

## THE PLANT COLUMN

### Martin Stimson



## Basking in summer sunshine, under a flannel bush

Blending horticultural, social and personal reflections **Martin Stimson** continues his very personal series on plants that have a special meaning to him. This month Martin reflects on the importance to him and his family of the 'Flannel Bush' that he planted 28 years ago.

The last ten days of June and the beginning of July have provided those of us who crave warmth and sunshine with a glimpse of the Mediterranean life style. The unusual evening heat means that sitting, eating and communing with nature in a garden with good company has become a serious possibility. A pleasurable but rare act in Britain. So when it happens we invest heavily in time and resources in some often vain attempt to convince ourselves that we are truly international and continental and this weather will last for ever. Gazebos get erected, pools get filled for toddlers, bar b q s gets restocked and the sun cream comes out of the cupboard. Importantly the tubs, troughs, hanging baskets and borders get filled with colourful plants, and evening watering becomes ritualised before the thunderstorm breaks the dream.

My patio faces south and west and was designed specifically so that on warm days and balmy evenings I could sit outdoors and watch the evening sky approach. I do this today with a bottle of red wine, and a note pad. I think, whilst staring at the local swift colony circling and squealing their good night charms in the Essex sky. With flowers around me of bright colours, and an emptying bottle for company I can escape urban living and convince myself I'm somewhere abroad where the air is continually warm and outdoor living is a constant. The dream continues.

Paradoxically no sooner have we realised how hot 30 degrees really is, than we clammer for shade in the gazebo (a surrogate olive tree?) and we beg the rains to commence. As Peter Kay famously said in one of his routines "I like it warm, but not that warm".



Plants contribute to that summer feeling, especially the bright coloured flowers we associate with annual baskets and tubs, and the wall plantings that surround our outdoor living spaces. 30 years ago when I moved into my present house I was fortunate enough to come across a small property which had on its west flank a suntrap. The west wall being one side of the house and the south wall being a garage abutting the house, thus creating a corner of heat and sun. The sun reaches the site at about 10 am in the summer, and remains focussing its rays until it descend behind a bungalow at about 8 pm on the longest day. The heat trapped in this space is considerable but perfect for the *Fremontodendron californicum* or Flannel Bush I acquired 2 years after moving in.

A spare and lonely plant, left over from a planting job, it looked in need of care. With a 1 m bamboo cane for support and despite some neglect, a vigorous potential was recognised in the leading shoots which were twig like and downy. Yellow exotic looking flowers of some size would contribute to my desire to be somewhere else in the warm.

As the name implies the native species originate from California, not the Mediterranean, but its large glowing yellow flowers – really sepals- contribute to that riot of colour which makes outdoor living more comfortable in the UK. Named after Major General J.C. Frémont the most common form is a hybrid called “California Glory”, recognised for its 5 lobed leaves.



A warmer more Californian site than against my garage wall would be difficult to imagine. In pursuit of horticultural nervana 28 years ago I constructed a raised bed from bricks. The walls of the beds were 3 courses high and the planting area about 40 cm wide. This narrow and shallow construction was supposed to contain alpine plants, a particular interest of mine at the time. I was young, enthusiastic, keen to impress and experimental. So the raised beds were only half filled with compost. The lower half being filled with deeply fissured rubble covered with a membrane to stop the compost falling between the drainage pieces. Photos were taken at the time for future reference. (But where are they now when I need them!?)

A very hot site, with hardly any soil - which was very free draining, - had serious potential for drought and with hindsight was not a perfect decision. But the alpines loved it. The *Fremontodendron* was an unexpected ‘donation’ and therefore an unplanned addition to the gardenscape. It duly found itself against the south wall of the garage. I'd seen a colleague do a similar thing and I'd imagined it would be pruned like as hedge to cover the wall of the

garage and reduce the reflected heat. For about 3 or 4 years this was fine and dandy and it grew into the space allotted. How it has grown subsequently for 20 plus years in no soil is almost one of the world's horticultural wonders. According to Hillier's Manual on page 225 of my copy the Fremontondenron is "ideal for sunny aspects, Best grown on a sunny wall, requires full sun and good drainage" There we are then. A perfect fusion of human intervention with plants and nature. Text book as they say.



Rather like a firework it was a case of stand back and watch it grow and expand outside the space designated.

It grew vigorously. Long pale green grey shoots that are covered in a dust which you need to avoid. Fremontodendron has some wonderful properties but here's the health warning. The dust hurts if it gets in your eyes and is dangerous. It can get in your skin and nose and eyes, so protection is needed when pruning and tying the plant. Worse there are tiny thorn like pieces which appear on the seed heads and pods and stick to your fingers painfully almost like the ones you get on cacti. If you take the outdoor Californian or Mediterranean life style very seriously and discard shoes these small dust like spikes get in your toes as well. All part of horticultures rich experience but uncomfortable at the time.

After a few years I became interested in why most gardeners didn't grow Fremontodendron as a specimen that was free branching as a standard tree rather than constrain it against the wall. So I left mine to grow as a tree once

it had got above the garage wall. In this way it could become 3 dimensional in space rather than only two dimensional growing south. A proper tree rather than tamed specimen.

After producing strong vigorous green shoots and rather tough leathery and felty leaves it became necessary to prune with serious intent. It responds well too. Like a number of plants, pruning can encourage vigour rather than constraint. As branches get too tall, heavy or close to the garage roof they come off. It looks harsh but the plant responds with vigorous renewal.

My Flannel Plant has accompanied me on my life's journey to this point, watching from on high as I raised a four children family who played beneath it. It's watched as the family brought up pets; it seen neighbours sit and laugh around it. It's seen the children moan as the little thorns get in their feet. Now it's watching grandchildren enjoy the sight of bees visiting the blooms. It's almost a community tree as its spectacular blooms are sufficiently high in the sky to be seen by neighbours.

It has aged as I have aged - hopefully with some distinction. But all the way through the joy has been in the huge quantities annually of large yellow flowers which line the branches. Large, conspicuous sepals that attract bees hover flies and beetles in quantity. On the down side, the flowers fall as whole units and require sweeping up to prevent them from coming into the house and covering the carpets with dry petals. Literally buckets full of blooms are produced annually with some times a second flush of lesser booms in the autumn



My 60 cm specimen in now over 4 m high and best seen from the bedroom window, and looked down upon. Its trunk is probably 20 cm across and occasionally I worry about the impact on my garage wall and if I might need to replace it one day (the wall that is, not the tree). Pruning out of large branches has so far encouraged new stronger growth so the plant is physiologically young in part. According to some sources I'm lucky to still have it around as they are quite short lived: trees suddenly dying at 20yrs

This is probably the only time in my horticultural career that I've thought of plants as a pet or in human terms. I'm normally less than sentimental about a plant as they can be propagated and renewed or replaced with a smaller one. They grow and die; that's what horticulture is about. This one is special to me though as in my family one of our "in jokes" is that it's the first plant name my children got to know. It's a long name so it became a party

piece. A party piece to impress the neighbours and 'townies' was to get very small children to tell them the full botanical name of the plant. Quaint, sad but true and remembered fondly with a smile and a recital. The name has not been forgotten..

With age - like its owner - the Fremontodendron has started to show signs of maturity and now there are some cracks appearing in the trunk and some interesting seepages of bacterial canker on the stem. I don't have seepages thank goodness but the limbs aren't what they were.

Will it die soon? Well may be. But in the mean time its home to a family of leaf cutter bees who float in and out of the stem on the summer air not taking leaves from the host but from neighbouring Clematis leaving behind distinct holes in the leaf margins.

There's also a fungus which appears at the base and this year the leave are small and there's little in the way of extension growth. A sure horticultural sign that it's on its way to the compost heap or the chipper. But then sometimes plants surprise us. There are some

small vertical shoots at the base, and I am wondering if with some careful removal of branches I can't encourage them to grow and who knows another 20 year might be possible. Chronologically old but physiologically young would be a success for me.



As I gather my book, pen and pad from the patio table and empty the last remnants of the red wine, I look up at the Flannel Bush and reflect on the joys and the pain this plant has given me over an extended period. The simplicity of its flowers and the complexity of its lifetime and its new inhabitants, a living embodiment of what horticulture is. A personal and community pleasure, the application of ecology and geography and the application of horticultural and social skills

**Happy summer days and evenings**

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