

In brief

What A selection of garden-worthy plants that are easy to propagate by seed or division and which can generally withstand the worst that winter can throw at them.

Origins Varied.

Season From early spring to late autumn.

Size Ranging from 30cm to 2.5m.

Conditions Reasonable, well-drained soil in sun or dappled shade.

Aster x frikartii 'Mönch'

Yellow-centred daisies surrounded by strongly coloured, lavender-blue petals. Easily rooted from cuttings in the spring. Nectar- and pollen-rich flowers attract masses of insects from late summer until the first frosts. 50-90cm x 30-90cm. AGM*. RHS H7, USDA 5a-10b†.



Tom Attwood is a Kew-trained gardener, lecturer and writer who with his wife Abi runs the nursery and garden design consultancy Abi and Tom's Garden Plants in Cumbria.

Ten years ago I began work on a garden that sits at the head of a rain-drenched valley in the Lake District. Here winters are less than forgiving and for a perennial to flourish, or at the very least survive, it needs abundant resilience. The early planting experiments I made – sometimes fruitful, sometimes not – engendered in me a deep respect for many of these resilient perennials, which have influenced those I grow to this day.

Garden worthiness needn't mean sacrificing any of the tempting qualities of less hardy plants or inviting a range of bland specimens into your borders. Grasses are an excellent place to start, robust, clump-forming types (of which there are many) are indispensable. A favourite of mine is *Panicum virgatum* 'Warrior' (see page 60). Slow to emerge in the spring, it has streaked foliage that matures to produce flower heads with a sumptuous metallic purple lustre and its winter effect is also highly decorative.

Grasses complement a multitude of perennials. *Linaria purpurea* 'Canon Went' (page 60), for example, produces spikes of highly delicate, creamy-pink flower heads in early summer. This garden stalwart will flower reliably until late autumn and is easily raised from seed. *Thalictrum* 'Elin' (page 62) – a hybrid between *T. flavum* subsp. *glaucum* and *T. rochebruneanum* – has a similarly ephemeral nature but is significantly larger. Its light frame is deceptively strong and from early to midsummer the flower clusters resemble clouds of mauve and cream.

Less statuesque planting can still achieve something visually striking. The euphorbias include an often overlooked, low, clump-forming species: *Euphorbia epithymoides* (page 58), which produces round flat heads of luminous green, sulphurous yellow bracts in early spring, setting off the inconspicuous flowers. If light levels are a struggle then *Omphalodes cappadocica* 'Cherry Ingram' (page 60) with a low-growing habit >

Originally *Euphorbia polychroma*

GAP PHOTOS / CLIVE NICHOLS

*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society.
†Hardiness ratings given where available.

Fail-safe borders

Whether you're a new or an experienced gardener, giving your borders a strong backbone of easy-to-grow plants that will survive where many others fail, ensures a long season of colour and gives you space to experiment

WORDS TOM ATTWOOD

▷ is characterised by numerous intense electric-blue flowers so synonymous with the borage family.

I first came across the melancholy thistle *Cirsium heterophyllum* (page 58) driving down a semi-derelict track in the Yorkshire Dales where it shot through the fallen remains of a dry-stone wall. It's an endemic plant that needs containing as it spreads by highly enthusiastic runners. A bottomless plastic container sunk into the soil to contain the runners works very effectively. Your efforts will be rewarded by the multitude of long-lasting thistle heads that appear from midsummer until early autumn and which are divine.

Umbellifers are highly distinctive plants and include a black-leaved form of our inherently tough native cow parsley: *Anthriscus sylvestris* 'Ravenswing' (see right). I adore this plant and enjoy contrasting its dark foliage with the spike-like, pink racemes of *Physostegia virginiana* 'Rosea' (page 61) and often pair both with hardy asters to extend the summer display well into autumn's grasp. *Aster x frikartii* 'Mönch' (page 56) described by horticulturist Graham Stuart Thomas as 'the finest aster for long display' is impossible to fault, as is *Symphotrichum novi-belgii* 'Little Pink Beauty' (page 62), a recently re-named aster that keeps you waiting until its flowers are revealed in September followed by an extremely handsome October crescendo. Late-summer spectacles should include the subtle beauty of *Succisella inflexa* 'Frosted Pearls' (page 61), with its small, spherical, pale-lilac flower heads that float above a matrix of stalks.

For the poorest-quality ground *Teucrium hircanicum* (page 62) is an enduring plant that will reliably produce masses of rich-purple flowers throughout the summer and autumn, attracting countless insects. I use teucriums where salvias, even hardy ones, would struggle. *Potentilla* 'Gibson's Scarlet' (page 61) with its fiery crimson flowers has a low, semi-scrambling nature and the two planted together will jostle beautifully for space.

Far from being in the minority, plants such as these that will succeed against the odds are vast in number, and these often underused fail-safe plants deserve to be grown and celebrated far more. □

• Tom's recommendations for plants for fail-safe borders continue over the next six pages.



Arenaria montana

A great plant for rockeries and well-drained borders. Produces spectacular, flower-laden cascades of evergreen foliage. Best raised from seed in the spring. 10-20cm x 50cm. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 4a-8b.



Anthriscus sylvestris 'Ravenswing'

A cow parsley with dark leaves that show off the distinctive white flowers. If the foliage needs refreshing, cut it back to produce another crop. It perpetuates by self-seeding. 1-1.5m x 50cm. RHS H6, USDA 3a-10b.



Cirsium heterophyllum

The melancholy thistle, supposedly a cure for sadness, produces intensely coloured, purple-pink heads on stout silver stems. A magnet for bees and admiring glances. Prefers a sunny position. 1-1.2m x 1.5m. RHS H7, USDA 5a-8b.



Euphorbia epithymoides

New leaves glow with a green luminosity in early spring to contrast with fresh growth of neighbouring perennials. Best raised from seed in well-drained soil; will sulk in overly wet ground. 25cm x 30cm. RHS H5, USDA 4a-8b.



Geranium Patricia (= 'Brempat')
A strong-growing cross between *G. psilostemon* and *G. endressii* that personifies hybrid vigour. Stunning cerise flowers with intensely dark centres 4cm across. 70cm x 70cm. AGM. RHS H7, USDA 4a-8b.

Originally *Euphorbia polychroma*



Aquilegia vulgaris var. stellata 'Nora Barlow'
Adaptable to both sun and shade, this robust plant need not be confined solely to the cottage garden. Double flowers, suffused red, pink and green in May and June. 90cm x 40cm. RHS H7, USDA 3a-8b.



Succisella inflexa 'Frosted Pearls'
A relative of devil's bit scabious, this adaptive perennial grows in the poorest depths of soil. Its pale-lilac flowers open well into October. A good food source for bees. 90cm x 90cm. RHS H7, USDA 5a-8b.



Omphalodes cappadocica 'Cherry Ingram'
The intensity of the blue colour on its forget-me-not like flowers cannot be overstated. Flowers are held in short sprays over clumps of smooth lanceolate leaves. 20cm x 30cm. AGM. RHS H6, USDA 6a-9b.



Physostegia virginiana 'Rosea'
Forms a dense mat of impressive flowers in summer and autumn. The individual flowers, which are arranged in four vertical tiers, move as if on a ball and socket joint. 70cm x 35cm. RHS H6, USDA 3a-9b.



Helianthus 'Lemon Queen'
A sturdy, non-invasive cultivar that produces delightful, softly coloured, lemon-yellow sunflowers. Particularly good paired with other statuesque perennials. 1.5-2.5m x 50cm-1m. AGM. RHS H4, USDA 4a-9a.



Linaria purpurea 'Canon Went'
Pale-pink flower spikes atop blue-green stems teem with insects from June to September and make excellent cut flowers. Well-drained soil, preferably in sun. 90cm x 30cm. RHS H6, USDA 5a-9b.



Symphytum 'Hidcote Blue'
Extremely useful as a dense ground cover plant. Unrolling croziers of red buds change to blue and white tubular flowers that emerge from April through to early June. 45cm x 90cm. RHS H7, USDA 4a-8b.



Panicum virgatum 'Warrior'
Clump-forming grass with green and purple foliage that intensifies in colour throughout the season. Produces purple flowers that flower freely all summer. Attractive winter structure. 1.4m x 60cm. RHS H7, USDA 5a-9b.



Potentilla 'Gibson's Scarlet'
Semi-scrambling herbaceous plant with intensely coloured, dark-eyed flowers. Grows in the shallowest soils and favours a bright, well-drained site. 30-50cm x 30-50cm. AGM. RHS H7, USDA 5a-9b.



Centaurea montana 'Purple Heart'
As a boy, I was drawn to the electric colour and funky design of *Centaurea montana*. 'Purple Heart' has distinctive white florets around a rich, velvety centre and doesn't run amok. 40cm x 60cm. RHS H7, USDA 3a-8b.

Cultivation

All of the plants profiled here are ones that have resolutely buffered some of the worst Cumbrian winters, where others have perished. Not only are all of the plants featured easy to propagate by seed or division, they also all have the potential to enhance the gardening endeavours for any gardener experienced or not, looking for a reliable and inspiring display.

- The performance of all plants will reflect the ground conditions and how well you prepare your soil prior to planting. Working in organic matter and opening up the soil structure while also enhancing the quantity of available nutrients to your plants will translate into strong, balanced growth. Your long-term approach to soil husbandry should centre on an annual mulch in the spring or autumn, feeding not only your soil but your plants.

- Many of the strongest-growing perennials will need lifting and dividing to rein them in and avoid smothering neighbouring plants. It will provide you with masses of additional material to use elsewhere in the garden. Ornamental grasses should be lifted in the spring but many perennials can be divided in the autumn as well.

- A vast range of perennials can be sown from seed. We move seedlings sown in the spring from seed trays into modular cell trays to grow into strong, well-rooted plug plants. These can either be potted up or planted straight out into the garden. Large areas can be planted very effectively using well-developed plug plants.

- Garden plants that hanker after overly wet ground conditions are in the minority and every effort should be made to ensure that soil has good drainage – especially during the winter months. Adding organic matter will help as will digging in some horticultural grit.

Recommended reading

• *Beth Chatto's Woodland Garden: Shade-Loving Plants for Year-Round Interest* by Beth Chatto (Cassell Illustrated, 2002).

Demonstrates what can be achieved in largely shady conditions, using many robust perennials.

• *Planting: A New Perspective* by Piet Oudolf and Noël Kingsbury (Timber Press, 2013).

An inspiring resource that details the experimental and creative use of hardy perennials along with a superb plant directory.

Where to buy

• Abi and Tom's Garden Plants

Halecat, Witherslack, Cumbria LA11 6RT. Tel 015395 52946, abiandtom.co.uk

• Beth Chatto Gardens

Elmstead Market, Colchester, Essex CO7 7DB. Tel 01206 822007, bethchatto.co.uk

• Chiltern Seeds

Crowmarsh Battle Barns, 114 Preston Crowmarsh, Wallingford, Oxfordshire OX10 6SL. Tel 01491 824675, chilternseeds.co.uk

• Duchy of Cornwall Nursery

Cott Road, Lostwithiel, Cornwall PL22 0HW. Tel 01208 872668, duchyofcornwallnursery.co.uk

• Great Dixter

Northiam Rye, East Sussex TN31 6PH. Tel 01797 252878, greatdixter.co.uk

• Hardy's Cottage Garden Plants

Priory Lane, Freefolk, Whitchurch Hampshire RG28 7FA. Tel 01256 896533, hardys-plants.co.uk

• Jelitto Seeds

29685 Schwarmstedt, Postfach 1264, Germany. Tel +49 (0)5071 98290, jelitto.com



Camassia leichtlinii subsp. *leichtlinii*

Produces erect racemes of starry, creamy-white flowers (6cm wide) in late spring. Has a longer flowering period than the blue form and will naturalise given the right conditions. 1m x 40-60cm. RHS H4, USDA 5a-9b.

Thalictrum 'Elin'

In midsummer produces loose, elegant sprays of soft-lavender flowers with contrasting tufts of yellow stamens. Perfect in a woodland garden or moist sunny border. 1.8-2.4m x 40-60cm. RHS H7, USDA 5a-9b.



Teucrium hircanicum

Intense, purple flowers are produced on salvia-like flower heads. Planted close to a gravel surface it will self-seed freely and seedlings transplant easily. Sun to part shade. 30-40cm x 30cm. RHS H7, USDA 8a-10b.

Symphyotrichum novi-belgii

'Little Pink Beauty'
Single, soft-pink flowers cover a dense clump of mid-green leaves from September to October. As flowers age, lilac becomes more intense. 70cm x 70cm. RHS H7, USDA 4a-8b.

Originally *Astrantia* *major* 'Roma'

Astrantia 'Roma'
One of the most impressive repeat-flowering perennials. Has highly attractive, muted rose-coloured flower heads. Native to Europe and western Asia. Grows in sun or light shade. 20-50cm x 20-50cm. AGM. RHS H7, USDA 4a-7b.

