

PLANTS FOR WIDER PROPAGATION: SOME HERBACEOUS TREASURES, BAMBOO MAGIC, AND OTHER SURPRISES

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Obviously, no nurseryman wants to be caught raising a large stock of some esoteric plant of which he will eventually sell only two or three. I should like to point out, however, that communications between grower and customer have been greatly improved since Chris Philip and Tony Lord, under the aegis of the Hardy Plant Society, have produced *The Plant Finder*, a mine of information on how to locate a whole range of hardy stock.

In general, there are plenty of businessmen around in the nursery trade with a sensitive nose for ratings, but plantsmen are few and far between or, if present, uninfluential. A plantsman is always supposed to have his head in the air and to be blissfully unaware of market forces. Peter Catt, whom we met on his nursery during the conference tour, is exceptional in being a combined plantsman, propagator, and businessman. The result of having so few plantspeople either at the propagating end or the selling end of the production line is a dismal uniformity. The public is in part to blame because a large part of them do not notice anyway.

But a large part of the British gardening public is remarkably well informed. In my garden, which is constantly open to the public but is totally unlabelled, I am made aware of this fact all the time. To a large extent they know what they are looking at or recognize what is different. The best plantsmen, therefore, are the amateurs, which doesn't say much for us.

The sort of plants that need producing and promoting are not necessarily new at all. In the herbaceous field, the old-fashioned single white Japanese anemone is constantly in greater demand than supply. This is the flower that I call *Anemone japonica* 'Alba', though it may be more correctly, *A. × hybrida* 'Honorine Jobert'. It is not 'Luise Uhink', wherein the flower is fussed up with a lot of narrow petals. In 'Alba' they are broad and set off by a ring of yellow stamens and a green eye.

Arundo donax, the giant reed grass, grows three to four metres in a season from scratch, but its growth and foliage is well spaced. You can see through and past the plant, which allows it to be placed as appropriately at the front of a border as at the centre or back. American visitors sometimes annoy me a little by saying it looks like corn, their name for maize. Admittedly both are grasses, but the giant reed grass has beautiful glaucous foliage and great style.

Hakonechloa macra 'Aureola', another grass, is fairly widely distributed but young plants take a while to make any impression.

At most its height is 30cm. With its gold and green striped foliage its season extends from spring to autumn, when it flowers, and right into winter, when its dead stems and leaves still look good. It is a marvellous plant once established.

Yet another grass, *Imperata cylindrica* 'Rubra', seems the ideal companion for the black-leaved *Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens', a plant for which it is not easy to find a good team-mate. The grass grows stiffly to 30 to 40cm tall and its red foliage in autumn shines like rubies when back-lighted by the sun.

Hellebores are excellent plants in garden centres for extending the selling season but seedlings are unreliable. We desperately need to be able to clone up the new hybrids which Helen Ballard and others have been breeding. I had hoped to hear, at this Conference, that micropropagation might provide the solution, but it seems not. The numbers of any one clone required by the hardy plant trade are too small to justify the high production costs of this expensive propagation method.

Kniphofia caulescens has an imposing presence with broad, glaucous strap leaves similar to if not quite as good as a leek's. But the kniphofia is evergreen. It makes a bold feature in paving or on a promontory in such a position where the leathery old *Bergenia cordifolia* is normally used.

The kniphofia has, on account of its tropical appearance, always been supposed to be tender, but is remarkably hardy in such gardens as Wallington, Northumberland, and Crathes Castle near Aberdeen. The plant is slow to propagate by division and the clone in general cultivation flowers too late, in September, to set and ripen seed. However, Dr. Jack Elliott has a clone which flowers in August and ripens generous seed crops, so future prospects are brighter.

Polystichum setiferum 'Bevis' is a most desirable fern with elegant fronds that taper to fine points. But it is sterile and the dense crown that it forms is not easily pried apart. But how many have seriously tried?

At Sissinghurst Castle it combines with and cools off a large planting of *Dactylorhiza* × *grandis*. The hardy *dactylorhizas*, such also as *D. foliosa* and *D. elata*, have gone in and out of nurserymen's lists, including Bloom's, over the years. They are first rate garden plants with quite a long flowering season. Furthermore their roots multiply readily, unlike the genus *Orchis* in which the crowns generally remain single.

Aralia cachemirica is a herbaceous member of the genus, making 2.5 to 3.0m of growth in a season when well established in moist soil. It is an imposing plant to use as a specimen, not colourful but hard to pass by. The large pinnate leaves are surmounted by umbels, combined in panicles, of small white flowers which soon become deep purple fruits; the subtending pedicels also purple. A handsome plant, easily raised from seed sown in autumn and

allowed access by frost. Germination is free in the following early spring.

Paris polyphylla, again, is discreet judged by the notion that flowers should be colourful and only the leaves green. But its inflorescence has a splendid structure retained right through the summer until the capsule of vivid orange or yellow seeds opens out. There must be an easy way to germinate these seeds. It has been done but not by me.

Euphorbia schillingii was introduced by Tony Schilling from Nepal and was thought at first to be a form of *E. sikkimensis*. In fact it belongs to a different group of euphorbias and was found to be a so far undescribed species. Unlike *E. sikkimensis*, which suckers inconveniently, *E. schillingii* is a sturdy clump former, a metre tall, flowering at a usefully late and prolonged season from mid-July for two months. It can be raised from seed, which germinates directly from a spring sowing, or from cuttings of basal shoots taken early.

Geranium 'Anne Folkard' is a sterile hybrid between *G. psilostemon* and *G. procurrens*. It combines the virtues of both parents without inheriting their faults. The young foliage is yellow green, which is a worry until you realise that it is healthy and natural, after which you advertise it as a great asset. The bright purple flowers are borne unceasingly from May to October on a rambling, weaving plant and it is invaluable for binding a border's contents together. In winter it dies back to the crown. Stem cuttings need to be taken early in order to establish plants that will overwinter.

I should like to bring in clematis, since my name has at times been associated with the genus. Some old favourites, greatly in demand, are hopelessly underproduced. Raymond Evison tells me that he has taken 2000 cuttings this year of 'Perle d'Azur' and his is the largest European clematis nursery. 'Perle d'Azur' is by far and away the most prolific and showy blue clematis for late July. At Sissinghurst it makes a great curtain of blue against a concave wall. Everyone wants it but it is always in short supply.

So is 'Alba Luxurians', a viticella hybrid which finds itself difficult to decide whether it wants to be leaves or flowers. The first blooms are entirely green, the last entirely white, but in the main flush it is characteristically white with green tips to the sepals. It has great public appeal.

Bamboos were, as I wished them to be, included in my subject title. Nurserymen are most unadventurous in the range offered. Of the larger, specimen-forming kinds, the commonest is *Pseudosasa japonica* [syn. *Arundinaria japonica*], which is invariably scruffy and always subsiding into a partial flowering condition. *Sinarundinaria murielae* and *S. nitida* are good but nowhere near as distinguished as a whole range within the genus *Phyllostachys*, such as *P. aurea*, *P. viridiglaucescens*, *P. bambusoides*, and *P. nigra*

in their several selected clones.

These bamboos have shown little inclination to flower, at least in my lifetime. And in our climate they are compact in habit, not running about as they do where summers are warmer.

As a genus, they have far greater presence than the majority of bamboos, yet when the Award of Garden Merit Committee was sitting a few years ago, reviewing the lists of plants deserving this award, not a single phyllostachys was included. The nurserymen represented just did not want to know about them.

LESSER KNOWN AND UNUSUAL SHRUB SPECIES AND THEIR PROPAGATION

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These days people are constantly asking nurseries for something out of the ordinary. This paper contains a few suggestions that maybe of interest to the discerning gardener.

The Moroccan broom, or *Cytisus battandieri*, with its pineapple scented flowers, is usually grown from seed, but this method is not really satisfactory as the plants do not flower until quite mature. Micropropagated plantlets are sometimes available, but there are still problems with successfully establishing the plantlets.

The best results are from cuttings which, although not easy, are a good source of supply. The wood must be semi-ripe and taken rather late in the year, October or November. Our greatest success has been from plants kept in a poly-tunnel and the growing shoots taken when about 10cm long and quite whippy to the feel. They are then dipped in Synergol rooting hormone, at the rate of one part to six of water and inserted into individual pots of Cornish grit/peat, 3:1.

The pots are then placed in a carrying tray and put on the mist bed, with a base temperature of approximately 65°F. The mist is kept to minimum levels during the day and turned off at night as this species thrives best in a dry atmosphere. Rooting usually takes place in about 3 to 4 weeks, when the young plants should be carefully potted on into suitable containers. Care should be taken to avoid any root disturbance. This method produces a good quality plant that will generally flower during its first year.

Grafting, using laburnum as an understock, is not generally regarded as being ideal as the resulting growth is too lush and the plant is not long lived.

Climbing hydrangeas and relatives. While there seems to be a plentiful supply of *Hydrangea anomala* subsp. *petiolaris*, there