



Campanula lactiflora and *Echinops exaltatus*
standing proud during the 2022 heatwave

Nature's Way to a No Watering Garden

Carol Bruce

The pressures of climate change were still on the distant horizon when I started the garden at Old Bladbean Stud in 2003, but childhood memories of hosepipe bans in the 1980s had already convinced me that the problem for gardeners was water dependence rather than water availability. Nudged by alarming articles in *The New Scientist*, I decided that to help my garden survive and thrive without watering in the future I should embrace nature's tried and tested method of adapting to environmental challenges by somehow incorporating natural selection through survival of the fittest into the garden's design and maintenance.

At the same time, I already had a clear idea of how I wanted the garden to look, and strong geometry together with restricted colour schemes were key to the whole project. The long lines of sight, the tightly structured layout of paths, clipped box balls and careful attention to colour schemes would make sure that the garden could embrace its wild side but still look thoughtful and deliberate in order to get the best of both worlds.

Roses, shrubs and trees were chosen with drought tolerance in mind, but rather than source and plant named varieties of perennials, I laid out the new beds with large numbers of seed-raised perennial species with the aim of encouraging a dense under-story of genetically diverse self-sowing plant populations - the plant equivalent of a wildlife park as opposed to a zoo. Named varieties are genetic clones of each other and however beautiful and well suited to static conditions they may be, I needed to liberate my plants' genetic diversity to give them the best possible chance of throwing out winners in the challenging conditions to come. I needed to lower the drawbridge, expose my plants to the full force of the elements and let mother nature make the selections for me.



Geranium pratense var *pratense* f *albiflorum* and *Allium cristophii* have colonised a sunny corner in the rose garden

I started with thorough research to identify a group of perennial species that would be compatible with each other and my site, and that had suitable flowering times and flower colours, then I grew large numbers of seedlings in module trays and planted them out in drifts where they were most likely to thrive. This first generation were the only ones ever to be watered and once established they were left to fend for themselves. Initial losses were high as was expected and after about three years, seedlings from the survivors began to naturalize and mingle, then colonise new areas where conditions were right for them. The real magic began after eight years with a marked increase in diversity between individual seedlings in terms of flower colour, flowering time, height, and heat and drought tolerance. All the while, any plant not suited to the here and now died out along the way, and available space was quickly colonized by something else. The result is a dense and dynamic flowery tapestry full of variety and novelty that has not been watered for twenty years.

Seed for a wide range of perennial species is available through mail order catalogues and most of mine came from *Chiltern Seeds*. Some I grew from more than one seed source to increase genetic diversity, but given the resulting flurry of invention, I think one source would have been enough. Ten or more different species seems best to avoid the end result looking monotonous, with a range of



Phuopsis stylosa meanders around neighbours and up into the roses, covering everything in pretty pink pompoms

pratense var *pratense* f *albiflorum*, *Chamaenerion angustifolium* 'Album' and *Teucrium scorodonia*; not native but naturalised is *Centranthus ruber* 'Albus'.

heights, growth habits and flowering times, and they must be chosen to match the conditions of the site, as once planted they will be on their own. In the rose garden here I used *Alchemilla mollis*, *Salvia verticillata*, *Phuopsis stylosa*, *Eryngium eburneum*, *Eryngium giganteum*, *Verbascum chaixii* 'Album', *Saponaria officinalis*, *Astrantia major*, *Campanula lactiflora*, *Campanula persicifolia*, *Echinops ritro*, *Echinops sphaerocephalus*, *Valeriana officinalis*, and *Allium cristophii*.

I also included native wild flowers, some grown from a seed pod collected on a local walk, in the knowledge that they were already adapted to local conditions, and I am particularly fond of the white forms of native wild flowers as they always add a touch of elegance to the garden. Wild flowers growing here include *Digitalis purpurea* f *albiflora*, *Leucanthemum vulgare*, *Knautia arvensis*, *Succisa pratensis*, *Geranium*

The implications of this approach for the gardener are far-reaching – watering, dead-heading, thinning, fertilising, dividing, and protection from the weather are all unnecessary interference. Everything is allowed to set seed, and, in November, the old stems are cut down and left where they fall to rot down over winter, returning all the organic matter and seed heads to the soil. The only traditional maintenance jobs are regular weeding through the growing season and raking the soil surface in spring, meaning one gardener can happily maintain a much larger area.

I created the gardens here on waste ground so I was working with a blank slate, but this approach could easily be overlaid on existing planting. The most important thing is to establish natural growing conditions with a commitment to no watering, fertilizing, or protection, and then to add seed-raised perennials in gaps or weaving around existing plants, and once established, allow them to set seed and self sow.

Gardening this way requires a change of mindset to favour the health of the system over the individual, and it takes a while to adjust to the idea that a garden plant has to survive and thrive unaided and then gains the right to pass on its genes; but adapting to a new balance of power in the garden mimics the change in our relationship with the planet. What we do in the garden will be contained by nature one way or another, so it makes sense to embrace the forces of nature rather than to fight them in a losing battle. There is a peace that comes from working within nature's constraints, a sense of elemental rightness that comes from accepting diversity, chance and loss as part of life; and letting go of the burden of trying to keep everything alive soon turns into joy for the plants' triumphs rather than your own. And importantly, you never need to water your garden, ever again!



Swarms of *Eryngium giganteum* stitch the long views together in high summer with striking silver bracts

Carol Bruce created the gardens at Old Bladbean Stud in Kent on two acres of rough ground between 2003 and 2012, and now maintains them single-handed. She spends her evenings making nature-inspired bead jewellery (reweavingtherainbow.etsy.com) and opens the gardens through the NGS and to groups by arrangement (www.oldbladbeanstud.co.uk).

You can follow the gardens through the seasons on Facebook (search for Old Bladbean Stud).

Small quantities of seed collected from self-sowing perennial species around the garden are available for sale from www.oldbladbeanstud.co.uk