

When is a tree a shrub?

Karen Evans

When I received my CGS seeds this year, Margaret Mason, the kind person who put my choices together, had written a note on the bottom of my order form which said ‘I don’t remember seeing a tree, apart from a couple of scrubby sycamores anywhere in Orkney, so good luck with the birch!’. This started me thinking, when is a shrub a tree, or more to the point in Orkney, when is a tree a shrub?

We moved to our island home in November 2011; a pretty bleak time of year, wet with easterly winds that make the front door whistle and sing. The ‘garden’ was asleep but I recognised hebes, escallonia, fuchsia, olearia, sambucus and the ubiquitous willow. There were some shrubs however that I couldn’t put a name to, so resigned myself to await spring and new leaf growth that I hoped I would recognise.

In the meantime, much to my husband’s horror, I set about savaging the very top-heavy willow in order to promote fresh growth from the base and severely cutting back the elder. The bare framework of a mature elder is very appealing in winter; there’s something about the gnarled branches that tells a story from times gone by.

In early spring the following year it was time to tackle the hebe hedge. Hebe grows so



well here; it provides a windbreak and, due to the relatively mild winters, it flowers virtually all year round. However, there is a difference between an effective windbreak and a mass of overgrown, twisted branches, and, in any case, I want to see the sea from my kitchen window!

Now that the established planting was much reduced and tamed, I had some useable space to plant some of the hundreds of plants that I brought here from my previous home. I was not going to rush in to anything, because gardening here is a big challenge and it's important to understand the seasons and weather patterns. The winters are not cold, no severe frosts, but there are very strong winds and days are short, in contrast to long summer days when at times it never really gets dark but the average temperature is a mere 15°C. One big shock was the soil; this is a small island and I had assumed the soil would be sandy and free-draining: I couldn't have been more wrong! Clay sits on top of bedrock so during the wet winters there are areas of garden that lie under water for several weeks.

Over the last three years I have begun to understand the garden and learned how to use the different areas to best advantage: existing shrubs and walls provide shelter for my hellebores, *Erythronium* 'Pagoda' and 'White Beauty' as well as various trilliums; levels have been raised with grit to plant *Pittosporum tenuifolium* 'Tom Thumb', *Ceanothus thyrsiflorus* var. *repens*, *Cytisus* 'Boskoop Ruby' and *Ozothamnus rosmarinifolius* and the wet areas have become a home for *Iris sibirica* 'Southcombe White' and 'Mandarin Purple', *Trollius* 'Cheddar', *Astilbe* 'Snowdrift', *Carex buchani*, *Geum* 'Bell Bank', 'Lionel Cox' & 'Mrs W Moore' and *Primula pulverulenta* and *P. secundiflora*. There is so much more still to do!

The mystery of the unidentified shrubs revealed itself in the spring of 2012 with new leaf growth. The 'shrubs' were in fact whitebeams; they have been here many, many years, produce a lovely crop of berries for the blackbirds each year and have reached the heady height of between six and eight feet tall! So in conclusion, my *Betula ermanii* will never be more than a shrub, but I look forward to enjoying its beauty for many years to come. *Karen gardens in Orkney.*