

In My Garden, August

Fairest of the Months!
Ripe summer's queen
The hey-day of the year
With ropes that gleam with sunny sheen
Sweet August doth appear.

R. Coombe Miller

Late summer is one of the most floriferous times of the year in my garden. I grow lots of late flowering perennials. This season is special to me, and I want to have as much colour as possible before another growing season passes by. Suddenly we will notice it is dark at half past eight; the hour glass definitely has more sand in the bottom than in the top now.

Just as the first snowdrop heralds not quite the end of winter but the starting of spring so the first cyclamen flowers, along with spiders' webs on the lawn, announce not quite the end of summer but the beginning of autumn. Cyclamen hederifolium comes in fuschia pink and a beautiful pure white form, growing almost anywhere but thriving best in leafy soil with some degree of shade.

This summer we have had hardly any more than four consecutive days of sunny weather before yet another deluge drenches the soil initiating the armies of fat brown slugs to descend like the Goths upon the garden devouring all in their wake. This, along with the short growing season in the valley, is why I gave up bothering to grow vegetables. Instead this spring I planted rose bushes for cut flowers in what had been the vegetable garden. These and almost all the other trees and shrubs have enjoyed this season's erratic weather. Already I can fill a vase twice a week with blooms. Next year I hope to have armfuls to give away to friends.

I have had one of the best displays ever from tobacco plants, *Nicotiana*. Planted in half barrels at the front of my cottage they are tall and bushy, and have been covered in flowers since June. Their gorgeously sweet fragrance drifts in through any open door or window during the evening and night. Bought locally this year (and I must say testament that locally grown plants often do better than imported ones) from a lady who raises a variety of bedding plants at Langham, they have done much better than the more expensive plants I had been buying from garden centres in previous years, whose stunted growth and practically scentless flowers are quite pathetic in comparison.

Verbena bonariensis is tall, thin, with angular linear growths that terminate with a little cluster of light purple flowers, a perfect platform for any passing butterfly to land upon. They will continue flowering and flowering right into October, when a decent frost will finish them off. Nearby phlox in mauve and pink share a bed with *Strobilanthes attenuate*, the bear's paw, whose rich purple hooded flowers have a slightly sinister look when viewed close up. Adjacent to this grows a blue hyssop and a pink form; not exactly show stoppers but beloved by bees, butterflies and a host of other insects.

Walking along the lane one morning I saw a brimstone butterfly newly minted, hanging by its pupa on a leaf of the alder buckthorn, the plant it fed on as a caterpillar. These butterflies hibernate in October, then emerge again in spring to lay their eggs. Incidentally wood from alder buckthorn, *Frangula alnus*, is reputed to make the best charcoal for gunpowder production. Other butterflies visit the garden too – peacocks, commas, red admirals and the beautiful silver washed fritillary. The caterpillars of these strong flying leopard-like butterflies feed on violets.

The birds hardly sing at all in August. They have mostly finished raising their broods and are now moulting. They are preoccupied on gorging the natural glut of fruits, seeds and insects fattening themselves up for the leaner times to come in winter. We too enjoy the abundance at this time of year. Every day I pick blackberries, and greengages ripen almost too fast to eat.