

A Dated Garden Part 3

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

As **lavender** is scented it's one of my must-haves and, conveniently for my limited compost supply, it thrives in unfed soil. I'll put it right by the drive where it'll get more of the sun it likes and can benefit from any heat stored in the edging stones. However, there are numerous varieties around today and I've no idea when they were introduced, only that lavender's been known in England since the 16th century. At least, the species *Lavandula angustifolia*, *L. latifolia*, and *L. stoechas* have been. With hardiness a must – I'm no longer in the 'Mediterranean' south – it's best I stick to varieties of **Lavandula angustifolia**, and that's no problem aesthetically as any of these will provide a good foil to the glaucous foliage of the bearded iris I intend placing alongside. It's a given the bees will love it, and how I'll relish their buzzing on a summer afternoon while taking tea al fresco.



Lavandula angustifolia
Du-Sa-Ni-Ma
From Flickr

A quick Google doesn't help my search; all I find is that Lawrence Johnstone, creator of the Arts and Crafts style Hidcote Manor gardens, introduced the varieties 'Hidcote' and 'Hidcote Giant'. But he was into his gardening between 1907 and 1948, so those don't fit the bill. Over to reference books and internet shopping ... the monograph 'The Genus *Lavandula*'

arrives in the post two days later and I have all the information I could possibly wish for. Impatient for dates I skip the botany and chemistry and the cultivation information – plenty of time for that later – and go straight to the history of lavender cultivation and the taxonomy section where the cultivars are listed. Interesting reading: I find that originally lavender was grown commercially from seed, which threw up many forms. This method lasted until the late 1800s when the commercial oil crops began suffering from disease and triggered the vegetative propagation of resistant plants. These varieties were later named. And I'm in luck: one of the earliest, '**Backhouse Purple**', introduced in 1888, is still around and will do very nicely: it has a strong scent and is not too large. It was bred in York, too, so even better. I really am lucky, as the bulk of named varieties came much later; one of the earliest being Gertrude Jekyll's 'Munstead' in 1902. The continuous flowering **Lavendula x intermedia** '**Alba**' would also qualify for my garden – apparently it's as near as damn it to a specimen picked at Kew in 1880 – but I always think of lavender as purple, not white, and I've only room for one plant.

The **Bearded iris** I mentioned have flowers in a class of their own, but I'm only prepared to fall in love with them if they're scented, and surprisingly large numbers of them are, although it's seldom mentioned in the catalogues. But, any thoughts I have of choice are immediately put in their place by finding out that all the bearded iris I've ever chosen from were bred in the twentieth century. In fact, the British Iris Society wasn't founded till 1922. We take so much for granted in our gardens. Prior to that, the only bearded irises available were the species, which go back a long, long way. I'm sunk. But no, all's not lost: **Iris florentina** and **I. pallida** have enough virtues, including scent – or, I'm thinking, because of scent - to have survived commercially, and what use knowing of a plant if I can't buy it easily; I'm not into anoraks or hair shirts. Their flowers are, respectively, a grey-blue white and a soft lilac-blue; perfect with lavender foliage. Sold to the lady with an 1890s house. I might even get round to using their roots to make orris powder. While I'd hoped to choose plants that were the newest of the new these will at least acknowledge the nineteenth century penchant for giving flowers meaning. Of course, these meanings were applied to flowers that were familiar to them, not turn-of-the-century upstarts, and the iris, I'm delighted to say, stands for faith, hope, wisdom and valour.

Scent, scent and more scent: **peonies** in fact, or paeonia as they're called botanically. I've been infatuated with these for years, so I know breeders of the herbaceous types were busy well before the turn of the century and that many of the varieties they produced are still available. As a bonus, it's likely I'll find varieties introduced prior to 1900 more suitable for the garden because subsequent breeding concentrated on suiting the floristry trade rather than us gardeners, and we prefer our blooms not to flop or spoil in the rain. The foliage of peonies can often be as valuable as the flowers. Beautiful emerging shoots and, if you choose right, autumn leaf colour, and even decorative seed pods. Nonetheless, it's usually their flower power that's to the front of anyone's mind when choosing: such opulent forms, such wonderful perfumes. But take care with the latter. I've been known to evict cut blooms from the house for being too strongly scented; but that was before I had high ceilings and a capacious hallway.

Having kept a collection of catalogues and other information, all I need do is open my files and choose one. Oh dear, just one? Don't they say it's best to plant in threes? I only have to

see the pictures in a catalogue and I'm like a kid in a sweet shop, so I must keep reminding myself I'm seeking just one specimen plant as a focal point. If I'm honest, though, it's lack of space and the cost that'll be putting the brakes on. And then, after what will surely be agonised deciding, will the nursery be offering that variety that particular year when it comes to ordering? Life can be so cruel. For sure I'll be turning straight to the lactifloras - the ones with scent - and I've a list of variety names ready: **'Edulis Superba'**, 1824; **'Duchess de Nemours'**, 1856; **'Albert Crousse'**, 1893 ... how frustrating that the all-time wonder 'Kelways Glorious' wasn't launched till 1909. Kelways of Somerset still cultivate a huge collection of peonies and go back as far as 1851. French breeders were busy even before then and their progeny haven't done too badly, either: **'Festiva Maxima'**, bred by Mielles in 1851, was selling in Woolworths only a few years ago.

Duchess de Nemours

*'Let Them Eat Cupcakes'
(New Zealand)*

From Flickr



But, enough, I must rescue myself from the danger of a garden entirely full of peonies by looking at all the other desirable plants that could belong there. And how can I plant a garden without bulbs and their like? They've the advantage of being dormant at some point and so are good for inter and under-planting and providing a surprise.

Long stemmed **tulips** are wonderful in a vase – they go-over so beautifully - and I used to grow them on my allotment for just that purpose. But they're good in the garden, too. Unlike daffodils, they won't turn to face the sun so all I see is the backs of their heads when I'm looking at them out of the window. And there's less chance, too, of them refusing to open due to lack of sunshine like a lot of crocuses do early in the year. They tell you tulip bulbs need lifting, but I can't be doing with that. If they're fosteriana tulips or Darwin hybrids they happily stay where they are, and I've used them to drift amongst other plants. But, when were they introduced? I'll be disappointed if I can't use them.

I am disappointed; Tulipa fosteriana 'Red Emperor' was introduced in 1931 and that leads me to believe the other colours in the Emperor group were also introduced too late for my

purposes. Of course they were: my 'Bulb Book' says *T. Fosteriana* was first collected in 1904. And that fact scuppers the Darwin hybrid tulip too, as one of its parents is - you've guessed it - *T. fosteriana*. But, the 'RHS Plant Finder' lists three pre-1900 tulips still extant. At least, in 2007 they were - I must get the latest copy. But they're single earlies ... hmmm. Perhaps with light soil they'll stay in the ground ok? But there's another option; perhaps the species tulips *praestans* and *batalinii* are of a suitable date. I've grown these as permanent planting, too. I draw a blank in my research, and I've no intention of going as far as ferreting through museum libraries. But then I see Shipton's catalogue has a vital nugget of information: ***Tulipa praestans*** was a discovery of Eduard Regel in the nineteenth century. All the same, I should shed the past and take the chance to experiment; and learn! I've always fancied ***Tulipa acuminata*** - brought to the UK around 1813 - and '**Clara Butt**', a late single bred in 1889, might work, who knows? Strangely enough this last is noted by Etty as being the first of the Darwin tulips on the market. Nothing's straightforward in this business! '**Coleur de Cardinal**' too, is a very old variety. It has a reputation for toughness and is also fragrant, although that's probably only noticeable en masse. I'd intended ignoring **daffodils** seeing as they'll turn their backs on me, but seeing as Shipton's in Wales do a nice line in historic narcissus I think I'll reverse that decision. They can show their faces to me when I come up the path with the shopping. It turns out the problem with Victorian varieties is that naming was a bit of a mess prior to the 1884 Daffodil Conference and, even then, actual cataloguing didn't start till 1907. An enormous collection of 100yr old cultivars - they're tough old things - has been discovered on the Cotehele Estate in Devon. It could yield new varieties, but they all need identifying, and that'll take an age. Meanwhile I'm very happy to find I can have my all-time favourite; '**W. P. Milner**', 1869, and also the late blooming and scented ***Narcissus poeticus***. They say that's been around since being brought back from the crusades. I'll add a jonquil or two, perhaps, and then there's some interesting doubles ... so easy to assume double daffodils are a modern phenomenon when, actually, they go back a very long way



Narcissus W.P. Milner
 Courtesy of © Shiptons Bulbs



Narcissus poeticus

And what's on Thomas Etty Esq's miscellaneous heritage bulbs list? I immediately rule out anything eggy yellow – can't stand the colour - and crown imperials are too showy, but **Crocus sieberi 'Tricolor'**, introduced in 1832, could persuade me. I've grown a different sieberi crocus for its habit of staying open once the sun has triggered it, instead of closing again, and maybe this one behaves the same way and is an equally good doer. It's worth a try. And then there's **Bulbocodium vernum**, introduced in 1753, which I've never grown – it likes drained soil and is hardy, so why not ... amongst the bearded iris?



Bulbocodium vernum

Genepitastic

on flickr

The pink-lilac of the blooms in spring would go well. And that makes me think to the other end of the year and autumn crocus. The blue tones of **Crocus speciosus** - a species from Eastern Europe and the Crimea, so sure to be known then - would look good supported by a freshly regenerated groundcover of grey **Snow in Summer** foliage; a plant widely used in Victorian gardens and needing cutting back after flowering. But was the large flowered variety *C. speciosus* 'Conquerer' named by the 1890s? I doubt it, but as the species is very variable and happy to multiply I'm sure some choice large-flowered type would have been doing the rounds at the time, and it can land in my garden any time.

Regarding **hyacinths**, while I appreciate their scent I'm averse to that solid look and certainly don't love those doubles the Victorians were so excited about, so I'll take '**Lady Derby**', 1875, or '**City of Haarlem**', 1893, for their scent and neglect them. That way they should become more graceful, or, to some eyes, weedy. Each to their own.

I have some juvenile ***Camassia leichtlinii* subsp. *alba*** lined up that I've grown from seed, so they'd better pass the date test! Or will I plant them anyway on the basis that the exception proves the rule and they're too precious to give away?



Camassia leichtlinii subsp. *alba* D. McClurg, Springfield, Oregon, USA c/o Flickr.com

All I can ascertain for now is they're native to Oregon in the USA, but I'll take the liberty of assuming that one of the many plant hunters returning from that continent in the colonial days had some of the seed in their pockets. As we Brits have had since the 1600s to discover it I feel the odds are in my favour.

I also grow ***Cyclamen hederifolium*** from seed. These will provide valuable winter foliage and be happy in any shady parts. Having grown in the UK since well before my house was built, there's no problem there, but back then it was called *C. neapolitanum*. For follow-on flowering I can add ***Cyclamen coum***, a venerable species known in the UK since 1699.

The very opposite is true when it comes to the bulbous spring iris. I find many of the species to be of such recent introduction in the 1890s that cross breeding had yet to start. But, no hardship: I've always plumped for the strong purple that's characteristic of ***Iris reticulata*** – although it's variable and I may well be able to source a blue, or a violet, if needed - and the sulphur yellow blooms of ***Iris danfordiae***; such a special colour. Now I've lighter soil, it should be easy to plant it really deep, which is supposed to prevent the common problem of it splitting up and ceasing to flower. Actually, since *I. danfordiae* wasn't brought to the UK till 1889, it probably wasn't ready for market till quite a bit later, but bulbs are handy for filling gaps, and even the best planting schemes need tweaking as they settle in.

In fact, I'm finding a large number of the bulbs, tubers and corms we take for granted today are out of bounds to me because they came on the scene post 1900, and to my surprise I'm happy to go without, even though, before, I've always planted them given the chance. I'm

even accepting that I can't grow *Lilium regale*, which I've always grown, so I think I'm beginning to get the hang of this. *Lilium regale* wasn't discovered till 1903, by the way. I've always grown *Alliums*, too, but those plant hunters had still to find most of them, which clears the stage for the lovely little European species ***Allium roseum***.



Allium roseum

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It's regarded as a pest by some due to the bulbils it sheds from the flower head - they take root as quick as a wink, or so it seems - but interestingly the Plants For A Future database states that a sub-species *A. roseum roseum* doesn't produce these. Even more interesting is the fact it's edible; I don't know how that passed me by. It's easy to control a weed when there's the incentive of eating it.

I'm finding garden plants of all kinds were yet to be hybridised in the 1890s, or had only gone a short way down that road, and it'll be interesting to work within those limits. It'll mean paying attention to overall colour contribution and foliage effect rather than individual form: the garden as a painter's palette rather than a display cabinet. That, by default, will bring me nearer to Jekyll ... most satisfactory. So, what else will I add to this palette of mine?

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D. McClurg

Du-Sa-Ni-Ma

Let Them Eat Cupcakes (New
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