

View from The Southwood Garden August Extra 2018

It's amazing what you see when you look ...



The drought which started at the end of May, broke on July 27th. I remember the day because I had been longing for it for so long. The second time it rained was on August 11th. Then we had another downpour on the 18th. For a gardener it has been a trying three months - watering adds to your work schedule and plants are unforgiving if you neglect them. One way to gain agency during this period was to use the opportunity to observe which plants could tolerate the conditions and which ones couldn't. And it wasn't just the lack of water that affected plants but the glare of the sun's rays made worse by the fact that the large plane trees which surround our site, had been pruned this year.

Shade – we constantly bemoan it. A shady garden is a disappointment, frustrating our desire for light and colour. But shade came into its own this summer, shade gave us relief, protected us, revived our motivation. And when it came to the plants, it did the same for them too. Even those patches of grass, shaded by the benches, grew faster and greener when the rain returned.

Top performers

I never thought the **Lilium 'Muscadet'** – a freebie which I planted at the bottom of the Rectory steps and which flowered in July, would be so drought tolerant. In fact both types of lilies I have grown this year – Asian and Oriental, have performed very well.



The **white dead nettle** (*Lamium album*) brought back from a friend's garden in Suffolk 2 years ago has taken to the Southwood Garden like ducks to our fountain. It has prospered best in a cooler spot at the far end of the garden, sheltered by a box and a yew and the neighbouring buildings. Having been cut back two times this season it is on its third flush of flowers. Loved by bees, it mingles well with epimedium and acts as a bridge between the native and cultivated species in our garden.



Flowering at the start of the summer **Astrantia major 'Roma'** kept its stems upright and foliage fresh. A couple of new flowering stems have popped up this month. Maybe if I had dead headed in June we would have had more. Bees love swaths of nectar rich flowers so I will harvest its seed heads and sow some directly and some in pots with the hope of drifts of them next year. Interestingly astrantia likes heavy damp soil, the opposite to ours.

THE fern for dry hot weather has been **Polystichum setiferum Divisilobum Group 'Herrenhausen'**. We have it in the bed next to the railings along Piccadilly. This is the driest bed on the site with no irrigation other than the occasional watering can or two emptied over it. Its leaves are still fresh and show no sign of burn or collapse.

Epimedium x versicolor 'Sulphureum' has also weathered the drought well. When I first arrived at St James's this tough perennial was looking its worse - its leaves tatty and dull. This was in August 2013. That winter I dug a lot of it up. How ignorant the gardener who clears plants from a garden they do not know! The following spring it unfolded its delicate yellow flowers and now, even after the hottest of summers, it provides fresh ground cover, reducing evaporation of what moisture there is left in the soil and providing cover for wildlife.



It's been a good year for the roses. As you walk through London and elsewhere, they are blooming. At St James's, their performance has been more restrained. A few flowers but better pest resistance than last year and no signs of wilting. The thunderstorms in late spring washed off the first wave of aphids. Then the heat, coupled with a minimal feeding regime, resulted in harder shoots which were more difficult for the aphids to bite into. We have five roses: Rosa 'Graham Thomas' – in the bed along Piccadilly; R. 'Shropshire Lad' – climbing through the ornamental cherry tree) and R. 'Erfurt', 'Wild Edric' and R. 'Francis E. Lester' in the narrow bed along Jermyn Street. They have been chosen for their tolerance of dry shade as well as their scent and bee-friendliness and were planted between 1 and 4 years ago. The lack of flowers is probably because despite tolerating a bit of shade, they would be happier in more sun AND because they can take many years to get going.

Strugglers in the heat

The plants which suffered displayed symptoms such as scorched and wilted leaves and a lack of new growth. Some showed signs of chlorosis whereby the leaves start yellowing. This is caused by the fact the plant can't absorb the necessary nutrients in the soil because the soil is dry. I am in the process of reviewing how we can improve the drought resilience of our garden bearing in mind that weather conditions change and can throw up new and unexpected challenges.



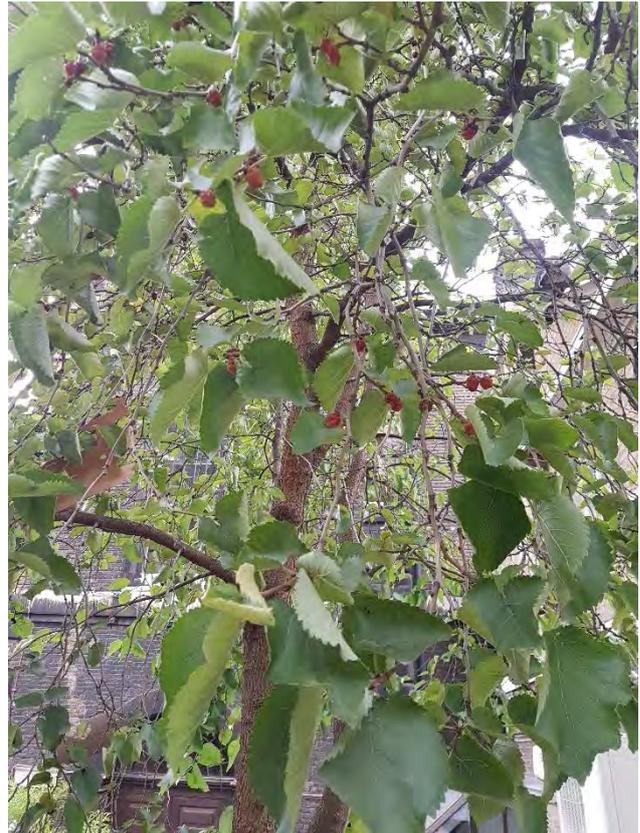
By the beginning of July **the grass was brown**. The soil was compacted from the increased footfall of visitors seeking relief in a green space in the middle of a hot city. I was worried. I looked for advice from lawncare websites. They said if when you pulled on a tuft of grass and it came away in your hand, it was dead, if not it was still alive. I tried this and the grass stayed put. I rang up our turf suppliers. When asked what I should do – water it, rope it off to visitors? they reassured me that it wasn't dead but dormant. They said that if we wanted it green again we would need to water it daily then keep up that regime until the drought broke. That wasn't feasible so I left it, only occasionally mowing it to Hoover up the plane tree bark that kept springing off the trees and covering it. Three bouts of rain have turned it green again.

The **Mulberry tree** has not liked the heat at all. It's normally large leaves are half the size and slightly curled, the fruit less abundant. Two other *Morus nigra* I visited in August in Middle Temple, London, showed no signs of heat stress. Maybe the retaining wall along one side of its bed, meant the soil dried out that much more around our mulberry.

A trio of **Fuchsia magellanica var. gracilis 'Versicolor'** at the end of the bed along Jermyn Street seemed frozen by the heat - they didn't grow but didn't die either. In fact they have struggled in this location for over 4 years although not as badly as this year, so it may be time to say farewell.

The **hydrangeas**, *Hydrangea paniculata* 'Limelight' and *H. paniculata* 'Bombshell' (the former planted 4 years ago and the other 1 and half years ago) all drooped severely when dry, although recovering quickly when watered. They were chosen as a nod to the original 1950s'

Southwood Garden planting scheme as well as being pollinator friendly. I am hoping, if they can weather this summer, they will become more resilient. Their pale green flowers look beautiful against the purple foliage of *Physocarpus opulifolius* 'Diablo.'



The plants which **suffered most were those newly planted**. You can see these strugglers in the narrow bed at the top of the second set of steps. Exposed to the highest levels of sunlight and with the greatest area of bare soil around them, these ferns, perennials and shrubs took the brunt of the weather. They looked parched and ragged throughout most of the season until I soaked them for several days and then the rain returned. Most of these - *Salvia microphylla* 'Lutea Cerise Form', *Crocsmia* 'Star of the East', *Aster divericatus*, *Nepeta racemose* 'Walkers Low', *Anemone x hybrida* 'September Charm', *Escallonia* 'Golden Carpet' and *Brunnera microphylla* 'Jack Frost', will recover and do well. But I'm not so sure about the *Polystichum tsus-simense* and *Astelia nervosa* 'Westland'.