

Answers to gardening questions

# Polygonums

By R. W. Sidwell

The genus polygonum includes knotgrass and the persicarias, all notorious weeds of arable land. There is also the almost ineradicable *Polygonum amphibium*, equally at home in water or on dry land. It makes masses of deep cord-like rhizomes, so dense that digging them out is rather like trying to dig in a bed of wire spaghetti.

The two rampant giants from the Far East, *P. cuspidatum* and *P. sachalinense* are now widely established in waste places, on river banks and, unfortunately, sometimes in gardens.

If we add to this by saying that the polygonums belong to the same family as the docks we have hardly a good launching pad for a group of ornamental garden plants. Yet there are several most desirable plants in this genus particularly well-suited to modern natural-style gardening. Most are herbaceous perennials and are lovers of rich moist soil.

One of the most useful is *P. amplexicaule* which has stems about three to four feet high rising from a fleshy rhizomatous rootstock which is so solid and dense that it effectively suppresses weak competition. The flower spikes are very persicure-like and are borne over a long period from midsummer onwards. The best forms are a deep crimson red.

This species can be left undisturbed for many years and although it spreads steadily it is not seriously invasive and is very easy to eradicate when not wanted. Both this and the next species are Himalayan.



*Polygonum campanulatum*

*P. campanulatum* is my favourite when it can be grown well. This produces an abundance of delicate pink sprays from late July until severe frost. It is sometimes still in bloom in December and in 1978 was a mass of bloom when cut down by the exceptional frosts at the end of November. It is about the same height as the previous species.

This species spreads readily by shallow rooting surface stolous and is one of the first plants to suffer in drought. On dry sandy soils it can fail altogether. When the first autumn frosts come, some of the flowers turn a deeper pink and are most attractive. A white form has recently arisen as a sport in my garden. I do not think it is as pleasing as the pink one but it is different.

The native *P. bistorta* is rather invasive but it is a useful plant in the

wild garden. A better plant for the more civilised places is the form "superba" which not only has finer flower spikes but is a good reliable perennial of moderate spread. It is usually about two feet high.

A refined, select species that can be said to be well garden trained is *P. carneum*. This forms slowly spreading clumps and in early summer produces stiffly erect stems with roundish heads of pink flowers. A second crop of flowers follows in the autumn. It will tolerate drier conditions than most species but it still has the family liking for good living.

There are some very good low-growing species suitable for the rock garden where there is room for fairly large mats of growth. Not, may I say, for planting among small alpine. The best known of these is *P. affine* which forms a ground-hugging mat with erect flower stems six to 12 inches high over a very long period. The form Donald Lowndes is shorter in stems than most and has quite large heads of pink flowers, freely produced. Taller, and of a deeper colour is Darjeeling Red.

The leaves of *P. affine* turn a rich chestnut brown in the autumn and persist through the winter. I find this attractive. Some people object to this dead appearance and try to pick the leaves off. It is very laborious. If you don't like it as Nature made it, don't grow it.

Somewhat like the last species but with much smaller leaves is *P. vacinifolium*. This will not grow with me although in some gardens it is rampant. I think it objects to the high lime we have on our part of Bredon Hill. It is chlorotic and quite sickly. How odd it is that vaccinium itself, from which this plant gets its specific name, should also be intolerant of lime. The two plants are quite unrelated although there is a strong superficial resemblance. Both of these polygonums are from the Himalaya. A more refined rock garden plant is *P. tenuicaule* with flower spikes only a few inches high. It comes from Japan.

Getting away from the hardy herbaceous species there are some others of interest. *P. capitatum* is quite tender and is usually grown as a half-hardy annual either for outdoor planting in the summer or in pots in the greenhouse or sunny window. It is a spreading, quick-growing plant under warm conditions and readily seeds down on greenhouse staging.

One of the best known polygonums is that ubiquitous coverer of unsightly objects *P. baldschuanicu*. This rampant woody climber is often planted in places where it has no hope of fulfilling its ambitions, which are to smother everything in sight. Severe pruning is called for when it has to be restricted.

A countryman's life

## On rural transport

By Margaret Charles

My youngest son has recently acquired his first car. As usual,

flies" were. Making one of my instant decisions, which I don't often