

Private passions *Diane Quick*

My bedtime reading recently has been 'In my garden', by Christopher Lloyd, a collection of his weekly articles for Country Life magazine in the 1970s and 80s. I can recommend it for worried insomniacs. Every story will send you off to sleep with a smile on your face, your mind gently stimulated by his humour, knowledge and gardening lore.

One piece which amused me was about his pursuit and acquisition of a rare and beautiful blue tropical water lily. It resembled so closely my relationship with the blue Himalayan poppy, first seen in all its glory in a Scottish castle garden. After worshipping from afar for some years, I eventually saw them growing, rather feebly, in a couple of local stately home gardens, and it occurred to me that my back garden - shady, dark and acid - might support them. I had read everything I could find about them, so knew off by heart all about their care, much as I did about child rearing before the real thing happened. Would they sabotage my theories, just as the children did when they arrived? At least the children thrived, so maybe there was a chance with the poppies.

The first step was to find seed, very fresh, that would germinate like cress, said the books. I acquired one seed pod from a local stand of *Meconopsis grandis*, carefully dried it, and scattered the precious grains on the compost. In no time at all I had a little forest of seedlings, so, as soon possible, I carefully transferred some into new quarters, leaving some undisturbed in the original pot. Many died, but I managed to rear through the summer - about twenty healthy little plants. Woodlice enjoyed the ones in the greenhouse, slugs and snails devoured the ones outside, but the batch in our cool north facing conservatory remained intact.

When winter came and the temperature in the conservatory plummeted to sub-zero, I brought them into the cold spare bedroom and agonized over keeping them alive as near to bone dry as possible. They just survived this treatment, but



the first drink in spring had them leaping into life so enthusiastically, filling their pots with big floppy leaves, that I soon had to face the dreaded day of planting out.

Their chosen site was the shady side of some large trees, where I had rotted down some old turf. The plants were surrounded by slug pubs, egg shells, wood ashes, coffee grounds and, I must confess, slug pellets. I briefly considered camping out to watch over my treasures, but thought my husband might have me certified. Nearly all survived. Later came the most agonizing procedure. According to the books, they must not be allowed to flower the first year, or they would surely die. I steeled myself for this violation but was spared because, although they made big leafy clumps, no flowers appeared. Most of them came through the next winter safely with no special care, and in May 2011 I had my long awaited reward.

The blooms were large and a pure translucent heavenly blue, some with four petals, some with six, seven or more, each emerging like insect wings. They looked like crumpled silk at first, and then slowly unfolded over a couple of days smoothing themselves out to their full spread, revealing the yellow mop of stamens inside. The plants are 2 to 3 feet tall, sturdily self-supporting, and the flowers on their slender individual stalks seem to float above the ground like lazy blue butterflies, gently nodding. The stems and leaves are pale green and covered with furry ginger hair. The flowers come out in succession over four to five weeks, so the pleasure of them is not so fleeting as paeonies. You hardly dare go away for the weekend in May if you have paeonies in the garden! Once the flowers are gone, the plants are not appealing, but by chance, mine are near hardy geraniums and greater celandines which mask them quickly. They are now blooming for their second year, not so profusely, but I understand they are short lived, so have grown on some more from last year's seed.

Christopher Lloyd tells how he proudly showed off his water lilies, only to be asked, 'Do you have any fish in the pond? I lead people to my poppies, wait for the look of awe to dawn on their faces, only to hear, 'What's that pretty yellow one at the back?' (Cambrian poppies, a weed in my garden). Or they point to a muddy mauve geranium. 'Do you mean that one?' All the time the blue beauties are fluttering and posing like mad, fluffing out their stamens with all their might. I give up. I wait for them to be noticed, now. They are, after all, my own private joy and self indulgence, and they are worth all the trouble, even if their lives turn out to be short. *Diane gardens in Sheffield, and wins this issue's Garden Gift token for her lovely article.*