

Midsummer Madness by Edna White

Soon it will be mid-summer. For the next two weeks the days will be at their longest and gardeners will use the extra hours of daylight to catch up on their work. But surely, hopefully, we will have at least one long balmy mid-summer evening when we can just enjoy ourselves?

There are few greater pleasures in life than to walk round a garden in the late evening. By then the playing children and the dogs and the cats may have been gathered home, the midges and the mosquitoes might be having an evening off, and in the stillness of dusk, a garden has magic all of its own. During the day the gardener's critical eye is always busy, recording what needs to be done: we are too often sidetracked into doing a bit of weeding or staking or, for me, there is the frequent panic of rescuing half-smothered plants. But in the soft light of evening, when it's too late and too dark to do anything much, we can lose our preoccupations and register only pleasure.

My favourite shrub at midsummer is the *Philadelphus* or mock-orange blossom. I have nostalgic childhood memories of its heavy scent on long summer evenings in distant Donegal. The *Philadelphus* would not come high in any list of the world's best shrubs. It has no beauty of form or of leaf, there is no winter interest in its bare awkward branches, and, if I were going by the book, I shouldn't really recommend it at all. But then: it is fully hardy, it will grow in any kind of soil, even dry limey soil, and almost all varieties are highly scented and very floriferous. The flowers are always white or, less attractively, cream.

The most usual *Philadelphus*, and the one of my childhood, is *P. coronarius*, a strong-growing, rather large shrub with creamy-white richly scented flowers. I am lucky to have this one growing next door; the flowers sweep into my garden and I have the scent for free. There is a variegated form of *P. coronarius* which I have never seen, and one with yellow foliage, brilliant in spring but fading later. I recommend this golden variety only to those with large gardens; there are better "evergreen" yellow-leaved shrubs (I don't scorn the common golden privet).

In my own garden I grow the medium-sized *Philadelphus* 'Beauclerk', but would be equally happy with *P.* 'Belle Etoile'. Both have large white flowers slightly flushed cerise, and their flat square faces have a rather wide-eyed, surprised look. Both are very scented and show up wonderfully in the evening light. I also grow a good version of the tall, double-flowered *P.* 'Virginal'. I found it growing manfully in an old derelict garden, almost the only survivor, and I raised it easily from a cutting. At the moment I have cuttings in of *P. microphyllus*, a dainty small-leaved (that's what *microphyllus* means) shrub which grows to only about 3'.

I am not familiar with half the members of the extended family of *Philadelphus*; in general I recommend those with large flowers and a good scent, or among the dwarfs, *P. microphyllus*, the double 'Monteau d'Hermine', or 'Coupe d'Argent'. Don't, however, hope for a scented mid-summer garden merely by planting a mock-orange in some dark out-of-the-way corner. It won't bloom much in shade – I know, because I've tried.

The *Philadelphus* has a rather posh cousin called *Carpentaria*, a single species that hasn't gone in for any proletarian inter-breeding of hybridising. It was discovered in California 100 years ago, and it likes rather Californian conditions. It is hardy only in a very warm spot, and, even there, its evergreen leaves get shabby in winter.

However, the flowers have an elegance and a poise which the *Philadelphus* just misses. They are five-petaled (rather than four) with a boss of yellow tipped anthers, and they are fragrant rather than unashamedly perfumed. For some perverse reason, gardeners are prepared to slave over *Carpentaria*, which is hard to find in a nursery, while the almost equally pretty and hardy mock-orange is not appreciated enough.

Another relation of the Oriental *Philadelphus* is the Chinese *Deutzia* which blooms rather earlier in the month, with starry flowers, single or double, in clusters. These are very pretty shrubs when in bloom. I remember admiring them extravagantly at Birr Castle, but somehow I don't want to grow one myself. There is something a bit ingratiating in their prettiness and, as shrubs, they lack character. However, they come in pink as well as white (which makes a change in today's article).

Abelia triflora is not often available, but it is of some academic interest to us, as the first plant discovered by Edward Madden in the Himalayas was sent to our National Botanic Gardens at Glasnevin, and it is still growing there today (to the right of the main entrance). I was given a cutting of this *Abelia* 20 or so years ago by the late John Chichester, a charming eccentric who visited a lot in great houses, and who occasionally brought me armfuls of miscellaneous greenery. I put the cutting in, evidently, within inches of a north wall, and within a foot of what is now a large *Griselinia*. I was more than surprised several years later to find it had grown up through the *Griselinia* and is now a tree 30' tall. It is covered in June with small clusters of pinky-white flowers which are beautifully scented. This fluke of nature has given me a great bonus in flower and fragrance, and all from a scant square foot of my garden.

Few of us have space for an all-white garden, as at Glenveigh Castle or Sissinghurst; but every garden should have some white flowers, if only for their luminous beauty at nightfall. ●

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