



STURGEON'S STALWARTS

RHS Chelsea 2016 Best in Show winner Andy Sturgeon FSGD reveals his ultimate go-to plants - the reliable, adaptable star performers that he couldn't live without

When you begin a planting design it's too easy to be seduced by those glossy magazines and catalogues that litter the desk. The temptation is to seek out a new perennial or some previously undiscovered shrub. Yet life is made so much easier if you have a stable of tried-and-tested stalwarts that can be deployed in almost any situation and, importantly, are readily available in the trade. They also need to be tough, reliable and interesting for at least 50% of the year, preferably longer.

Hebes have it all: structural, evergreen, any size and flowering throughout the year. They all grow in almost any soil and aspect, but *H. stenophylla* is really tough. Wide and moundy in sun, it has a more open, graceful habit in shade and also makes a good hedge nearly 2m tall, when it can be left as an amorphous shape or even trimmed quite neatly – I sometimes use it clipped into domes. Adorned with spikes of white flowers in summer, it provides useful structure for mixed plantings.

Even more comfortable in the shade is the unfeasibly long-named *Mahonia eurybracteata* subsp. *ganpinensis* 'Soft Caress', but it's only the last bit you need to remember, which is presumably a description of the rather graceful and not-at-all-spiky, glossy green leaves. Less upright and angry than the car-park favourite *M. 'Charity'*, I've found it to be a client-pleasing fast grower and it quickly gets wider than it is tall. Reaching around 1.5m high it can work in any size of garden. Growing in sun or shade and in most soils, it is majestic in pots and doesn't seem to mind erratic or even scarce watering. Just don't expect much from the rather stubby yellow flower spikes, which aren't scented and never really get going – although if you aren't a fan of yellow this recalcitrance can be seen as yet another asset.

Flexible favourite

Nandina domestica is my go-to plant for almost any situation. Happy to recede into a sunless corner to fill a gap, they can also readily take centre-stage out in the open. Sprays of white



Photo: GAP Photos/Marcus Harpur

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flowers are followed by bright red berries, although I could do without those. New growth is blushed in an acceptable amount of pink. Known as 'heavenly bamboo', it only retains its implied elegance if you occasionally thin out a few woody stems, but it can be left alone to make a sizable clump up to about head height. It grows in sun or shade and a huge range of soils, but in cold exposed sites in winter it can get denuded.

The wildcard of the group, *Azara microphylla* creeps onto this list as it doesn't have any direct competitors. A 6m-tall, slender, weeping evergreen tree with small dark-green leaves and tiny, intoxicatingly scented yellow flowers, the fawn-coloured bark almost glows from the shadows, ensuring that if you don't smell it, you certainly see it. Although quite

hardy, it does need shelter in cold places, and a little shade, but this is easy to provide by planting amongst other small trees and large shrubs. It is also happy against a north-facing building if not too exposed.

Silver service

Astelia chathamica 'Silver Spear' has become reasonably common. The bright shiny silver of its leaves is only achieved in full sun, but it will grow happily, albeit less bright, in light shade. Perfect for pots, it seems to thrive on neglect. A kind of thinking man's *Phormium*, it can work well with purples, blues and lime greens in a conventional border or can lend a hand in Mediterranean or tropical contexts.

Miscanthus 'Kleine Fontäne', my go-to grass at the moment, is relatively compact at →



Photo: The Garden Collection/PP/Martin Hughes-Jones

OPENING PAGE
Salvia x sylvestris
'Viola Klose'
OPPOSITE *Mahonia eurybracteata* subsp. *ganpinensis* 'Soft Caress'

THIS PAGE, TOP LEFT
Nandina domestica
TOP RIGHT
Astelia chathamica 'Silver Spear'
BOTTOM LEFT *Azara microphylla* AGM
BOTTOM RIGHT
Hebe stenophylla aka *H. parviflora* var. *angustifolia*



Photo: GAP Photos/Jo Whitworth



Photo: The Garden Collection/PP/Martin Hughes-Jones



Photo: Architectural Plants - www.architecturalplants.com

Photo: GAP Photos/Christa Brand



ABOVE *Euphorbia palustris* is a great all-rounder
BELOW *Trachystemon orientalis* is an indestructible groundcover plant

about 1.4m with slightly taller flower spikes. Making strong, sturdy clumps, it holds its own amongst its neighbours in perennial planting, from the thrust of silver-spined leaves in spring right through to its parchment-coloured winter alter ego. Others in the genus are too tall for many situations and, being taller, are more prone to collapse in winter winds, but this one stands really well into winter. For maximum effect, it needs sun on it or behind it to show off the reddish plumes, which are very reliable.

Digitalis ferruginea, the rusty foxglove, needs sun to be reliably perennial, where it makes good, strong clumps of more or less evergreen basal rosettes. Attractive leaves are essential for a perennial in my book, as the flowers are relatively fleeting. In this case, the chest-high spikes of rusty flowers last for the best part of two months in midsummer, but they stand well into autumn doing that 'graceful death' thing that we all love about perennials these days.

Trachystemon orientalis is unbeatable for covering large areas in a simple manner and to dramatic effect and, as far as I know, is impossible to kill. Curious stumpy borage-like flower spikes appear early and

are soon followed by big oval leaves that make a weed-beating carpet. Ample space is vital because if the soil has moisture it will take over, but in that awkward dry shade under trees it is kept in check and does that groundcover job superbly.

It's hard to pick a *Euphorbia* from so many varieties, but *E. palustris* has roughly 1m of height and remains quite stiff and stable, so it's useful in borders of any scale. Happy in most soils in sun or some shade, it's clump forming, so doesn't wander like some others. The bright yellow flower bracts of early summer last well and fade beautifully. Its green leaves and stems give way to rich autumn colours of yellows, oranges and pinky reds.

Salvia x sylvestris 'Viola Klose' gets the nod over *Salvia x sylvestris* 'Mainacht' because it's got a slightly deeper purple colour and flowers slightly later – but in truth they are equally as good as each other, so choose whichever you can get your hands on. Both flower again if you cut off the faded blooms so you can keep them going virtually all summer, and surprisingly they can stomach a little shade. I find it an exceptionally easy colour to use in any type of scheme. ○



Photo: The Garden Collection/FP/Martin Hughes-Jones