

## Autumn Concerto

By J. ARCHIBALD

NESTLING DOWN in a cushion of heather and birches, now, in September, beginning to change their summer covering of silver-green to a richer, autumnal one of gold, Inshriach is a garden well known to most alpine plant enthusiasts. Apart from the extensive nursery, the garden itself is fairly small and in no way exceptional, though perhaps it does contain a larger number of notable plants per square yard than the gardens of most specialists, but Inshriach has a peculiarly seductive beauty and the visitor experiences a certain delight in finding so many exotic alpine plants looking so much at home here among the hills of the Cairngorms. The pale September sun rises from the fresh chill of the Highland morning mist to shine down on alpine plants from the high mountain ranges of every continent. This cosmopolitan atmosphere is, of course, not common only to the rock garden at Inshriach, but few people fully appreciate the amazing fact that the gardener can distil the beauty of the world into a few square yards of inhospitable soil. From the mountains of Norway to the barren, wind-swept shingle beaches of the Falkland Islands, from the grassy alps of the Yunnan to the Olympic Mountains of Washington come alpine plants to contribute to the final display of autumn before the cold of the Highland winter comes with a freezing hand and forces them to cower into the soil.

In fact, to find good late summer alpine plants we need go no farther than our own country, whence come such delightful plants as *Dryas octopetala*, which carries in autumn its numerous little, fluffy white, powder-puff, seed-heads over a mat of tiny leathery green oak leaves, and *Geranium sanguineum*, in its forms, like *G. s. lancastricense* to be found on the sea-sprayed turf of Lancashire's Walney Island, with its large satin-pink apple-blossoms all summer through. The Maiden Pink, *Dianthus deltoides*, another long-flowering native, in its garden forms from the earlier flowering, rich red "Huntsman" to the Wisley Variety's flopping profusion of dusky, grassy foliage jewelled with the brilliant little crimson flowers, is still determinedly producing its abundant blossoms in autumn. Of course, of native autumnal rock garden plants, our heaths and heathers provide some of the most praiseworthy. In company with the Himalayan gentians they provide some wonderful sweeps of colour, but any catalogue of them will provide adequate descriptions of the legion of varieties, so a mere mention of them will suffice here.

In the garden it is but a short step from Scotland across the Atlantic and, indeed, across the whole North American continent to find the Lewisias from the mountains of the far Western United States. At Inshriach, these sumptuous Westerners grow absolutely contentedly in the same dry stone wall which *Geranium sanguineum lancastricense* drapes with its hanging stems. The Lewisias generally bloom in spring

and early summer, but there were enough *L. cotyledon* hybrids in flower in August and September to cause an appreciable amount of comment from visitors to this garden at that time. These hybrids, which are becoming a speciality here, are never happier than when growing in a sunny dry stone wall or vertical rock crevice, where they can produce their specious flowers of crimson or pink or orange apricot, all flamed and pencilled with richer, deeper tones. A relative of the Lewisias, also from Western North America, is the recently introduced *Claytonia nivalis*, which is a living refutation of Farrer's judgement that the 'Claytonias are pretty little weeds, but weeds no less,' for it is none too easy to cultivate and merits a more extravagant adjective than merely 'pretty.' It makes a fine pan plant with its splaying rosettes of red-tinged, succulent leaves and sprays of gay, sugar-pink flowers which appear intermittently from spring to autumn.

However, neither the Lewisias nor their rarer relative provide a really successful ambassador from North America to the autumn rock garden. Nor do the crudely insolent bright-pink Monkey Flowers of *Mimulus lewisii* any longer gape their mouths and show their speckled throats, like Chinese dragon-heads, to the extent that one still feels that it was worth their while to come down from the banks of the icy Alaskan streams or the edges of the winter-frozen swamps in the Rockies. While the Erigerons and Penstemons become less anxious to produce new flowers and neat little *Oenothera flava* is more reluctant to billow into its huge, blasé imitation blooms in the softest of yellows, which are so delicately enormous that they look as if they will be wafted away by the first evening breeze, there is one American which by sheer daring of its gaudy colour attracted more attention late last summer at Inshriach than any other. *Gilia aggregata* is not an alpine plant but an inhabitant of mountain meadows and grasslands on the slopes of the Southern Rockies, where its Sky Rockets shoot up straight from the waving sea of grasses, the three-foot stem clad evenly in feathery fine foliage, somewhat reminiscent of the pernicious Mare's Tail, and erupt into an uninhibited blaze of the most fiery of volcanic scarlets. The individual flowers have great beauty but are closely packed into a compact spire, in which the top buds open first, in the manner of that other brilliant American genus, *Liatris*, each one poking its nose out from among the light green hair-like leaves before bursting into a flaring trumpet of that most intense of colours. *G. aggregata* is but a biennial and at three to four feet hardly a suitable contender for a place in the rock garden, but as a border plant nothing could be more spectacular in the shortening days of late summer than the fiery brands of this American blazing with unrestrained splendour.

The South American continent, in contrast to its northern neighbour, has provided comparatively few plants for the rock garden, though the Cordillera of the Andes is as rich as any other great mountain mass in alpine flowers, but despite the efforts of Harold Comber and many others, these temperamental temptresses from the south never seem to settle down here for any length of time. There are, of

course, such exquisite exceptions as *Calceolaria darwinii* and the more recently introduced *Oxalis laciniata*. A relative of the former, the Chilean *C. tenella*, sends up from its creeping mat of tiny, bright green leaves a myriad of baggy little flowers on quivering hair-like stems, gaping their yellow mouths, delicately gashed with tiny mahogany-crimson teeth, ceaselessly all summer. From the cold and windy Falkland Islands comes delightful *Myrtus nummularia*, swept into a prostrate huddle by the howling Antarctic gales and bearing in autumn, over its neat little varnished leaves, relatively huge, waxy pink berries.

However, the most obtrusive South American in this garden last autumn was not a rock garden plant but a half hardy climber from Chile. *Eccremocarpus scaber* is neither new nor difficult ; almost every popular seed catalogue contains its name, but very few visitors to this garden had ever seen it before. One of the most spectacular of climbers, clinging by means of finely twisting tendrils at the ends of the dull green leaves, it will quickly reach a height of anything up to twenty feet, before being cut back by the first severe frosts, and from July onwards produce its curving racemes of tubular orange-yellow flowers, each one flushing with deeper orange-red towards the throat and puffing out its glossy cheeks before pouting its chrome yellow-lipped mouth, in a manner befitting any Chilean beauty.

From Chile's northern neighbour, Bolivia, comes one of the few South American gentians in cultivation. The short-lived *Gentiana chrysantha* from high in the Bolivian Andes, like all other gentians from the Southern Hemisphere, seems most ungentian-like to our northern eyes. On a stem of nine inches or so it carries its spikes of bright yellow flowers, squinny little things when compared to the massive trumpets of *G. acaulis*, but of interest because of their form, colour and rarity.

To find a more impressive beauty among the cultivated gentians of the South we must travel over 6000 miles west from the Bolivian mountains to the southern shores of the South Island of New Zealand, where, among the rocks and sand-hills, *G. saxosa* forms its neat two-inch clumps of crowded, brownish-green leaves and produces its shallow, upturned flowers of sumptuous white, huge for the size of the small plant. A close relation of this is *G. bellidifolia* from both the Southern Alps and the mountains of North Island. It is a somewhat larger plant and bears many dark, flopping stems on which loosely cluster the large white goblets looking up at you from their delicately veined depths.

To visit the home of the next plant we must move from 40° South to 40° North, from these great islands of the Antipodes to their northern counterpart, Japan, whence comes little *Thalictrum kiusianum* to run about accommodatingly in rich scree at Inshriach. This pleasant Oriental dwarf spreads itself in a fragile way, sending up a yellowish-green Aquilegia leaf every so often and in late summer producing an abundance of tiny fluffy lilac blossoms on fine two-inch stems. A more robust inhabitant of Nippon is the curious woodlander, *Tricyrtis*

*macrantha*. At Inshriach this weird relation of the lilies grows happily to a height of about two feet among dwarf rhododendrons. From the axils of the hairy, corrugated leaves in autumn come the pallid, waxen flowers, spotted and freckled with a sombre and livid ruby purple—altogether rather fascinatingly evil and bizarre caricatures of the more beautiful members of the lily family.

Beloved of bees and butterflies, Japanese *Sedum pluricaule* revels both in sunny scree and in a trough, where towards the end of summer it covers its prostrate mat of fleshy leaves with flat, almost stemless clusters of brilliant rosy crimson-pink flowers in so harsh a shade that the crudeness of colour would be almost overpowering were it not for the subtle tempering effect of the glaucous grey leaves, which convert this little sun-lover from just a vulgar splash of colour to one of the most useful, easy, and beautiful plants for any rock garden in autumn.

Before looking at the plants from the Himalayas, the most generous of the massive ranges in giving of its beauty in autumn, we shall see what the hot, arid lands of the Eastern Mediterranean region and the Near East have provided for the embellishment of the garden in September. With one foot in the Black Sea and the other in the Caspian, the colossal mountain chain of the Caucasus bestrides this part of Southern Russia, enclosing the northern borders of Georgia and Azerbaijan. From this range might come innumerable fine plants were it not for the impregnable political barriers erected by man—barriers far less easy to surmount than any set up by nature.

Nevertheless, many of our showiest alpine refugees from this area, notably the *Campanula* species centering on *C. tridentata* and, for the autumn garden, *Silene schafta*, a particularly easy, colourful plant which seems to rest in unmerited and unaccountable obscurity. The flowers of this friendly Caucasian are rather similar to those of the wild Red Campion of our hedgerows in size and colour, but are borne on dark stems of only five inches or so, in an indescribable profusion of magenta-rose, above the lush leafiness of its tufted clumps. So eagerly does it produce its masses of bloom that one is apt to suspect that it has sprung from some packet of half-hardy annual seeds and will die of exhaustion before the coming of winter, but the next year will see *S. schafta* up again, irrepressibly and blatantly flaunting itself in the autumn garden, as it will do for many years to come.

West from Azerbaijan and to the north of Persia, lies the consistently mountainous land of Armenia, where grows the Prophet Flower, *Arnebia echioides*. At Inshriach, or in any other garden, this plant enjoys a sunny place and light soil at the front of the border or in the rock garden, where it will produce, both in early and late summer, its foot-high bunches of large, bright primrose-yellow flowers with each of their five lobes blotched at the base with a daub of jet-black—the five finger-marks of the Prophet. However, he does not seem to have made a lasting impression on the blossom, for as it grows older

the signs of his presence fade from its memory until the colour is that of a clear and immaculate milky, lemon-yellow.

Another plant which delights in a similar life in the sun is the result of a bigeneric cross : tiny, beautiful *Celsia acaulis*, from high on Mount Taiyotos in the southernmost of the Greek Peloponnesus, was married with the somewhat coarser, two-foot *Verbascum phoeniceum*, from farther east, around the Lebanon, mixing its pure yellow with the purplish-pink of the latter, to produce a six-inch hybrid, with large flowers in a most wonderful shade of brick-pink imperceptibly tinged with burnt apricot, a shade equalled only by the smoky autumn clouds when sunset lights them from within and they hint of a storm far beyond the mountains. Moreover, this astonishing plant, as if knowing that we can never have enough of this colour, insists on producing its delicate sprays from the end of May right on through September in a succession of seemingly interminable beauty, although, admittedly, by autumn is it understandably looking just a little straggly in the daintiest way possible.

North of the Plain of Thessaly towers the 9,500 ft. summit of Mount Olympus, whereon the Greek gods meet in conclave and which is also the home of an aristocrat among the Dandelions and Hawkweeds, *Crepis incana*, a plant as different in its bearing from its relations as the gods are from mankind, for which reason it doubtless has sought their company up on Olympus in preference to living on the railway embankments and roadsides of us mortals. Nevertheless, this aloof Composite will come down from the sacred heights and settle down in a hot, dry place in our gardens, where in late summer it will generally boisterously produce its fifteen-inch high bouquets of large, delicate pink Dandelion-flowers on soft, grey-leaved, branching stems and later, mingled with the flowers, the fluffy silvery seed-heads, which never quite show the final familiarity of producing for us any fertile seed.

And so, finally, we come to the last of the great mountain ranges from which plants have come to give of their beauty here in September, and the greatest of them all—the Himalayas, the home of the most wonderful of all autumn-flowering plants, the Himalayan gentians. It would be pointless to describe and enumerate the two dozen or so distinct species and hybrids grown at Inshriach ; it is sufficient to mention a few of the less common ones. *Gentiana x fasta* 'Highlands' is a magnificent plant with the blood of the three best autumn-flowering species in it, *G. veitchiorum* from Szechwan in W. China, *G. farreri* from Northern Kansu in Tibet, and *G. sino-ornata* from the N.W. Yunnan. This beautiful and elegant plant with its brilliant blue trumpets—almost greenish-blue in their intensity—is best planted in groups, large or small, so that the effect of the colour is not lost, as the flopping, dark, fine-leaved stems are long and a single plant distributes its beauty over a wider area than most gentians.

In face of the oft-repeated eulogies concerning *G. x* 'Inverleith' it seems rash to name *G. x macaulayi* 'Kingfisher' as an altogether

superior hybrid. Granted, it has not the massive flowers of the *farreri-veitchorium* cross, but mere size has become a vulgar horticultural obsession ; on the other hand, the 'Kingfisher' has a colour as vivid as the metallic blue-green of its namesake, deeply electrifying in its brilliance, and an artistically proportioned habit, which is extremely neat while every bit as strong as that of 'Inverleith.' A wide mass of this gentian created a most arresting sight in September, particularly as it took part in a very daring colour combination with the richly and deeply coloured, magenta-claret goblets of *Colchicum speciosum atropurpureum*, the most shameless and brazen of all 'Naked Ladies.' Pale, translucent blue *G. hexaphylla*, the earliest flowering of all the autumn gentians, crossed with the Cambridge blue *G. farreri*, gave rise to the lovely hybrid, *G. x hexa-farreri*, of which the Aberchalder Form provides one of the longest-flowering autumn gentians, easy-going like most of these Himalayans in a moist, gritty, peaty soil.

Another genus of blue, autumn-flowering Himalayans, less well-known than these gentians but liking exactly the same cultural conditions, is that of *Cyananthus*. All these make flopping mats beset with many large and sumptuous blooms, like flat periwinkle-flowers, over quite some length of time. *C. integer* is perhaps the best with its neat dark-foliaged stems and soft-blue vincas, but the laxer-growing *C. lobatus* has more splendid flowers in a variety of shades. There is a pale and lucent albino, the porcelain blue of 'Sherriff's Variety' and the rich, deep, satiny-toned *var. insignis* in Oxford-blue luminescently shot with violet. They all die back each winter to the sturdy central tap root and all relish that rich, cool, peaty scree beloved of so many Himalayan plants.

*Codonopsis convolvulacea*, like the *Cyananthus*, is a member of the *Campanulaceae*. It is also a Himalayan and has come down from sub-alpine levels, where it twists and twines and trails among the tangles of shrub and herbage, to bestow on us its most lovely flowers in late summer. These, the most delicately fragile, shallow, Wedgewood-blue saucers, imperceptibly lit with a lavender glow, open wide to show the intricacies of design at their centres, painted on with lacquer of crimson-lake. *C. vincaeflora* is the double of *C. convolvulacea* with the same intimate clinging habit and the same wonderful flowers which, however, lack the central crimson brush strokes, though, by way of compensation, they begin to display themselves somewhat earlier.

An unusual woodlander, widely distributed in the Himalayas, is *Podophyllum emodi*, which, like *Paeonia emodi*, derives its name from the 'Emodi Montes,' the ancient description of that district of the Himalaya first explored by Alexander the Great. Whatever distant connections with the Macedonian conqueror it may have, *Podophyllum emodi* was first discovered by Dr. Wallich in Nepal in 1829, but, despite well over a hundred years in cultivation, one hardly ever sees this interesting plant, which is surprising, as it is by far one of the most spectacular things in the autumn garden. Although the flowers, which appear in May like huge, pearly-white winter aconites, are

pleasant and deeply lobed, umbrella-like leaves, blotched with purple, make it a fine foliage plant, its real glory comes in autumn with the production of the massive, squashy fruits of glowing orange-scarlet, like large and bloated plums or persimmons. These dangle from the slender swaying stems of about a foot in height and last for a considerable length of time, for, in spite of their soft appearance, the outer skin is tough and leathery. At Inshriach this herbaceous woodlander is perfectly happy growing in light shade and ordinary soil, but it must not be allowed to suffer from extreme drought in summer or be disturbed once established.

Yet another easily grown alpine of Himalayan extraction, which is rarely seen, is *Potentilla x tonguei*, indisputably one of the best, most trouble-free plants for the autumn rock garden. This charming, almost prostrate potentilla is a hybrid of the much larger *P. nepalensis* of our herbaceous borders and makes rough little tufts of similar dark and dull green, cinquefoil-leaves, over which glow the embers of large strawberry-flowers in late summer, each one like a bowl of apricot brandy with a central drop of crimson blood, which before congealing had begun to suffuse its erubescence light over each petal. This delightful hybrid is extremely simple to cultivate in a light and fairly sunny soil, as long as it is not one which is very poor or arid.

In September, high in the mountains of the Pir Panjal range in Kashmir, at an altitude above 12,000 ft., *Polygonum affine* paints the rocky slopes with a hazy pink, pouring itself loosely over the boulders and covering itself with innumerable, uneven spikes of many tiny, frothy flowers in several shades of rose-pink, varying in richness. This showy alpine is willing and good-natured enough to give a similar spectacular performance in the September rock garden and, when grown in full sun and poor soil, a few of the pointed, bright, leathery leaves will sometimes turn to a brilliant scarlet, adding even more zest to the display of the ever-deepening pink flower spikes. A neater relation of this all but too rampant Himalayan is the equally affable *P. vacciniifolium*, a plant which Farrer described as a 'refined treasure' needing 'careful propagation.' However, whatever first appearances may suggest, it soon becomes obvious to the rock gardener that Farrer must have planted *P. vacciniifolium* upside down to come to the conclusion that it needed careful propagation, for this little enchantress shoots out long stems, arching over the surface of the soil and rooting wherever they touch it. Thus, it forms an undulating carpet of twiggy growth, in winter, bare yet pleasant in its density, clothed all summer with small bilberry-leaves, looking deceptively evergreen, and covering itself in autumn with countless, four-inch spikes of rose-pink fluffiness.

Just as Farrer was somewhat mistaken about the culture of *Polygonum vacciniifolium*, he seems to have been entirely ignorant of the merits of the Himalayan *Saxifraga strigosa*, which he condemns in his usual peremptory manner as being worthless, 'dowdy in appearance, difficult in temper and tender in constitution.' It is needless to add that Farrer could never have seen the plant in cultivation ; in

fact, it was not introduced until after his death. It is a most dainty and beautiful plant, providing an excellent foil for the blue of the more refined gentians and *Cyananthe*, with its flowers of deep and brilliant yellow, a colour so intense and vivid that it almost verges on garishness, but the small and graceful blooms, each with a few minute and brilliant orange nectaries, which temper rather than emphasise the gaudiness, are so delicately borne that the overall effect is far too ephemeral looking to appear ostentatious. This unusual hairy saxifrage will flower for about two months in late summer and requires a little care in cultivation, but should give no trouble in the peaty scree and shady position recommended for some other Himalayans. Care should also be taken that no great, lolling, rampant neighbour engulfs the little saxifrage for it is, literally, a fragile plant. Nevertheless, however fragile *Saxifraga strigosa* may be, the last thing that could ever be said of it is that it is 'dowdy in appearance.'

Now, at last, we reach the final plant in this survey of some of the alpinists which have come from all parts of the earth to decorate this garden. It is through no odd chance that this plant has been kept to the end, for it is the only one of the list to merit the phrase 'quite out of this world.' *Saussurea stella* is so weird a whim of nature that, on seeing it for the first time, one has suspicions that the seed must have dropped from a flying-saucer, so like a product of the surrealistic imagination is it. But, on closer examination, it can be seen that it is none other than an earthly composite gone mad and in fact this plant and many of its relatives have let the mountain air of the Caucasus and Chinese Alps go to their heads and fallen victims to paranoia and schizophrenia. These vegetable maniacs go to no limits to vie with each other in imbecility: *S. obvallata* blows its flowers up in a balloon of lemon-yellow, Chinese-silken bracts; *S. sacra* rolls itself into a perfect ball of cotton-wool; *S. gossypiphora* carries the cotton-wool madness to a state *par excellence*; yet others form columns of down for the little flowers to hide their personalities in the depths; and *S. stella* thinks that it will try, away up on the Roof of the World in Tibet, to emulate a starfish from Saturn. Almost all of these maniacs are absolutely intractable in the garden, whither they are no sooner brought than they languish and depart, so that their souls can return to the barren mountain wastes to rant and rave to their hearts' content. *S. stella*, however, is quite willing to be confined in the gardeners' Bedlam, where it will delight the lovers of the bizarre by performing its strange ritual of flowering. Before it flowers, this plant does not look inordinately curious, but it is easily seen that it is trying very hard to be a graceful, bright green starfish in the way that it forms its tufts of grassy leaves. Late one summer, it will at last realise its hopes; the leaves lie flat on the ground and broaden markedly at the base, where they become tinted with a bright, yet sinister, shade of pinkish, beetroot-red, rather similar to the colour of phenol soda solution; then the plant, having all but succeeded in its attempts, changes its mind and decides that it will be a sea-anemone instead, so it sends up



from the centre of the starfish a tight cluster of deep Tyrian purple, perverse and stemless knapweed-flowers, from which the cream anthers frolic forth in an evilly seductive fashion ; and so, elated at having achieved its end, *S. stella* departs this world, leaving behind it sufficient seed to perpetuate its hereditary insanity.

This is probably the only nursery to propagate this curiosity commercially and it is certainly a pity that more members of this genus are not willing to display their weirdness at this Highland garden, where such difficult rarities as *Meconopsis delavayi* and *Ranunculus buchananii* grow successfully. Inshriach is a garden for the enthusiast and as has been seen, in autumn, though no more than at any other time, embraces alpine plants from every continent, combined in one great harmony of colour and form, a vast concerto, in which there are many soloists, but one which almost everyone could have in his own rock garden with a little skill and a little more patience.

## The Season's Ups and Downs

By A. DUGUID

1959 WITH US in Berwickshire has been a year of extremes. As in other areas, practically no rain fell from January to October, our total when the drought finally broke in mid-October being 4.5 inches—a very meagre fall indeed compared with a monthly average of about 4 inches in a normal year. Lack of water became a source of increasing anxiety as month followed month when we had to depend on a small but constant trickle which had to serve the needs of a farm, three households, and lastly a garden and nursery. It had to be decided early in the season that none could be spared for established trees, shrubs, and plants which were more or less left to care for themselves.

It was surprising how many came through, but with deep-rooting plants being on a clay subsoil must have helped greatly. Rhododendrons, being mainly surface rooters, suffered severely in the drier areas and looked very miserable with their tightly curled leaves. Several long established bushes died completely : others suffered so severely that it will take them quite some time to recover their former vigour. Gentians, likewise, did not like the excessive drought, suffering both from lack of rain and the almost complete absence of dew at night. On only one night in July did I notice traces of dew and there was no appreciable amount again till mid-September. This lack of night moisture was a serious loss since dew at nights benefits plant life to a very great extent—especially seedlings and young plants. As a result of this drought we had the poorest show of Gentians we have ever had—even of *G. sino-ornata*, usually a carpet of blue. The only gentian that really flowered well—and it happened to be in a damp spot—was *G. x hexa-farreri* "Aberchalder Form," which produced a wealth of flowers for weeks on end.