



BULB LOG 20.....20<sup>th</sup> May 2015





I think all gardeners have some tendency to judge a garden on the 'flower power', not the foliage. This is such a short term view as flowers last from a few hours to perhaps a few weeks - foliage can be with us all year round - even in herbaceous plants we can get around six months. I love ferns but I have to admit that I have never worked at learning their names which

often look very complex and difficult to pronounce never mind spell – this does not stop me being fascinated by them and using them extensively around the garden.



Some like the first three I show above, have leaves all year round until I eventually cut them back in late winter to allow the beautifully stylish, uncoiling fronds to be seen and grow unhindered by the old growth of leaves.



Others like the shuttlecock fern, **Matteuccia struthiopteris**, do lose their leaves in the winter, sending up beautiful soft green new growth with the top curled over like the end of a fiddle. Then we find that not everything that looks like a fern is a fern: like the lovely **Pteridophyllum racemosum**, below.



**Pteridophyllum racemosum**



**Aciphylla glauca, Dicentra formosa, Corydalis 'Craigton Blue' and Podophyllum pleianthum et al !**



as you see the large flat leaf of **Podophyllum pleianthum** has a lovely toothed edge.

Our style of gardening is very much influenced by nature where we see many plants growing together and in many cases you cannot see the ground for foliage. This is exactly what I try and achieve using low level plants that will carpet the ground while still allowing taller plants to grow up through them. Mixing foliage types also creates beautiful and interesting tapestries of colour, shape and form.

Each and every leaf deserves close inspection rewarding the observer –



**Podophyllum delavayi leaves have striking patterns in brown over green.**



**Podophyllum delavayi leaves rise up through a carpet of Dicentra formosa as does Arisaema nepenthoides.**



**Glaucidium palmatum album** with **Podophyllum delavayi** and **Trillium kurubayashii**.

The flowers are a welcome addition but mixing foliage types will give much longer lasting interest.



This **Rodgersia sp.** has attractive bronze foliage when it first comes through – it then turns green.



Trilliums are very happy coming through ground cover - it is why all the leaves and flowers are near the top of the stem. In these pictures you can see how different forms of **Trillium grandiflorum** are perfectly happy growing in a community planting.

Even the larger leaved Colchicums can be grown in communities so long as you choose partners that can hold their own with the spring competition. Many of the smaller bulbs such as *Corydalis solida* flower and are going dormant before the Colchicum leaves expand. Helleborus, Aquilegia and taller growing bulbs such as lilies and Allium can easily grow up through the Colchicum leaves.



***Celmsia semicordata* shines in front of a blue mass of *Corydalis flexuosa* flowers.**



**Corydalis flexuosa flowers**



When a plant such as *Dicentra formosa* or *Corydalis flexuosa* grows well it will spread forming large mats of foliage and flowers - what we need to decide is how far we are willing to let it spread. We can control it by pulling it out as a weed, to restrict its spread or it is also possible to create a boundary by changing the environment to one that will not suit the plant. As many of these plants are happy in most of our garden we do have to thin out the growth and control its spread.

Here at the base of an *Acer* we are happy to leave the *Corydalis* with *Anemones* and self-seeded *Meconopsis*

*cambrica* - it is partially controlled by a *Rhododendron* at one side and the path on the other.

**Oxalis magellanica,  
Acaena and Viola  
canina.**

When is a plant a weed?  
There are a few plants  
we sometimes regret  
introducing into our  
garden. We were  
charmed by Oxalis  
magellanica filling its  
pot with its neat foliage  
and mass of white  
flowers at a nursery  
many years ago and now  
it is just everywhere. It  
obviously loves the  
conditions in our garden  
where it spreads both by  
stolons and the explosive  
seed capsules which



scatter the seeds everywhere. On reflection it still poses all the features that attracted us in the first place so why should we worry that it spreads so freely – it seems that our attitude to plants is often more to do with how easy or difficult they are to grow than how they look. Think how much of our time is spent in the futile attempt to tame some of the high alpinists into growing in our gardens – delighted if they survive long enough to produce a few flowers. As I get older I am learning to appreciate more the plants that will thrive in our garden; seeding, spreading and flowering freely with little input from our gardening skills.



**Celmisia spectabilis** is one of many from this genus that grows happily in our garden providing us with wonderful foliage all year round. Here it is surrounded with seeding Aquilegia – are they weeds? With so many of the other plants we grow flowering in the first half of the year these volunteer Aquilegia when flowering will provide good colour interest with foliage well into the summer. We will take out some seedlings allowing others to grow and I have learned it is easier to remove the seed pods, reducing the amount that seed than it is to pull out all the seedlings.



Back with the attraction of foliage we like to mix all colours, shapes and forms.



The lovely red tinged leaves of a tree Paeony contrast both in shape and colour with the new soft green leaves of **Vaccinium smallii**. The long thin leaves of Fritillaria and Narcissus and the fern-like ones on Anemone all illustrate the wonderful forms that nature has created for us to enjoy.

The emerging stylish and decorative fan shaped leaves of **Veratrum fimbriatum** are quite different to any of the surrounding foliage adding a striking contrast.

This is a new plant to our garden that is being championed by Christoph Ruby who wrote a plant portrait in the February [International Rock Gardener](#).



**Erythronium tuloumense** has been joined by these volunteer *Digitalis* and **Pseudofumaria lutea**, both of which self-seed around the front garden – our choice is where we let them grow on. Now there is a way we can use one plant to help control another – if the ground is covered over with a carpet of leaves, such as *Dicentra*, it is difficult for seeds to germinate.



Front garden



The contrast between the bare foreground and the carpet of green beyond is obvious and shows the difference one year can make. We cut back shrubs and opened the far end of the front garden two years ago while the near side was just cleared this time last year. It will not take long for **Galium odoratum** and **Dicentra** to colonise the ground. Many may consider this **Galium** a weed but it is a great weed plant that works for us by keeping down

‘weeds’ while allowing all other plants to grow up though as well as forming the most beautiful soft green carpet which will soon be covered by a foam of white flowers.



The next three pictures show the lower part of the front garden illustrating the full effect of combining the carpeting plants such as *Dicentra*, *Corydalis* and *Galium* with other leaf forms such as the spiky ***Aciphylla glauca***, hellebores and

rhodendrons – all of this appears after we have enjoyed the spring bulbs. The ***Ledum palustre*** in the foreground was one of the shrubs that I cut down to almost ground level two years ago. It was close to thirty years old and had become quite straggly and spreading now it has regrown forming a nice compact floriferous shrub.





Front garden



Spotted leaves of **Dactylorhiza** are a worthy feature in themselves but then we will also get the wonderful flower spikes. Look at how they contrast well with the other foliage types – perhaps the frost damaged Trillium leaves are not so decorative.



This style of community planting is not restricted to larger beds – it can also work well in small areas such as this trough. This illustrates wonderfully my garden philosophy of enjoying the process of nature. I am not at all interested in ‘instant gardening’, so often shown on TV, where mature plants are used. A garden should grow slowly to maturity it is like a curve slowly moving up to a peak of maturity then it is downhill as plants get old, grow too big and we need to intervene as we did in the front by cutting back the shrubs to rejuvenate the garden – pity that does not work for the gardener. You can also think of it as lazy gardening – originally I planted this trough with seedling *Oxalis adenophylla* which has spread to fill it but then *Dactylorhiza* seeded itself in along with the wee *Viola* and I even like the moss growing

over the edges. Nature has taken over and created something that is far nicer and more interesting to me than my original effort. I learn from this that what I should be doing as a gardener is creating environments.

Having taken my lessons from nature I observed this rock perched in our pond had over the years become beautifully covered in moss.

I noticed that some plants, grass seedlings and even a *Dactylorhiza* seedling had taken hold and so I added my own touch by introducing a plant that I have so often seen growing in such conditions in the wild.



***Pinguicula grandiflora*** – I will watch the fate of ***Dactylorhiza*** seedling leaf, bottom middle, with great interest.

This fascination with trying to mimic nature has been with me for a long time – I developed the ‘fish box trough’ so they would be light enough to take to a Show 30 plus years ago. What I wanted to display was Scottish habitat types so I had a woodland planting, a seaside planting etc.



Now I find I am combining my ‘lazy gardening’ with my interest in habitats - this pot was originally planted with *Ophiopogon planiscapus* but gradually other plants have seeded in; creating to my eye a delightful spectacle.



A number of the native plants I used in the habitat troughs are still with us after all these years such as the beautiful *Carex atrata* – some may consider it a weed but it has never spread around here.



Here **Carex atrata** shares a pot with **Festuca ovina** and I just love this with all its untidiness; it is as if I have plucked a small piece from nature. In many ways this appeals far more to me than the search for perfection we used to seek when we placed plants on the SRGC Show benches – it makes me question what is perfection? I still love going to the Shows, as at [Aberdeen last weekend](#), and seeing the exhibits, large, covered in flowers with no imperfections: these are a testament to the great skills of the growers but for now I am happy with my untidy natural pot of native grasses that looks after itself – I don't think the Judges would be too impressed! My greatest teacher and inspiration for gardening is nature which I try and mimic (in an unnatural way) by bringing plants from all parts of the world together in our garden - the one thing they do share is that they can adapt to our conditions.....