



BULB LOG 33 15th August 2012



Cirsium vulgare



Most mornings I walk Lily, our wee dog, along a back lane - it is one of our favourite walks where she likes keeping up with the odours as I ponder the world as I take in the decaying character of some garages and weeds.

There I have been watching this very fine thistle, *Cirsium vulgare*, just starting to come into bloom which as a proud Scot and without entering into the long running debate as to exactly which of the thistles is represented in the coat of arms etc is symbolic of our nation. To my horror the next day some uncaring lorry driver had completely ploughed up the entire verge destroying all the herbage including my lovely thistle. I dare say he thought nothing of driving off the track and over a mass of what he saw as simply weeds.

I checked the dictionary definition of weeds – “A plant considered undesirable, unattractive, or troublesome, especially one growing where it is not wanted, as in a garden.”



Senecio jacobaea –‘Ragwort’: poisonous to livestock!



Alchemilla mollis

There are so many plants that have naturalised growing along this lane I could write a book.

Every day for the last few weeks I have had a feed from the wild raspberries that crop beautifully without ever being pruned or tied up into neat rows as we are told to do in our gardens.

This lovely Rubus must be some sort of hybrid I expect- it has lovely leaves and flowers with a crop of berries following in a month's time.

While I do use the term ‘weed’ on occasion I much prefer to call these plants ‘wild flowers’. They may be genuine natives or escapees from gardens where they were at some time introduced as attractive plants. Senecio jacobaea is a beautiful plant and who would not enjoy something so free flowering as this in their garden? The same can be said of Alchemilla mollis on the left also very decorative so why are these plants, even non-harmful ones, so disliked by most gardeners and farmers? It is because if it is left to nature they seed around all too freely. The nerve of a plant: to propagate itself in this way while gardeners often struggle to keep alive some rarity that is not nearly so decorative!



Rubus



Front drive

I have always had a very relaxed attitude to allowing 'weeds' to grow in the garden and if you follow that doctrine that 'a weed is just a plant in the wrong place' then it is only in the wrong place in our garden when we decide. By some definitions our front drive is populated by what other gardeners might call weeds.





Actaea rubra and Hypericum



Among others, we introduced *Geranium sanguineum* into the gravelled areas by scattering seeds but lots, like the *Hypericum*, have just appeared there seed blown in by the wind or dropped in by a bird in the case of the *Actaea*.

When these free plants seed themselves in we have a choice - to let them grow or weed them out.

As well as seeds that blow in we allow a lot of the plants in our garden to shed their seed and naturalise so for this reason any weeding is done by hand with the simple rule that you have to be able to identify the seedling before you pull it out.

The grey/green needles of a dwarf form of *Pinus strobus* make a very attractive background for another *Hypericum* - see below.



Yet more 'weeds' here with the South American fern, *Blechnum penna-marina*, creeping between the paving slabs out competing a tiny *Oxalis* while Bowles' Golden Grass holds its own ground. Beyond that a first year *Digitalis* seedling, that being a biennial will flower next year, sits beside *Pseudofumaria alba* - all have self seeded.



'Weeds' typically found on waste ground and field edges are the *Linaria*, left, and *Achillea*, right, both provide flowering interest while the bulbs rest underground. Both these plants are easily controlled and removed if they seed into the wrong place plus it is very easy to remove the flowers as they fade and simply not allow them to seed around.

Ferns of all sorts appear around the garden and depending where they put themselves we can choose to leave or remove them. The one pictured below is growing at the edge of the path and due to the extremely wet summer we are experiencing this year has grown much larger than usual. If it were to grow this size every year we would remove it but we will excuse it and reassess it next year - we can always cut the fronds back.





This is one of the fish box troughs where we grow *Corydalis cashmeriana*. Once it has flowered in the spring and as summer advances the leaves start to die down, then in late summer, when moisture is abundant another flush of leaves appear. To get the best out of *Corydalis cashmeriana* it likes regular lifting, dividing and replanting into fresh humus rich compost and the best time to do this is in this summer dormant period. You can just make out the blue/green corydalis leaves appearing early this year because of the cool moist conditions. Meanwhile plenty of other plants have taken the opportunity to seed into the trough: lots of *Aquilegia* and parsley which is handy for the kitchen.



Another plant that self seeds is this *Sedum spurium* which again adds colour to this narrow hot bulb bed.



A small yellow Oxalis that we introduced over thirty years ago still appears every summer and while we do sometimes remove it or at least thin it out we are happy to leave in this raised bed it as it does no harm to the alpines and in some cases it helps by shading the leaves and cushions preventing them from scorching - if and when we do get strong sunshine.



Oxalis magellanica

Years ago we actually bought Oxalis magellanica seduced as others have been by the charms of this tiny cushion like plant covered in white flowers – I saw some 8cm pots of it recently in a garden centre where I have no doubt it will sell itself and fly off the benches. Never did we realise the ability of this wee beauty not only to self seed but also to spread by underground runners. It can be quite a thug and can unlike the more delicate leaved Oxalis shown earlier shade out and kill off some small plants - we have seen it damage cushion-forming alpines and very dwarf Rhododendrons. However it is a nice addition in the gravel path where it appears in midsummer flowers for around a month and then disappears back underground for the rest of the year.



Two more self seeders that bring colour over a very long period are **Pseudofumaria alba**, above and **lutea** below.



Pseudofumaria lutea



Corydalis species

The seed of this unknown (to us) Corydalis species was collected in the Himalaya by Alastair McKelvie a goodly number of years ago. The original few plants we raised from that introduction have since increased as it seeds itself gently around.

Perhaps it is the lovely ferny foliage that is the most attractive feature of this plant as the individual yellow flowers are quite small plus the flowers spikes tend to be partly hidden by these leaves.

However for those observant enough to explore for the flowers they will be rewarded by their delicate beauty.

While it gently seeds around I would not describe it as a nuisance - in fact it is a wonderful addition to the woodland garden.



Pond

The pond is very overgrown with 'weeds' the mass of tiny leaves of Duckweed covers the surface hiding the water completely while the larger leaves of bog bean and water hawthorn scramble up from the water surface flowering freely as they go. We also have water lilies but as the pond is around a metre deep and in shade most of the day it never gets warm enough to encourage much in the way of flowers.



Around the pond are a number of rather neglected bonsai pots that have attracted their own share of 'weeds'.

Self seeded here you can see a Rhododendron and a number of strawberry plants.

We allow a number of strawberries to grow around the garden mostly at the edges of the paths and while these seedlings do not produce the bumper sized berries of the selected cultivars they do provide us with a refreshing snack of tangy sweet berries often with better flavour than some of the cultivars.



Originally we thought we would keep the gravel areas plant free but that lasted about six months before plant seedlings started to appear and now the gravel is a highly productive area providing masses of self seeded *Meconopsis*, *Primulas*, etc. In the small area shown above you can see self seeded *Rhododendron*, *Aquilegia* and *Paeonia lutea*. Look closer below and you can add *Roscoea*, *Narcissus* and *Oxalis magellanica* makes another appearance.





Tropaeolum speciosum

Another 'weed' in our garden is *Tropaeolum speciosum* which spreads both underground and by seed. Plenty gardeners would love to be able to grow this beautiful climber and cannot get it established while others have it and cannot get rid of it – there seems to be no in between stage. It is most beautiful climbing up through a hedge or conifer where it does no harm but it will quickly kill off many a dwarf shrub in a few weeks if it takes hold.



Allium wallichii seeds around in the gravel path along with *Meconopsis* and *Primula*. When they get too big or are in the way we lift and move them to a more suitable place or take them to a plant sale.



This bed is full of *Dactylorhiza* and *Meconopsis* all of which self seeded and were moved here. If we did not identify and hand weed our garden we would miss out on all these free plants. The garden hoe and herbicides are strictly not allowed.



Similarly most of the plants providing seasonal interest in this bulb bed have been moved from other areas where they seeded into the wrong place.



Regular readers will know of my pet Dandelion which I carefully tend in a prime spot of a raised bed. Considered by most to be a weed as are many of the plants that I have illustrated above – it is however there not just for its beauty but to remind us not to become plant snobs only interested in the rare, the new or the difficult but to enjoy each and every one of nature’s flowers for its own worth .

To look back to the dictionary definition

“**A plant considered undesirable**” – surely a question of personal taste.

“**unattractive**” – who could say that my dandelion flowers are not beautiful.

“**or troublesome**” – most can be controlled with a little effort.

“**especially one growing where it is not wanted, as in a garden**” – well, move it.

I have come to the conclusion that weeds are more an attitude of mind so one person’s weed could be another person’s desire.

I wonder if the lorry driver that destroyed my lovely thistle would have driven so callously over a bed of roses as he did over a beautiful verge of ‘weeds’?