



The invincibles of the garden

Roddy's got the answer to every gardener's prayer – the species of plant that are impossible to kill!

INDOOR plants give a great deal of pleasure in the depths of winter, but it is not always much fun for them. This is the time when most meet their maker, the main reason for their demise, some 90 per cent of the poor blighters, due to being overwatered. Longing for the sort of conditions they are used to in their country of origin where they are gently fanned by warm and humid breezes, they find themselves plonked into a room subjected to cold draughts and poor light levels and, as in so many cases, hideously tortured by desiccating heating appliances. The general rule of thumb at this time of the year is to go gently on the watering, do not expose plants to direct sunlight and keep your plants on the cool side.

There is, however, one popular plant that flowers so obligingly now, and that is the Indian Azalea (*A. indica*) that always makes a popular Christmas present. By the end of January many of them have been given an undignified dustbin funeral, and that is not only sad and unnecessary but also a terrific waste. I have kept the same azalea plant for years and years with little trouble. The older the plant the more graceful their shape becomes and you are rewarded with profuse flowering so long as you stick to a few simple rules.

The Indian Azalea is a plant that loves the cool, and unlike practically all other so-called 'house' plants, loves having a wet root system at all times. So, if you have a boiling hot sitting room take it out to somewhere cool, even outside in mild periods, as much as you can. This is an acid-lover, therefore it should be watered with water from the butt (not from alkaline tap water) and re-potted in the spring using ericaceous compost when it will also appreciate a good feed. It will love to spend the whole summer outside in a damp shaded corner.

I once had an impossibly inhospitable part of an ex-garden where the conditions were so appalling that I didn't think



anything would grow there. But I like a challenge and I came up with a very satisfactory solution. This wretched patch of ground, measuring five metres by one, sat under a north-facing wall where there was no soil to speak of, merely rubble. This little story gives me the excuse to tell you of good-looking plants that will grow in hostile areas. In this case I chose *Alchemilla mollis* ('Lady's Mantle') which I planted in small holes made with a pick axe and partially filled with ordinary garden soil. They soon grew into a very healthy-looking carpet strip, and maintenance was confined to a hair cut with a rotary mower with the blades set high just as the flowers were turning brown in late July to prevent it from going to seed. This little annual exercise took up 10 minutes of my time.

In the same garden I had quite a large area underneath an old yew where the root-matted ground was bone dry and shaded at all times. In prepared holes I planted another tough perennial, *Liriope muscari*,

with attractive strap-shaped leaves and spikes of violet-mauve flowers in autumn. Another shade-tolerant survivor is the cranesbill, the hardy geranium, especially *G. macrorrhizum*. Why do these fore-mentioned plants that thrive on neglect do so well when all the odds are against them? They all have explorative root systems. I defy you to kill any of them.

In our quest to create neat and tidy gardens we

sometimes forget how Mother Nature operates. I was talking to a neighbour who was worried about the untidy state of her borders owing to the leaves lying about. I suggested to her that she should leave them where they are. Not only will they help to suppress weed seedlings in the spring but also, in time, earthworms will take them down into the soil thus improving soil structure. However, leaves sitting on the lawn will harm the turf, and these are easily raked back into the border. Once the plants in the border have come into leaf such 'untidy' leaves will disappear from sight in any case.

She also told me she was going to light her bonfire at the weekend. I implored her to wait until the spring just in case hedgehogs, our friendly slug eaters, were hibernating at the base of it. These little things help to redress the balance of nature and preserve those very precious ecosystems that have taken millions of years to evolve. ■