

THE PLANT COLUMN

Martin Stimson



Back to Basics in Suburbia

In his bi monthly series, Martin Stimson continues to reflect on plants that are personally important.

This month, in his own 'Winter's Tale', Martin travels to his birthplace for an encounter with a Winter Jasmine. On the way, he meets two common plants, the Hawthorn, and the Dogwood, which are often overlooked in preference for the extravagant and rare.

Martin speaks up for the horticultural commoner or the 'working class' plants which reside in urban gardens and landscapes.....

In the beginning..... as I lift the lid on my lap top I glance through the window. Outdoors the fresh white snow that cocooned the plants in my garden for two weeks, has begun to melt slowly. Underneath a rather dirty, grimy and untidy garden is revealed. It is too soon to venture out to clear up the mess, and much better I feel to stay indoors and study the seed catalogues, giving



thought to the spring and summer ahead. I notice that the clear frosty air and cobalt bright blue skies which came with the snow have been replaced by a thick grey fog, which deposits a necklace of dew drops on Acer and Betula twigs. Despite the murky sky these beads sparkle in the gloomy daylight.

Indoors the weather forecaster has just annoyed me, and the latent grumpy old man within that I try unsuccessfully to suppress, has begun to stir. "Tomorrows weather will be very gloomy" and, she says, "quite depressing"..... 'Who is she? to tell me how depressed I feel', I rant. 'Just tell me what the weather will be as I need to travel'. More cloud, fog and gloominess is what she predicts. I'm only depressed by the way the weather is forecast, rather than the weather itself.

I am travelling to my birthplace (almost symbolically it seems) at Christmas time and the start of the new year, which takes me North up the M11. Not with a donkey but with a Renault. For once I'm a passenger which gives me time to study the landscape and the plants it contains. I soon

begin to realise that sometimes it's the most common of horticultural plants that get overlooked in the maelstrom of enthusiasm and superlatives that characterise every day gardening journalism.

Despite the forecaster's despondency, the journey starts with a glint of weak winter sunshine and



the occasional hint of blue in the vast fenland sky. The occasional wispy cloud rushes west, and sufficient angular light squints under them from the east, to illuminate the vibrant red stems of the hedgerow Cornus and the sparkling reds fruits of the Hawthorn.

Periodically positioned Ash trees thrust their strong and sturdy silvery trunks skywards, and wizened khaki coloured oak leaves flutter on their branches having died on the tree in the cold, instead of falling to the ground earlier in the autumn. Even the thorny common hedgerow Bramble leaves are interesting, having twisted in the cold to reveal silvery undersides which flicker and flash in the



hedgerows. Urban and suburban horticulture gets a poor press generally. There are no aristocratic hyphenated Lords or Ladies on hand to wax lyrical over the horticultural delights offered by a view from the M11, but to the observant eye there's a lot going on visually, horticulturally and ecologically that we should be grateful for and obtain pleasure from. Hedgerows and embankments, ditches and dykes are filled with what might be regarded as working class plants. Commoners, if you like, who are robust, tough, strong and work hard to please.

Further from the road, clusters of dense Pine are interplanted with deciduous stock giving solidity and winter greenery a good name. The occasional Leyland cypress is perhaps not so welcome to purists. Across flattened cultivated fenland scenes, the riverside willows reveal orange annual twigs at the edge of their canopy, and give away the course of the river. Horticulture seamlessly becomes geography and ecology.

As a horticultural observer travelling at 70 miles an hour you might be forgiven for thinking that plants would be difficult to spot. But the laser sharp sunlight finds the coloured stems of *Cornus sanguinea* easily. Twigs of Field Maple, Hawthorn and Dogwood, where annually trimmed, show subtle colour differences, often ignored. Dogwoods, even when unpruned by keen gardeners or cattle, are very conspicuous with their annual tangled shoots ripening red in the crown of the shrub. Occasionally the Hawthorn trees jump out visually as we speed past, not only for the red fruits but also because they are sometimes decorated with small flocks of redwings and fieldfares. These winter visitors appear to dangle from within, on stems which are too weak to carry their full weight. They lose their balance when reaching for fruit and move quickly throughout the plant.



All these blue collar plants that I'm observing look to me as if they are all imported by man. Designed and installed as part of the civil engineering works and landscaping works when the roads and junctions were constructed. Three cheers for designers and horticulturalists! Although, as one's eyes scan further from the road, these plantings merge effortlessly into the surrounding landscape, once natural but now farmed. The plants are now doing the job one imagines the designers wanted them to do, providing shelter against the roadside, signifying the land boundary and attracting hungry birds in the deep mid winter. This must be regarded as a success story.

Horticultural commentators and authors - it seems to me - often overlook the obvious in favour of the specialist and elitist plants. It's much more 'de rigueur' to write and talk about Trilliums and Orchids than it is the hoi polloi like *Cotoneaster* and *Hedera*. Urban plants and ghetto gardening are not posh enough to get the column inches.

Dogwoods of course fit into both camps, in that they are normally depicted in the gardening literature as specimens or clumps under planted in the garden landscape with snow drops, heathers, or ivy. In this way the stems are contrasted with groundcover colour especially when hard pruned annually or stooled so that annualised strong shoots emerge straight, strong and vertically. Maximum colour is obtained this way in the winter. The larger the clump the greater the effect can be: photogenic in winter, with or without frost and cobwebs as extras. Dogwoods also

provide those showy white blooms which aristocratic gardeners like to have, but must wait for until spring time.

In urban landscapes I've seen huge plantations of red and yellow stemmed cornus used very effectively on ring road junctions, and roundabout planting to provide screening, reduce headlight glare and of course provide habitat and winter colour. In the rash of new towns created in the late 1970s and early 80s like Runcorn and Peterborough, Cornus provide cheap blocks of vegetation quickly as an alternative to grass which needs maintaining every week.



In these situations Dogwoods are uncomplicated in every way and undemanding in attention. Propagation from hardwood cuttings can be Child's play and undertaken professionally relatively cheaply. Planting can be en masse, and maintenance can be zero or occasional stooling. However they are maintained, they seem to perform in winter

as well as providing flowers and fruits in abundance. The hedgerow *Cornus sanguinum* is rather shy by comparison.



Our native Hawthorn is also both a rural and urban hard case. Often in rural areas the hawthorn provides the much needed stock control boundary, which is secure and impenetrable due to dense branches and thorns. It also provides a habitat for wildlife and easy maintenance for the

farmer. In urban places, the Hawthorn will take physical abuse from people, collect grime, dust and dirt from passing traffic and still survive to flower and fruit. Regular snow white 'May' blooms

and fresh pea green leaves are its trade mark, but in the winter sunshine baubles of red berries dangle stiffly waiting to be consumed.

These commoners are merely markers on my seasonal journey north but worthy of greater recognition. When I arrive at the sleepy village I still call home, the first plant I see is also an ordinary garden plant which flowers in winter but doesn't seek to attract the headlines. The winter



Jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*) is so called because the flowers are borne on stems that have no leaves and are thus naked flowers. It's easy for an enthusiast and wealthy garden owner to become familiar with the less familiar, and therefore to enthuse others. Some of the more pretentious plants aren't accessible to the real amateur or

non gardener. What happened to the down to earth commoners though and what about folk who don't have gardens and spaces where they can grow plants? Urban horticulture is important for the folk who can't get to visit the Chelsea show or large historic gardens open to the public. I like this reliable Chinese 'exotic' that here is a commoner. Winter Jasmine is accessible down your street somewhere, its easy to cultivate and interesting to the man and women in the street, providing urban colour and seasonality without any specialist input.

Don't get me wrong, the winter garden can be stuffed full of exotics such as Witch Hazel, Winter Sweet, and Viburnum, which when combined with their scent make them worthy for discourse, and there's no denying that such gardens can be inspirational for those who discover them and read about them. I love visiting winter gardens, especially the ones that have been created in my life time, as I can see them aging positively as I grow up myself.

My father's winter Jasmine clothes the south and east corners of a stone wall of a thatched cottage that was my birth place. Perhaps it was there before I was born? Densely twigged through 50 years of regular trimming with shears, it provides a summer nesting site and home often for a black birds or even a wren. But in late December after the winter solstice it's the yellow blooms for which we are most grateful. Of course, more sensible positioning would have meant the twigs would have been left alone and the new growth, which is shiny green, would act as a foil for the yellow flowers. Being close to a path such practical concerns have over ridden any

horticultural idealism. Visible to the public highway the plant is enjoyed by passers-by and is a conversation piece which encourages community.

The BBC web site tells its visitors that the winter Jasmine was introduced in 1844 from China as a 'wall shrub'. Who decided this and why? Jasmine likes to scramble as well and because it does not twine (a normal characteristic of Jasmine) it has to be cultivated. Have we forgotten what



'cultivated' really means |It means it requires looking after regularly and training onto the surface be it fence or wall. So often cultivated these days means plant in the ground and retreat indoors. My trusted copy of Beans Manual to which referral is obligatory, records the fact that "No plant does so much to lighten up in midwinter the dull suburban streets of London and the fact that it will thrive in such

places adds much to its worth" This shows perhaps its value more than we consider it today. Its also noted that it can be planted on top of a wall and it will fall downwards. I've seen winter Jasmine self propagate in gutters and in the leaf litter on a roof. I suppose it's regarded as important that the winter jasmine doesn't smell. It's a shame really as most Jasmines do.

As soon as the shortest day has passed I feel a sense of optimism for the New Year ahead. Melting snow from the southern edge of the thatch drips like a leaking tap onto a winter Jasmine beneath and freezes quickly as a weak and lazy December sun fails to make it above the surrounding trees. Each Jasmine bud is encased in frost and small icicles gather like blunt needles suspended ask Christmas decorations. One imagines that when such a plant was first available it was well publicised and fashionable. Nowadays, like flared trousers, one seldom sees reference to it. Its too common.

As we stare at the naked ice encrusted flowers my father has an expression about the days getting longer "by a cock's stride every night" Get ready to dust off the Bar B Q, I say and in the lengthening days ahead enjoy the plants that flower in the depths of December and January. They are welcome advocates of the new growing season that has yet to start. Let the winter jasmine just cheer you up with its flowers, bright and vivid. With green stems and stubborn tenacious growth it says a lot with out a lot of effort.

So my dear lady presenter of the weather forecast, the weather outside might be gloomy, overcast and dismal but there no real need to be 'depressed' at all.