



Islington Gardeners

www.islingtongardeners.org.uk

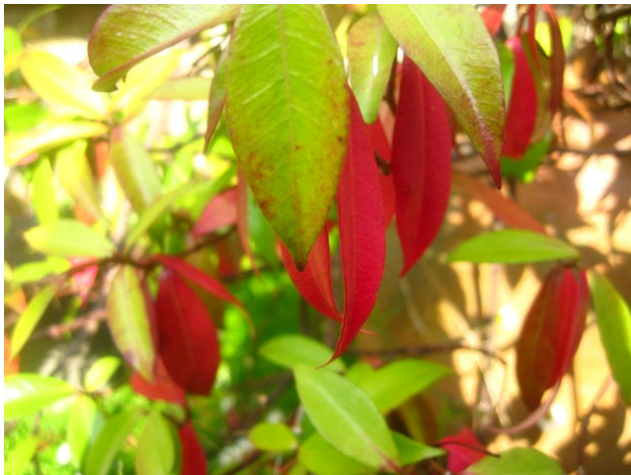
NEWSLETTER: OCTOBER – NOVEMBER 2011

Looking forward to autumn fireworks

As we move into the autumn the roses slow down, perhaps the borders begin to get a bit scruffy, and most of the perennials begin to fade, but at least we can look forward to the fireworks. Not November 5, of course, but Nature's fireworks: the autumn colour display that is such a wonderful part of the plant lover's year, even on the urban streets of Islington.

Many of Islington's cherry trees which were so pretty in the spring put on a good show of colour in the autumn, usually a mixture of red and russet brown. The leaves on the whitebeams (*Sorbus aria*) go a uniform chestnut shade, contrasting with their undersides which are still felted white. Even the London planes, the birches and the lime trees in the squares put on a show of yellows and browns. Some of the best colour on our streets come from the various mountain ashes, including the native Rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*) with its scarlet berries. There is a good display of Sorbus in Barnsbury Road next to Barnard Park, where the rich reddish brown leaves contrast so beautifully with the scarlet berries. A couple of them in the park have been leaning sideways since they were nearly uprooted on October 15 1987. There are lots too in Theberton Street, where several of the trees must be *S. hupehensis* or a similar variety, with white or pale berries, which set off the bright autumn leaves so well, and in many cases stay on the trees into the winter.

When I first saw Sorbus Joseph Rock one late October I was transfixed: the shiny rich dark red leaves contrast so well with the pale yellow berries. We bought one 25 years ago for our new garden, and it is indeed an ideal tree for a city. It is still small, perhaps 20 feet tall and about 12 feet across at the crown. It takes on brilliant autumn colour every year without fail, but we have never seen the hoped-for contrast between leaves and berries. Each year a female blackbird systematically eats every berry before the leaves turn – and if I go into the garden to remonstrate with her, she screeches at me to go away and not disturb her meal. I guess many generations of blackbirds have now been feasting on our little tree. The books tell you that the birds don't spot the yellow berries as easily as the red, well, not so here. I am glad the birds are in the garden, and that they are finding plenty to eat – but I wish they would just leave one bunch to go with the leaf colour.



Some colour comes from unexpected places. None of the books offer autumn colour as a reason for growing a weeping silver pear (*Pyrus salicifolia pendula*) but it is one of the highlights of the autumn in our garden. The long silver leaves turn a uniform yellow, and as the light fades on a November afternoon the whole tree seems to be lit up.

Another unexpected show is on a *Trachelospermum jasminoides* in a pot by the back door (pictured left). This lovely twining shrub, with its jasmine scented flowers (there are still some on it in late September) is officially evergreen, but perhaps the slight stress of being in a pot, coupled with plenty of sun against a south wall, means that it loses a few leaves in the

autumn, and before they fall they turn a brilliant red.

Sadly, there is the other side to this – some trees which are expected to give an autumn show never do so in our climate. We have a beautiful small dogwood, *Cornus kousa* “Madame Butterfly”, which reliably produces its creamy flower bracts in June, but in 20 years has never shown colour in the autumn. Apparently this is common in Britain: dogwoods need the United States climate - a hotter summer sun coupled with a sudden fall in temperature in October - for the leaves to colour brightly in the autumn. The same seems to apply to the various scarlet and red oaks – there are plenty of them around on Hampstead Heath, but I have never seen one which has turned bright scarlet or crimson, as they do in the US.

But we can rely on my husband’s bonsai trees: all the maples colour beautifully without fail, every shade of red from scarlet to deep crimson, the ginkos turn their uniform bright yellow, and the winged spindle tree, *Euonymus alata* (pictured right) turns a slightly unreal bright raspberry red. This is one of the big pluses of having a bonsai collection, you get to see all these autumn shades on what would be in some cases big forest trees, without having to go in search of them in woods and parks. Anna McKane



This is a shortened version of Anna’s original article which includes several more pictures and a very useful list of small trees and shrubs with good autumn colour which are suitable for town gardens. The full article can be found on the website www.islingtongardeners.org.uk.

London in Bloom

In case you missed the results: Islington once again (despite rather fewer hanging baskets!) once again had a very successful year in London in Bloom. Although Westminster was overall winner, Islington was a runner up and gained Gold; Angel gained Gold and was category Winner for Town Centres, the King Henry’s Walk Garden was First in the Community Gardens section and Islington residents Karyl and Charlotte Muswell came Second in the Front Gardens section.

Islington Gardeners had a special role this year in that the Islington entry was put forward by us rather than by the Council. We thought might like to read the Judges Report and have therefore reproduced it here.

“The judges were pleased to observe that despite the cutback of funding by Central Government to Local Government the standard of green spaces management and display, along with a significant amount of community engagement, was still being maintained at levels not far off those seen during LIB judging in 2010.

It was good to note the council’s ongoing support of the Islington in Bloom initiative and in particular, the Greenspace team’s positive engagement with the local community and volunteers despite the fact that council officers no longer had the resources to administer Islington’s entry into the LIB competition overall.

Picking up the baton and putting forward Islington’s entry this year was a team of volunteers led by Islington Gardeners who not only provided the judges with an excellent portfolio document to consider but also masterminded and led the judges’ tour. (Greenspace dept’s support of IG effort was appreciated)

It was clear, once again, the Islington certainly had the ‘wow’ factor with a number of its locations. The recently restored Arundel Square particularly inspired with its impressive colour block drifts of grasses and herbaceous perennials entirely suited to the magnificence of its architectural surroundings. Equally impressive was the joint venture between Islington’s Greenspace department and local residents in the ongoing provision of a delightful ‘mini park’ at Penn Road Gardens. The Council’s ‘greening the grey’ scheme continues to brighten the borough

and the seaside garden now coming to maturity alongside the wall of Penonville Prison shows how a former barren and rundown roadside strip of land can be transformed into something quite amazing.

The Islington Gardeners and Forgotten Corner Groups were evidently both committed to improving the borough's horticultural and environmental appearance and never ceased to amaze with their stunning oases of 'pocket' gardening. The Blackstock Triangle Gardeners, responsible for the local 'treepit' gardening initiative, demonstrated how the street scene can be enhanced by the intervention of the borough's residents – this idea now appearing elsewhere in the borough with the support and encouragement of the council. The team effort and community involvement at King Henry's Walk Garden continue to impress.

Increased neighbourhood allotment gardening was both impressive and productive, led by enthusiastic individuals committed to transforming unused land into growing areas to benefit local residents through the production of fruit and veg. This included the cultivation of underused back gardens under the 'Transition Towns' banner. The community garden at Forest Court was a wonderful combination of quiet restful green space and productive garden of well grown fruit and vegetables.

Wildlife conservation and biodiversity enhancement were also high on the agenda, 'The Wild Places Project' run by the Octopus Community Network and supported by the Council being a good example of this. It was a relief to learn that Gillespie Park, the well known council run Local Nature Reserve and Environmental Centre will continue to be a centre of excellence with the ongoing input of the borough and strong support of Islington residents.

It was good to see that the involvement of local business was being seen as a key element in sustaining the borough's reputation for good horticultural practice and environmental awareness. The role of the Business Improvement District and staff at the Angel showed how proactive engagement with the business community can lead to a retail and commercial area that is 'green, clean and safe', attracting the visitor and resident alike. The judges were made aware that the Greenspace section saw business partnerships as an area of expansion for the future which is to be commended.



Jennie Chamberlain & Joy Chamberlin receiving the Award for Islington

Finally, of special note, was the innovative partnership being developed between the Council and their Grounds Maintenance Contractor, Enterprise, in providing an integrated service that took account of local stakeholders and community groups, saw the need to train the gardeners and rangers of the future and above all, was determined to make sure that Islington continued to be an exemplar to others.

So, very well done and congratulations to all concerned, both in the community, business, the local authority and others giving their support.”

Wildlife and Forgotten Corners

The wildlife event of the period has been the destruction of the woodland beside the Network Rail track at Drayton Park station by NR's contractors. It took place on a Saturday, in mid July, without prior notice to the Council, and when birds' nests could still be observed from outside the area. Before and after photos can be seen on the IG website. Concerned residents led by IG members Pat Tuson and Chris Ashby complained to the Council and to

Network Rail. Greenspace and the Council Leader Catherine West contacted Network Rail, and (in contrast to the railway company's reaction when the same thing happened seven years ago), this time Network Rail have expressed contrition about the overzealous cutting, lack of advance notice. They claim lack of knowledge of the site as a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) due to extensive internal reorganisations and maintain that their contractors did carry out a nesting birds' survey on the morning of the cutting as the machinery was being unloaded on site, and saw nothing.

Everyone involved hopes that this time effective and permanent links can be set up to ensure that the two Network Rail SINC sites in the Borough (Drayton Park and Isledon Road) can be managed in an intelligent manner to support biodiversity as well as fulfilling all safety requirements. Railway lands are particularly useful for species which require some seclusion from people. Distressing though the Drayton Park railside cutting operation has been, hopefully a silver lining can be found in better future biodiversity management, and co-operation between Network Rail and Greenspace/local residents. In addition, Greenspace staff are planning to build better contacts with the other major track operator in the Borough, Transport for London.

Bats. There are a surprising number of bats in the Borough, and our last Biodiversity Officer Leanne Brisland reported that many of the bat boxes installed on trees around the Borough showed signs of occupation when inspected. If you would like to attract bats to your garden, you should plant for insects, and there is a good guide to gardening for Bats here www.bats.org.uk/publications_detail.php/231/encouraging_bats. The RHS also has a list, which includes dandelions and other native wildflowers: go to www.rhs.org.uk and enter 'Plants for Bats in the search box.

Insect Hotels. I have just built a Hotel Splendide for insects in a garden in the country, and it looks like this:



As well as providing homes for every sort of creepy crawlly and flying insect, the basement is apparently an ideal refuge for frogs and toads, and it is of course, a fine feature and talking point in the garden. The basic structure is wooden pallets of about thirty inches square. Five or six reach a convenient and stable height. Pallets can be obtained free from a friendly industrial user, although a car is needed to move them around. Other ingredients are roofing felt/plastic cover, roof tiles (optional), bricks with holes in them, short logs with

holes drilled in them, bamboo and other tubes, sawdust, straw, misc bits of wood, plants if wanted.... I am hoping that the Wildlife Gardening Group will want to put up another in a suitable place in the Borough.

The Friends of Petherton Road, N5, have managed to get several patches of long grass and wildflowers established in the Petherton Green, containing red clover and mallows, amongst the yellows:

And finally, Forgotten Corners: after its makeover orchestrated by Priscilla Benny this spring, the Rosemary Triangle, Baring Street (outside the Rosemary Branch pub and theatre) N1, is looking very attractive: Sue Lees

French Diary

After nearly four months of virtual drought from March to July, we arrived at Les Penots to almost two solid weeks of rain and cool temperatures. No use complaining about this since both garden and lawns were in desperate need of it.

Plants which enjoy dry warmth were doing best, especially the lavender which I cut, dried and brought back to London. Perovskia and gaura, planted in April, survived the dry weather and were flourishing. Many of the roses were, unsurprisingly, already over, though some were still in bloom. A disappointment was the hibiscus. They normally grow well here, but were affected this time by a nasty unidentified red flying insect with black spots which was eating the flower buds, so fewer flowers this year. We also missed some of the gladioli flowers since the guardian who looks after the place in our absence – and is no great gardener – had cut the stems down before they had flowered. Pity; these normally do very well here. I am not sure what kinds we have but they must be the hardy ones as the huge tender hybrids would not survive our winter.

The fruit harvest, as in the UK, was heavy and started early. Apples, peaches and figs were already ripening by mid August and heavy rain brought down two branches of the peach tree due to the weight of the fruit. Towards the end of August we made 10 pots of delicious fig jam from our large tree and that of some from friends nearby. We were also able to pick walnuts in mid September just prior to our return. Normally these are not ready to be picked until October. Also ahead of themselves were the brilliant yellow autumn crocuses, blooming in mid August instead of their normal early to mid September.

Although I have not been making an organised count, I do get the feeling that each summer I am seeing fewer birds of some species like Stonechats, Black Redstarts and Warblers. There is no evident reason for this as our trees have grown and there is no reduction of hedgerows or their type of environment nearby. There were also fewer Crested Tits in the pines near us since those trees suffered badly in the drought; many trees have died and others have little growth. More common birds this year include Treecreepers, Spotted Flycatchers and Long Tail Tits which continue to circle our garden in the early evening. A new bird sighting for me was Dartford Warbler, spotted 3 times. This is a most elusive tiny bird, though once seen its straight long tail and bushy head make it quite easy to identify. I now recognise his call and will look for him again next year in the prickly inhospitable gorse which is his territory. Another first sighting was some Linnets which have the most beautiful crimson head and chest and a Honey Buzzard (which is paler than our common buzzards) flew over a few times. One of our visitors told us they had seen a Griffon Vulture down in the Pyrenees prior to joining us.

We getting better at identifying butterflies. Have seen Comma, Meadow Brown, Scarce Swallowtail, White Admiral and Woodland Grayling. This last is a large dark butterfly with strong white markings and is quite common in Perigord. Our favourite was a Purple Emperor which flew around us late one afternoon and settled on my husband's chest and hand. It is a beautiful dark butterfly with a deep purple sheen. Amazingly, most disappear from the area at the beginning of September. As sadly must we for our return to London. Diane Austin

A Little of What You Fancy?

On glancing out of a front window, I will occasionally spot someone taking a few cuttings from the ceratostigma willmotiana (Hardy Plumbago) in my front garden which, with its mass of tiny bright blue flowers, is a stunning plant at this time of year. I don't mind at all, although if they did knock on the door and ask, I would advise them that they would have a much better chance of getting a plant going if they either took their cuttings earlier in the year before it had started to flower or came along in the winter and gathered some seeds. It is a large and flourishing bush and I lose nothing at all from a few bits being broken off – especially as I am going to prune it almost to ground level in the spring.

I have to confess that I am not an innocent in this game myself. I have collected passion flower and perennial

sweet pea seeds over garden walls, along with various cuttings of santolina, eleagnus, hardy fuchsia, lonicera fragrantissima and a pink flowered phlomis, to mention just a few. An important criterion is always not to damage the plant, so I hope the owners would take the same view as I do with the ceratostigma – pictured below. I would not take material from something struggling or newly planted and I had every sympathy with a NGS garden opener who said he had had to fence off an unusual buddleia because its growth was being inhibited by the removal of too many “unlicensed” cuttings.



Maybe the habit comes down in the family. I have in my garden a plant given to me by my mother which she always referred to as “Down Alice”. The name came from the way she had obtained it on a long ago WI trip to a garden somewhere near Bristol. She saw the plant and mentioned to her two companions that it was something she would like to grow. They then went into what was obviously a much practiced routine where one looked carefully around to ensure they were not being observed and, having ascertained this was so, hissed “Down Alice” and the other bent quickly and removed a small offset of the plant. It was and is stachys lanata (Lamb’s Ears), tough, attractive and not at all rare. From that offset after it had settled in and spread, many more plants have been propagated. I don’t have any in my front garden, but if I did, I doubt I would notice the removal of a small piece.

Taking cuttings or seeds or offsets is one thing. Taking whole plants is quite another. I would take quite a different view if someone came along with a fork or spade and dug up and carried away the ceratostigma. Probably not much chance of this because it requires forethought and equipment and, unless it was done in the middle of the night, they would be unlikely not to be seen and challenged either by me or a neighbour.

But Forgotten Corners, unless they are behind a fence, can be at risk and most of us who tend them have lost plants to theft as well as the “usual” trampling feet (often of workmen who think a bit of garden is a handy place to dump building materials). The less overlooked the site, the more vulnerable and I was incandescent last autumn when someone systematically dug up and removed practically all the shrubs I had put into a corner at the back of St Paul’s Shrubbery. Whoever it was seemed to have a taste for anything with coloured or variegated leaves. There was nothing particularly valuable or unusual there and they could all have been bought quite readily and cheaply at a garden centre. What was galling was that all had been raised by me from cuttings or seed (none in this instance from over a wall!) and represented rather more of my past effort than just putting them in. Maybe the thief thought they had been planted by the Council and were fair game for this reason – even though public ownership should not be an invitation to take plants away. An Enterprise officer whom I discussed the theft with said he was fairly relaxed about plants being taken away since he assumed they would be cared for in some garden. He just hated to see things pulled up and left to die. Probably an understandable viewpoint if you didn’t buy or raise the plants yourself and had been paid for the time spent putting them in.

The consequence of the theft was that I was reluctant to replace the plants. I determined that there would be no more shrubs there and I would just sow seed or put in a few spare bits of particularly rampant herbaceous perennials. In practice, I never got round to doing anything because I was immobilised by an accident from October until mid spring when drought made planting impracticable and, although some of the herbaceous part of my original planting has survived, most of the patch is now weeds again so the thieves stole not just some shrubs but a garden. Alison.

Next Newsletter – early January 2012 – last date for copy 20th December to Alison Barlow, 1 Bingham Street N1 2QQ or alisonbarlow47@aol.com