

In My Garden - May

"We had the best display of flowers yet seen – wallflowers in profusion, Columbines, phlox, & as we went huge scarlet poppies with purple stains in them. The peonies even about to burst. There was a nest of blackbirds against the wall I lay with the window open listening to a nightingale, which beginning in the distance came very near to the garden. Fishes splashed in the pond. May in England is all they say – so teeming, amorous, & creative."

VIRGINIA WOOLF, 28/5/18

My garden is in a cold frost pocket and consequently is slow to get going until May, when everything seems to suddenly burst into life. For us as gardeners it is the busiest month; lawns are growing like mad, weeds too, seeds need sowing, spring bedding is cleared away whilst summer flowers are planted out. May is such an exciting, expectant month. In the animal kingdom everything seems to be either fornicating or procreating, or on the verge of doing so. The birds too sing really early now, and in such a boisterous manner that at half-past four it is as noisy as central London!

There are Roe deer living in the valley. A doe usually manages to raise a couple of fawns in the derelict fields around the old mill whilst a young buck, possibly her husband, roams over a wider area including my garden. It is at this time of year that the buck's new antlers grow, soft at first, covered in downy felt. It is this felt that irritates them and they rub it off against trees and bushes. They must be especially attracted to pine trees as during the past few weeks two particularly precious trees have been damaged - one too seriously and it will have to be removed. Sad as this is (I still mourn the beautiful tall Mexican pine it replaced, a victim of the severe temperatures of 2010) it creates an exciting opportunity to plant something new.

Rubus spectabilis began to open its flowers at the start of last month, but is rather tardy at first. It is not really until May that it truly gets into its stride and it will continue on until June. Their native lands are the northern parts of America right up to Alaska, where they are known as the salmon berry because of the pinkish-orange colour of the fruits and because the indigenous people of these parts ate the fruits with salmon. The flowers are magenta and about two inches across. I grow the variety "Olympic", which has very double flowers with many petals like an old rose. Its long flowering period alone earns it a place in my garden, otherwise the untidy, gawky growth habit, particularly in winter, gives it quite an un-special manner.

May is Lilac time and I grow two species in my garden. *Syringia microphylla* "Superba" has small leaves on dainty thin stems and grows slowly into a small rounded bush, five feet high after 25 years. The light mauve flowers are highly scented and after the main flush this month it manages another around September. The other lilac I grow is *Syringia reflexa*. It has erect growing branches that weep over in a shapely manner and loose shaggy panicles of rose-purple flowers with of course that same heady perfume. Naturally I adore the fragrance and the bluish-mauve and white and purples of the common lilac, but it is another gawky grower. After an all too fleeting display what are you left with? A rather untidy straggly plant, neither bush nor tree, covered in very prominent dead flower heads, especially sordid in winter. Therefore I enjoy it in *your* garden during May, but it is not one for me.

Another scented plant so typical of this Month is lily of the valley. Often slow to start, they like leafy soil with a degree of shade, and once established are vigorous

and often difficult to get rid of. I grow the variety "Rosea" that has delicate pale pink flowers instead of the usual pure white.

The hedgerows are at their best this month, so many flowers in shades of pink and yellow and white like pretty summer dresses. Walk along any of our Devon lanes on a sunny May morning and I doubt there is anywhere in the world more beautiful, springtime must be everyone's favourite season.

ANDREW THE GARDENER