

Rogues and vagabonds

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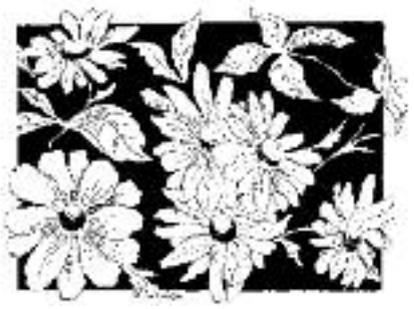
Reading yet another horticultural expert condemning *Alchemilla mollis* as a pest in gardens because it seeds so prolifically, and looking at pots of crocosmia/monbretia which turned up at our CGS plant swap to cries of ‘Don’t take that! It spreads everywhere!’, I thought about some of the rogues and vagabonds I have in my own garden or have seen used wisely and effectively in other places.

There are undoubtedly things that you regret ever having allowed in: I wish I’d never planted *Lysimachia clethroides* or *Lysimachia ciliata* ‘Firecracker’. The former pops up in the middle of much more desirable plants and the tough spreading roots are hard work to dig out in the rather damp area where I thought it would look effective. The white flowers, looking like a shepherd’s crook, do look effective and every August when it flowers and the butterflies gather on it I feel quite fondly towards it, but it is still a thug. The purple-leaved ‘Firecracker’ has similar spreading tendencies, but it is a wonderful background in late spring and early summer for tulips and day lilies, especially if you ‘Chelsea-chop’ it so it keeps its fresh growth rather than producing the pretty but not very distinguished yellow flowers.. It is also very good for cutting if you give it a good drink as soon as you cut it. So maybe I’m not entirely sorry I planted this in the first place.

Some of the euphorbias are rather over-enthusiastic, for example *Euphorbia robbiae* and *Euphorbia amygdaloides* var. *robbiae*. Both have wonderful displays of vivid lime-green flowers in spring and early summer, but take your eye off them and what was a pleasant clump is engulfing its neighbours far too enthusiastically. These euphorbias can, however, make a lovely edging to a driveway or path to a garage or shed. With a wall behind and tarmac, paving or gravel which is constantly driven or walked on in front they are kept in bounds. Similarly, there is a cottage which I drive past regularly which has a band of the old orange ‘monbretia’ along the front wall, safely restricted again by this wall behind and the roadway in front. Every September it is a heartwarming sight to enjoy. I think the lesson here is to think very carefully about where you put these root-spreaders, or even to try to contain them, rather like mint in old buckets.

As far as the prolific seeders are concerned, I have seen and have myself used *Alchemilla mollis* as a filler in awkward corners, where it cannot seed so prolifically, and gives a soft, billowing and generally trouble-free impact to bits of the garden on which you might not want to spend a lot of time and effort, although you still need to whip the flower heads off before it can seed. If something has, like alchemilla, seedlings which are instantly recognisable from the first little leaves it is easier to remove them when they are tiny.

A fairly recent addition to my vegetable garden is a sorrel with red veins on the pointed leaves: pretty and a good taste for soups and salads. But I am finding it does pop up everywhere, and I am having to be very ruthless with these dear little seedlings. The real problem seeders are the things that when they first appear might be something special - or maybe not - which have got going nicely before you realise you are nurturing sow thistles, which I did one year, thinking they were salsify. Now salsify, if you don't know it, has fascinating pale purple flowers marked with gold, looks as if it has stepped straight out of a mediaeval manuscript and always intrigues visitors as it appears on its upright pale green leaves between clumps of hardy geraniums and ox-eye daisies. It is actually a vegetable though I've never bothered to deal with its funny thin roots ('Life's too short to scrub salsify' - with thanks to Shirley Conran), and I just love it for these curious flowers which close up at midday, giving it the common name of 'Go-to-bed-at-noon,' and the intricate seed heads like a huge dandelion - a bit of a clue about its seeding potential there maybe?



'Ground cover' has long been recommended as a remedy for most problems not curable by whisky and hot milk, but again there is the problem that things which readily cover the ground may not know when enough is enough. A particular problem are the floppers which smother their neighbours as their leaves fully develop and under which you find lost, forlorn labels like a pathetic graveyard, and realise that the rather choice treasures have been buried under more enthusiastic neighbours. One ground cover that I have found very effective, however, is the smaller forms of comfrey. They spread and cover space well, in fact too well to use where there are herbaceous plants, but around shrubs or on difficult banks or steep areas it has a lot of advantages. It is easy to remove if you need to curb it, has attractive flowers early in the year and is a wonderful nectar source for early bees - I have a steep bank behind a workshop where it is a real delight to see and hear the bumble bees at work as early as late March. This is a space you only see when you hang out the washing and which was horrible when it was just grass - and nettles and docks. When the comfrey gets a bit tatty around the end of June I just strim it, put the strimmings on the compost heap, and up comes a whole lot of fresh new growth along the bank.

Other people will have their own list of thugs and rogues. A lot does depend on the soil: in our previous garden fennel seeded so prolifically that you needed a machete to get along one path. In my present garden I struggle to keep it going at all. Do you have recommendations either for or against particular plants you can share with the rest of us? *Sue gardens in North Wales, and wins a gift token for my favourite article in this issue.*