



Patrolling the border

April is a wonderful month for us gardeners. There's nothing like a fattening bud to lift the spirits and dispel the winter gloom now fast receding. We now have six heady months of horticultural hedonism ahead. What a joy

I AM FEELING particularly excited because I have created a new south-west facing border which I have filled with reliable plants, giving little concession, if any, to colour coordination. This is, after all, a garden that belongs to a modest house hidden away in farming country. Amongst the perennials I have chosen are *Papaver orientale* 'Beauty of Livermere' with large papery flowers of the truest red, *Knautia macedonia* planted close to a tall white lupin (excellent bed-fellows because the dark red button-like flowers of the former pepper the thrusting spires of the latter), and the tall growing *Leucanthemella serotina* with simple, white daisy-like flowers up to a height of five feet (1.5m) in September and October, a *Shasta Daisy* and a clump of *Alchemilla mollis*. All new borders have gaps that invite annuals (I usually go for annual asters), and the ever popular *Verbena bonariensis* that will only perennate after a mild winter. Penstemons are a must – (I have never seen one with objectionable flower colours), and

Lilium regale which, like all lilies, must have good drainage and are best planted, therefore, on a handful of gravel or small terracotta crocks. This particular lily is more tolerant of alkaline soils than many other species.

If you are looking for a climber for a shady wall there is a wide selection to choose from, but you must first ask yourself if you really want to cover the wall in the first place. I do not quite understand why, but us British gardeners seem to want to cover all vertical surfaces irrespective of what they are built of. If you have a beautiful wall built of stone or old brick, I would personally think twice before growing anything up it. Ugly walls are best smothered in *Virginia Creeper*, the alternative being ivy so long as the pointing between the stone or brick is firm and sound and it is kept cut every August to a



manageable height of, say, eight feet (2.4m). There are some fascinating ivies to choose from like *Hedera helix* 'Irish Lace' with handsome dark green leaves arranged like a bird's foot. It is so worth

exploring every genus of plant via a specialist grower. In the case of ivy you can do no better than to have a look at the website of Fibrex Nurseries in Warwickshire on www.fibrex.co.uk and then click on *Hedera* Catalogue.

Climbers with more ornamental characteristics for such as aspect include *Akebia quinata*, which can grow as high as 30ft (10m), with dark purple flowers in early spring and attractive lobed foliage, *Clematis x jackmanii* which produces dark purple, velvety flowers in late summer, and a particularly striking honeysuckle (*Lonicera americana* which has strongly scented yellow and red flowers in summer and autumn. There are a number of shrubs that can be successfully trained up a shaded wall and these include *Garrya elliptica* 'James Roof', a variety with extra long tassels throughout the winter, and the flowering currant (*Ribes speciosum*) with red flowers very similar to that of a long, slender fuchsia. If you have mildew problems with the climbing rose 'Zepherine Drouhin', it will grow quite happily up a north facing wall although, like all the

above-mentioned climbers, tends to flower more prolifically when grown up against a sunnier aspect.

On the vegetable front, all sorts of crops can be sown towards the end of April. Spring onions, carrots, turnips, parsnips and salad crops can all be sown outdoors now. According to my neighbour who has grown vegetables all his life you should never water vegetable seeds sown outside save an initial dampening but only then if the soil is very dry. The vegetable gardener is always planning ahead. If you want a more guaranteed prolific crop of Brussels sprouts and large cauliflowers for Christmas, they too should be sown by the end of this month. Successive sowings of annuals flowers between rows of vegetables will mean you will not have to pick flowers from beds and borders.

This is the month to make war on weeds. I always find it better to start weeding towards the middle of the month for the very simple reason that unwanted seedlings are more visible. The time to cut back forsythia is soon after the flowers have faded because it flowers of the previous year's growth. The forsythia is a very unattractive plant for the rest of the year and so it needs to be 'given' flowers by planting a large-flowered *clematis* or a *Tropeolum peregrinum* (Canary creeper) close by, two climbing plants that can use it happily for support. ■