

# Late summer and autumn at Inshriach

Written by a youthful James C. Archibald about the Nursery of Jack Drake at Inshriach, in the Highlands of Scotland, where he spent his school and university holidays working. In these early writings, Jim's prose is almost as florid as that of Farrer!

Plants of late summer and autumn at Inshriach.

Nestling down in a cushion of heather and birches, now, in September, beginning to exchange 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 alpines looking so much at home here among the hills of the Cairngorms. The pale September sun emerges from the fresh chill of the Highland morning mist to shine down on alpines 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 Yunnan to the Olympic Mountains of Washington come alpines to contribute to the final display of autumn before the cold of the Highland winter comes and forces them to cower into the soil with a freezing hand.

In fact, to find good late summer alpines we need go no further than our own country where some such delightful plants as *Dryas octopetala* which carries in autumn its numerous little fluffy white powder-puff seed-heads over a mat of tiny leathern green oak leaves, and *Geranium sanguineum*, in its forms, like *G. s. lancastriense* to be found on the sea sprayed turf of Lancashire's Walney Island, or the compact form from the Western Isles of Scotland with their 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 at Inshriach 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 North Western United States.

## Late summer and autumn at Inshriach

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 comments from visitors to the garden at that time. These hybrids, which are becoming a speciality at Inshriach, are never happier than when growing in a sunny dry stone wall or a 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 of the Rockies. While the Erigerons and Penstemons become less anxious to produce new flowers and neat little *Oenothera flava* is more reluctant to billow 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 stems 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 the light-green hair-like leaves before bursting into a flaring trumpet of that most intense of colours. *Gilia 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.

## Late summer and autumn at Inshriach

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 at Inshriach last autumn was not a rock garden plant but a half hardy climber from Chile. *Ecchremocarpus scaber* is neither new nor difficult, almost every popular seed catalogue contains its name but very few visitors to Inshriach 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 produces 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 un-gentian 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 amongst 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

## Late summer and autumn at Inshriach

which loosely cluster the large white goblets looking up at you from their delicately veined depths.

To visit the home of this 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 latifolia*. 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 vivid 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* works both in a sunny scree and in a trough at Inshriach, where towards the end of summer it covers its prostrate mat of fleshy leaves with flat, almost stemless clusters of brilliant rosy-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 foliage which convert this little sun lover from just a vulgar splash of colour to one of the most useful easy and beautiful plants for the 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 and arid lands of the Eastern Mediterranean region and the near East have provided for the embellishment of the garden at Inshriach 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 alpines are contented refugees from this area, notably the Campanula species centering on *Campanula 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 Causcasian are rather similar to those of the wild Red Campion of our hedgerows in size and colour but are born 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 blooms that one is apt to suspect that it has sprung from a packet of half-

## Late summer and autumn at Inshriach

hardy annual seeds and will die of exhaustion before the coming 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 echiodes*. At Inshriach, or in any other garden, this plant enjoys a sunny place and light soil at the front of a 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 at Inshriach is the result of a bigeneric cross: tiny, beautiful *Celsia acaulis* [[Ed.:now regarded as a synonym of *Verbascum acaule*]] from high on Mount Taigetos in the southernmost of the Greek Peloponnesus, was married with the somewhat coarser, two foot *Verbascum phoeniceum*, from further 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 attractive shade of brick-pink imperceptibly tinged with burnt apricot in 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 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 it is understandably looking just a little straggly in the daintiest way possible.

North of the Plain of Thessaly towers the 9500ft summit of Mount Olympus, whereon the Greek gods met 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 we 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, mingling with the flowers, the fluffy silvery seed heads, which never quite show the final familiarity of producing for us any fertile seed.

## Late summer and autumn at Inshriach

And so, finally, we come to the last of the great mountain ranges from which plants have come to give of their beauty at Inshriach in September and the greatest of them all, the Himalayas, the home of the most wonderful of all the 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 Szechuan in W. China; ***G. farreri*** from northern Kansu in Tibet and ***G. sino-ornata*** from 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 on ***G. x*** 'Inverleith' it seems rash to name ***G. x macaulyi*** 'Kingfisher' as an altogether superior hybrid. It has not, granted, the massive flowers of the *farreri - veitchiorum* 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 at Inshriach 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 ***Colchichum 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 the lovely ***Cyananthus***. All these make flopping mats beset with many large and sumptuous blooms like flat periwinkle-flowers over quite some length of time. ***Cyananthus 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.

# Late summer and autumn at Inshriach

*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 Himalaya, is *Podophyllum emodi*, which, like *Paeonia emodi*, derives its name from 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 the 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*, indisputedly 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 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 12000ft, *Polygonum affine* paints the rocky slopes with a hazy pink, pouring itself

## Late summer and autumn at Inshriach

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. vaccinifolium*, 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. vaccinifolium* 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. The form of this which is grown at Inshriach was brought down from the mountain slopes of Tehri-Garwhal and appears to be somewhat superior to the one in general cultivation.

Just as Farrer was somewhat mistaken about the culture of *P. vaccinifolium* 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; indeed 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 *Cyananthus*, 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 emphasis 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 engulf the little saxifrage, for it is literally a fragile plant. Nevertheless, however fragile *Saxifraga strigosa* may be, the last thing that could be said about it is that it is 'dowdy in appearance'.

Now, at last, we reach the final plant in this survey of some of the alpines which have come from all parts of the earth to decorate the garden at Inshriach. It is though no odd chance that this plant has been kept to the end because it is the only one on the list to



## Late summer and autumn at Inshriach

merit the phrase '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 the 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 imitate a starfish from Saturn. Almost all of these maniacs are absolutely intractable in the garden, whence 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 it forms its tuft 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.

Inshriach 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 alpinists 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 rock garden with a little skill and a little more patience.

J.C.A.