance, but it’s been a very useful ‘filler’, is attractive all year except in droughts or severe frost, and helps keep the nettles at bay. It also makes a useful screen to a small woodstore; and I suspect that not just the sheep, but fallow deer visiting the field eat it too.

The short ones

I know there is potential danger in this, but we grow several forms of mint (please don’t ask which²), mainly for their delightful scents, and we seem to have one or two native hybrids that provide food for a diversity of late-season beetles, flies, wasps, and butterflies.

¹The title is part of the WW1 song appropriately called (in the polite version) ‘Bless ‘em all’.

²*Index Kewensis* listed over 900 species and hybrids. Most are invalid.

However, one mint I bought doesn't fit this picture. With a ground-hugging habit, minute leaves, and an almost camouflage colour, it is fairly insignificant, and at first I couldn't understand why it was called a mint - but stroking or walking on it, one is rewarded with a shot of peppermint scent.

The Corsican mint, *Mentha requienii*, doesn't have much visual impact (fig. 2). For weeks I didn't notice patches of it on the vegetable beds, yet it had spread nearly everywhere there was any bare soil. I dug it out - almost too successfully.

For at least some of its time here, it grew and flowered quite well. But something was not quite right. Parts of the mint patches, instead of having typically dull, off-purple, half-hidden flowers, had constellations of little, bright-white flowers. I had bought a pot growing two plants of similar form. The other turned out to be a sandwort, *Arenaria balearica*, and this became the predominant plant (fig. 3).

Those constellations were a happy accident: just what I wanted to try growing among large stones edging a path. This it began to do, but I neglected it in a summer drought, and it almost disappeared. I neglected it again, together with the little patch of Corsican mint,



Fig. 2 *Mentha requienii*

until I took a closer look, and saw they were both being swamped by two other miniature but colonising plants, similar enough in appearance to be overlooked.

One, the common native pearlwort, *Sagina procumbens*, is surprisingly abundant, yet seldom noticed in many garden situations. The other I had sown as an experiment; and I was surprised how

successfully it survived, and grew, and spread. This is a rupturewort, *Herniaria glabra* (fig. 4); and as I had bought it from Chiltern Seeds³, I'll quote their catalogue: '... suitable as an alternative to grass for a lawn, the great merit of this rare English native, with tiny, vibrant green leaves and little clusters of tiny green flowers, is its ability to retain its deep green colour throughout the year'.



Fig. 3 *Arenaria balearica*

³www.chilternseeds.co.uk



Fig. 4 Rupturewort, *Herniaria glabra*

Herniaria is worth attention, though it is a bit nondescript, not least when in flower.

I enjoy the distinct, and surprisingly strong, scent of the mint, and the sandwort's constellations. I ought to nurture the remnants, or try them again, this time keeping the different components apart, though this might be futile, as they are easily invaded.



Fig. 5 *Heracleum mantegazzianum*

The tall one

For the last example I go back almost sixty years, to my father's garden, and one of the plants I introduced there. This was one I didn't buy but I probably would have, had I seen it for sale. I collected it from a lowland Scottish riverside, fortunately without being affected by the skin irritants it contains. I was delighted that it liked its new home – though its neighbours perhaps had a different view. It is one of the most magnificent plants I've ever seen, and is certainly among the most impressive ones I've grown. In my own garden I think I must have grown it from seed, quite possibly from the HPS...

Alas! I had to stop growing it years ago. Since 1981 it has been an offence to allow giant hogweed, *Heracleum mantegazzianum*⁴, to grow in the wild, and in 2014 it was proposed that owners of this and a

few other invasive plants should be made to eradicate them. It is a biennial (or monocarpic) herb growing to 2.5m, with umbels 50cm across (fig. 5). And it will suppress other plants that dare to try growing near it. For a while, I had four or five at the bottom of the garden, to be carefully maintained each year by cutting off the umbels before the seeds ripened – until one year I didn't, and was alarmed a few months later to find several hundred seedlings downhill from the garden. Fortunately, they were growing in a stand of bracken, and with the help of a slasher, I was free of them fairly quickly. My wife forbade the growing of any more.

But I do keep the memory of them... I've tried one or two other *Heracleum* species as substitutes, but have found them less than satisfying. *H. lehmannianum* was quite the wrong shape, and died without flowering; and *H. stevenii* is only just starting to grow. It would be nice to have a grove of hogweed-type giants again, but I haven't noticed anything suitable – and legal. For the moment, I have an area with both the white- and red-stemmed common native hogweed, *H. sphondylium* (figs 6 & 7); this will have to do, while I look around for an alternative.

⁴Some botanists think more than one species is involved.



Fig. 6 Common native hogweed, *Heracleum sphondylium*

I'm grateful for the chance to have seen these beautiful plants through their life cycle, and for the opportunity of discovering the ornamental value of common hogweed.

The point

I looked up to the hogweed. To the short one, and to other shorties, I don't look down: I genuflect to take in their charms. I don't do either for the long one, but I am grateful for the minor insights it, like many other plants I've acquired, has given me: usually something I wouldn't otherwise have thought of. And probably, had I not come across them and actually handled them, I would have missed this chance. Taking a chance sometimes

results in disappointment, but a negative result is still a result and an occasion to learn. If you don't take the chance, you miss out on the opportunity.

Like many other keen gardeners, I have visited many nurseries and garden centres, and gardens too, and have tended to acquire something I've heard of, or which has been recommended, only after I've had a good look at the real thing.

Of course, the *really* real thing – thoroughly understanding how a plant you find in the garden centre will perform in its own ideal environment, can be quite a challenge. Where to place it in the garden? Based on whose preference, mine or the plant's? Logic might



Fig. 7 *H. sphondylium* with dark stem

predict that I would walk straight past a plant I've never heard of, or that I've heard disparaged, or that sits hopefully in a pot without a label (usually in a spray of hairy bittercress). Sometimes I do, but it always seems wrong to do so.

Didn't my rubus arrive this way? Didn't my arenaria get in by pretending to be Corsican mint? And should I have ignored the heracleum? Perhaps I should have been more careful, but I don't think so. The plants I have described are all very different, but what they've all had in common for me is a sort of serendipity – and if you can't find serendipity in a garden, where can you find it?

Bless 'em all! This may be your lucky day. 🌸

Martin Spray was a natural scientist and gardener. Very sadly he passed away just a short while after submitting this piece. He was a frequent contributor to the *Journal* – often challenging, with gentle humour, the received wisdom of conventional gardening.