

Some advice for new gardeners

Gilly Powell's request for advice in our December issue elicited an enthusiastic response from several kind and knowledgeable members - here is a small selection. Many thanks also to June Thornton, Monica Meenaghan, Jean MacCormack and other kind respondees who have sent responses after the copydate - all have been passed on to Gilly who has told me she will update us on her progress! Ed.

From Maureen Sawyer:

I enjoyed reading Gilly Powell's piece about her new garden. It brought back memories of when I started to develop my own at Southlands. Had I been a member of The Cottage Garden Society then, it probably wouldn't have taken so long to get to grips with it!

If I was starting from scratch now, one of the things I would do is plant slow growing trees, shrubs and climbers. In my experience 'anything' that is fast growing usually reaches maturity in a short time and in the past I have had to prune shrubs very often to keep it their height and spread in check or have had to remove them from the garden after only a few years. Slow growing species usually develop into beautiful specimens and do not require regular heavy pruning, making them light on maintenance!

Because you are starting from scratch I'd advise that you to **find out everything you can about the plants you'd like to grow**. When I started to garden an understanding of some Latin would have helped considerably. After making some costly mistakes I vowed to learn Latin names (and terms). Once you start gardening seriously, you can't escape plant nomenclature because it's the one and only universal language. It allows the reference of plants with anyone, wherever they are. There's no confusion. Knowing them will allow you to distinguish between the slow and the fast growing plants, the fragrant and the foul smelling ones, the large or small flowered, the colour, size, and lots more about the huge range available. It's all in the name. Common names are useful but Latin names are much better.

Sourcing plants is an exciting part of gardening. All experienced gardeners will advise you to buy from a reputable source. A good independent nursery will have knowledgeable staff who will be able to assist you with expert advice. They'll also have top quality plants, always labelling them using their Latin names, together with information stating whether they hold an RHS AGM (Award of Garden Merit). Knowing about this award will give you more confidence when deciding what to choose. The trusted trophy symbol on the label is a

sign that the plant has been trialled by the Royal Horticultural Society and has been found to be of good constitution and excellent for ornamental use in the garden. It's the highest accolade a plant can have. I buy from good nurseries but also get some plants from supermarkets and DIY centres. They're much cheaper at these outlets and this is a factor when you've a lot to buy. You may be thinking that these places don't have a good reputation when it comes to looking after their stock. This is true and it's a shame because plants are generally very well grown by the big suppliers to DIY centres! To get bargains, go regularly and buy just after new stock arrives when it's in tip top condition. Don't buy anything that's stressed because it's pot bound or lacking water. With knowledge you'll be able to recognise pests and diseases and make informed choices about plants you see at fetes, open gardens and society plant fairs.

What is my one 'golden rule' of gardening? Gosh, it's hard to choose just one. However, if I was pushed, it would have to be: feed the soil, not the plant. The manure you applied to the vegetable beds has produced good crops. Feeding the soil with more manure, compost, leaf mould, etc. every year will ensure that you will always have bountiful crops and strong, healthy ornamentals that are less likely to be infested with pests and diseases. You will also be providing a rich habitat for bees and other beneficial insects and wildlife to flourish. To this end, you must have a utility area in your garden where compost and leaf mould can be made and stored because you will need lots of it. Mulching the soil with natural products made from recycled plant or animal 'waste' also conserves moisture and keeps the weeds down, making maintenance easier. If there's one thing most gardeners say they hate doing it's weeding. I don't dig compost into my sandy loam, I simply put a thick layer of it onto the bare soil between the plants in the borders in late winter/early spring. Of course, mulching a soil that has a perennial weed such a ground elder in it will not suppress it; it will have to be removed first.

My garden is surrounded by ground elder! I keep it at bay by removing it by hand. I go through all the flower beds in early spring and take it out when it's beginning to grow. It's easy to remove but any pieces of root left in the ground will sprout so I try to be vigilant and remove every bit. However a few always seem to get left in so I take the leaves off when I see them growing to stop the plants photosynthesising. This gradually weakens them so much that they die off eventually. If there's a lot of elder in your existing beds you might find it quicker to remove all plants you wish to keep, and, (if you're not organic), spray the weed in spring with a proprietary weed killer when it is in strong growth. Removing all traces is then much easier and you will have lovely clean soil to plant in. Another golden rule has to be 'Right plant, right place'. Giving a plant a good start in life goes without saying, but one in the right place will flourish. *Aegopodium podagraria* 'Variegatum' (Variegated ground elder) is a hardy perennial that is ideal for

brightening up shady borders or dark corners. It is not as aggressive as the green leaved species. Enough said!

What are my suggestions for vibrant pink and purple coloured flowers? I've chosen those that spring to mind immediately: *Campanula lactiflora* 'Pritchard's Variety', *Lythrum salicaria* 'Feuerkerze', *Penstemon* 'Alice Hindly', *Phlox paniculata* 'Eventide', *Geranium* 'Patricia', *Hemerocallis* 'Pink Damask' *Tulipa* 'China Pink', *Hebe* 'Great Orme', *Lychnis coronaria*, *Geranium psilostemon* 'Bressingham Flair', *Dahlia* 'Perle de Heemstede', *Salvia x superba*, *Allium hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation' and cosmos. **Suggestions for plants with perfume:** *Sarcococca hookeriana* var. *digya* 'Purple Stem'. *Mahonia x media* 'Charity' (shrub) *Akebia quinata* and *Jasminum humile* (climbers), *Gallium odoratum* (ground cover for shade), *Lilium regale* (summer flowering bulb). Latin suffixes will give you 'clues' as to the fragrance of a plant eg. *Lathyrus odoratus* (fragrant sweet pea). Other Latin words to look for are 'dulcis' (sweet), 'fragrans' (fragrant) 'fragrantissimus' (very fragrant), 'suaveolens' (sweet smelling).

Seek the advice of a good tree surgeon to discuss whether your flowering cherry is worth keeping if you like it so much. What is its name? Cherries are generally shallow rooted trees and these can be easily damaged by lawn mowers and other mechanical garden tools if they are grown too near a lawn, path or border. If you decide to keep it, bear in mind its ultimate height and spread to determine the effect it will have on light levels in that part of your garden and have it professionally pruned so that it can recover from its die back with a fighting chance. It will need fairly regular pruning to maintain its form and structure.

Your purple tulips won't last a long time: maybe two or three years. Most people seem to treat tulips like annuals, replanting new bulbs each year. If you must dig them up do this very carefully after they finish flowering with their leaves intact. Store them in a net suspended from the ceiling in a garage or out-house and plant the largest ones in late autumn in their new home. This should be providing the same growing conditions that have enabled them to thrive in the garden ie. full sun, good moist soil when in flower in spring followed by dry conditions during the summer. Plant them at the same depth. If this position is in a border, plant them close enough to give a good display.

I hope you find my responses helpful. There's always something we gardeners have to learn no matter what age we are but it is HUGELY exciting, satisfying and rewarding. For me, it's a way of life and I agree with Monty Don when he says it should be compulsory for everyone! Good luck and happy gardening *Maureen gardens in South Manchester and wins this issue's garden gift token for taking the time to give such an interesting and informative response.*