

## A Dated Garden Part 4

### The horticultural re-creation of a Victorian garden

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*wanted a garden with plants true to the period of her house. This is the story of her research and the creation of the garden*



Going back to basics is very much my choice when it comes to **daylilies**, that way I get a scented one, i.e. **Hemerocallis lilioasphodelus**.(left) No problem with the date here as this species plant has been around in the UK for at least 400 years. It's rather tall ... it's yellow ... will it go with a pink rose? This could be interesting. William Morris would certainly have approved: it has both beauty and utility; being useful medicinally, for craft purposes, and for eating. An absolute must, obviously. The last of these attributes particularly attracts me.

Given that they'll need lifting regularly in order to stop them taking over I'll be able to avoid that fatal urge gardeners have of growing any scrap of living plant material that falls into their hands, by diverting surplus roots to the cooking pot. Apparently they taste a bit like sweet corn. I look forward to finding out. And to those of you who're saying 'but you can give them away', there are only so many gardening friends who'll want to grow them, especially with so many other, more showy, varieties available since the breeders got going in the early 1900s. It may not be the ideal colour companion but it will, like the rose, contribute to that vintage look: being a species, it possesses the simple lines and loose habit so often left behind during breeding. That, too, would suit growing it intermingled; cottage style – William Robinson, the great garden writer of the late Victorian era, would approve. He was all for the naturalistic.

The same effect could work for *Crocosmia*, too, in the company of ***Aster amellus*** (right) - another plant that had to wait until the early 1900s for it to 'blossom'.



It's not surprising the species has been left behind now we have the pick of the breeders' crops but Chiltern Seeds offer a wild form and it'll be fun to grow my own. The autumn bulb *Nerine bowdenii* is a possible for partnering the aster, too. All I can find out about *Nerine* is that it originates from the William's Town area of South Africa, so I surmise it arrived here along with *Crocosmia*. As this colony was like the Wild West all through the 1800s I doubt there was anyone keeping track!

I'm finding that in the 1890s plants that flower late in the year, like the above, were in very short supply, which makes me appreciate why the Victorians were so keen on bedding: tender plants usually flower till the frost gets them. Interested in how Jekyll solved this I consult her planting plan for the south border at the Priory, Hitchin ... aha, dahlias and African marigolds! But I don't want to use them: too much of a fuss.

Suspicious that ***Crocosmia*** is yet another garden plant reaping the benefits of 20<sup>th</sup> century hybridisation I've bought myself the RHS plant collector guide '*Crocosmia* and *Chasmanthe*'. I now know I was right, and I'm also convinced of the wisdom of eliminating beyond all doubt the thicket of anonymous *Crocosmia* that's currently in the garden before I so much as think of introducing another, and choosing a contemporaneous plant with great care as it's modern breeding that's helped curb its colonising tendencies. The tale of this plant's discovery and its introduction to the UK is so unstraightforward it makes your head hurt but one nugget of information stands out: Lemoine of France had in his possession both *Crocosmia aurea* and *Crocosmia pottsii* and he used them in a cross that produced *Crocosmia*



*xcrocsmiliflora* (left)- I won't bore you with what they were calling these plants then - and this hybrid flowered in 1881. Lemoine knew he was onto a winner. He had a plant that was very easy to grow, multiplied fourfold each year, and looked good. Little surprise then that he launched it a year later at the eye-watering price of 6 francs a corm - he only charged 1 franc for *C. pottsii*. Currently it's romping across the globe - I've seen it carpeting a Madeiran wood like bluebells - and some would say that, as the two species concerned flower at different times, it was a

cross that was never meant to be. *Crocoshmia* were introduced here, to collectors, in the early 1800s and found themselves outdoors in the north of England and Scotland. Surprisingly, hardiness wasn't an issue, which cheers me. The key to success had been an understanding of what conditions they required, so a good rule of thumb, whichever of the extant cultivars I choose, will be for me to plant them deep enough to escape any freeze, and make sure they never dry out. But I'll cross my fingers too, just in case. There are six I can choose from; named between 1884 and 1895, and all different – dwarf, tall, yellow, red, plain or pleated leaves – so there'll surely be at least one to team successfully with a blue-purple aster.

Years ago I saw a hosta in bloom at one of the RHS London shows - a great white trumpet of a flower and a glorious scent - and I promised myself that one day I would grow one, so this is where I probably find that it's a relatively new introduction. **Hosta plantaginea** is its name and it was introduced to Britain in ... I consult the photocopied listing the Lindley Library sent me from Elizabeth Banks' book 'Creating Period Gardens' ... prior to 1780. Bingo! I can enjoy its gardenia-like scent after all. Or can I? It's the one and only hosta that originates from warmer climes and is probably only really successful in the south. It's likely to send up its new shoots very early in the spring, too, which makes it vulnerable to late frosts. There had to be a catch, didn't there? Perhaps I can use the modern but related 'Royal Standard'. The flower has a similar appearance and would only be a little cheat, wouldn't it? Ah, but, give an inch and take a mile, and knowing how abundant slugs are round here it's a lost battle whatever.

It might, however, be happy in a big pot in the porch. I can mystify visitors by referring to it by its Victorian name of *Funkia*. I also intend using the porch to challenge the reputation of that other Victorian favourite the Iron Plant - botanical name **Aspidistra elatior** - plus an old variety of fern or two ... or three ... or four

! A touch of the fern mania that gripped the Victorians, except my plants will come from a nursery and not out of the wild. **Mrs Frizell's Tatting Fern** (below left) from the 1850s, available from Shiptons, will do for starters ... now where's that other specialist fern catalogue I had?



© Ruth Broadfield

And I'll source a **Begonia rex**: how can you ever get tired of such magnificent foliage? When the plant was introduced in 1856 the Victorians were so excited by the leaves they depicted them on their trendy new Majolica plates. Fortunately for me there are also botanical illustrations to refer to because, although cross breeding

started well before 1900, the progeny - the Rex Cultorum Group we see today - seem only to have been reliably recorded after this date. With a pictorial reference I can source a look-alike; after all, it's only on show, not having its DNA tested. One thing's guaranteed, though; it'll be far from having a cast iron constitution so I'll have to be careful of winter draughts.

But to less tender subjects: I've brought with me a **Ribes speciosum** in a pot, which is another plant I wanted to get my hands on after seeing it in full glory as a flowering hedge in Beth Chatto's car park. It has a reputation for being hard to propagate but mine came about through an accidental layering of a plant belonging to a friend-of-a-friend. Thankfully I find it was introduced to the UK in 1828. Would I have planted it regardless? Well, one thing I can say for this plant is it's tough! It's been through thick and thin by obligingly going dormant when stressed, so it's certainly earned a place in the scheme of things.

Any more plants and the garden'll burst but I can't resist running my finger down the index of that Country Life 'Century Book of Gardening'. I feel fairly safe in assuming that plants that were around for the compilation of a book to be published in 1900 will suit my purpose. Some have inconveniently changed their names but some are recognisable from ancient herbals. The Arts and Crafts movement was all for seeking inspiration from the past, so it's in keeping for me to have a ration of plants that have been in gardens for centuries; like seventeenth century **Aquilegia vulgaris** 'Nora Barlow'. Not everything can be a la mode. Will I be able to shoehorn in the 14<sup>th</sup> century **Dame's Violet** and the European native **Musk Mallow** if I make the most of layered planting? I can't bear to leave out anything scented.



*Malva moschata* © Derrick Ditchburn

And that reminds me; I haven't looked at Sweet Peas. I find Wem, in Shropshire, to be the epicentre of nearly all things sweet pea, courtesy of a certain Henry Eckford who began breeding them in 1886.

By the turn of the century he'd raised more than half the huge number of varieties on the market and a few remain extant. I'll be happy to echo Victorian enthusiasm. If I forego showy vase fodder, though, I can go back to **Lathyrus odoratus** 'Cupani'; the very first member of the sweet pea family to arrive on these shores in 1699. I've grown this and found that a lone plant or two will quietly thread about and still

manage noticeable scent. And, if I want a different colour, '**Painted Lady**' is its 18<sup>th</sup> century sport.

Again reminded by the question of scent, I've dug out a book I found in a charity shop years back: 'The Dianthus' by Will Ingwersen. Nobody could have known more about these plants in the early 1900s than he! It's a gem. A plants man who confesses to 'chronic floral indigestion after a Lucullan repast' and who has me looking up the word recrudescence in the dictionary has my vote. Unfortunately it doesn't progress me much plant-wise as most of the species have changed their names. And again, it's a case of hybridisation not beginning in time. It does spark an idea, though. I've a pile of old broken slates from the roof repairs ... an alpine trough, with the slates inserted edgewise? A lot of the dianthus species are alpiners and one such intensely - so Ingwersen says - fragrant dianthus I can pin down is *Dianthus petraeus* subsp. *noeanus*, discovered in 1846. Alpine collecting was another very popular pursuit in the 1800s.

Still with my finger on that Century Book index I'm hoping I can transform the random into something deliberate by drawing up lists, arranged into the different periods of flowering, from which to establish a colour scheme: lists of blues, such as **Campanula**, **Delphinium**, and **Larkspur**; pinks; yellows; whites; etc. I note **Foxgloves**, **Gypsophila**, **Hollyhocks**, **Phlox** - but I only like the white scented one ... **Verbenas**, **Veronicas**, **Violas** ... help! How will I ever sort out this jungle of choice I'm giving myself

I was hoping, by sticking to contemporaneous plants, that the constant problem gardeners have of their ideas being bigger than their garden would be solved, but no such luck. And mine consists of two beds totalling just twenty-four square metres of soil ... yes, I can hear you laughing! So, note to self: I must edit ruthlessly. Perhaps the fact my planting design must sit in harmony with the neighbouring front gardens - the Crescent is designed as one - will assist me, and as there's no grass to provide green in the winter the evergreens will find themselves at the front of the queue, along with those autumn flowerers. And, above all, only those that can make the most of the conditions will be allowed.

I doubt considerations of climate will weed out much, as these days here is about as warm as the south was then, because I'm willing to bet there was that north/south gardening thing going on in the 1890s, whereby garden writers in the fashionable south extolled plants that let gardeners down in the colder regions. On the other hand, there's that little matter of altitude and I'm not far from the moors. As for soil, mine is black - at least, it is when it's moist - light and gritty. I'm glad I'm no longer battling heavy clay, but, then, every soil has its down side, and meanwhile ignorance is bliss and learning keeps you on your toes. I'm told there's clay if you dig deep enough, and I suspect this clay may be on the acid side - the opposite of the top soil - as the hydrangea living below the porch window doesn't know whether to be a blue

or a pink one, but I don't intend finding out. I may live to regret that but there's too little space for digging large holes and drainage seems fine.

My final promise to myself is I'll not order any of my chosen plants until their planting spaces are ready. Too often in the past I've bought a plant that's 'going to be just right' only to have it languish in its pot waiting for me to get round to preparing room for it. Sometimes I've ended up giving it away to a friend with more time or space than me in order to save its life! If the garden's to establish itself as quickly as possible the plants need to go into well prepared soil in prime condition. The weather's fickle enough without adding any more uncertainties.

So, let the journey begin: from eclectic list of plants to Arts and Crafts, Jekyll-inspired, splendour. Wish me luck!

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