

Sea hollies and spurges

By R. W. Sidwell

Some gardeners like plenty of strong colour. Their ultimate in gardening perfection might be a bed of scarlet geraniums with or without its edging of lobelia and alyssum. There is nothing wrong in this. For providing a continuous display of bloom with the minimum of maintenance such plants have no equals.

There are, however, times and places where more restrained tastes will prevail. Form and texture play a big part in many modern planting schemes. We find that plants which were looked upon as weedy and insignificant some years ago are now enjoying great popularity. This is, in part, due to the current interest in flower arranging. For interior decorations, colour is easily obtained with a pot of paint or a change in soft furnishings. The subtleties of plant form cannot be man-made. They have to grow.

High among the rankings of plants of interesting form are the sea-hollies. These belong to that odd group of umbellifers that do not look like umbellifers. This is the family of the parsnip and carrot. The non-botanist may find it hard to accept the relationship. The sea hollies belong to the genus *Eryngium*. All are more or less spiny, hence the name. Some, including our native *Eryngium maritimum*, grow by the sea.

With the exception of *E. giganteum* and an odd group of sea-hollies from tropical America, these plants are all good permanent perennials, non-invasive, and generally well-behaved. One of the most beautiful is *E.*

alpinum with large heads of delicate blue green. For those who do not know these plants I should say that the flowers proper are arranged in dense heads, roundish or ovoid, and are surrounded by bracts which give the plants their special character.

E. oliverianum has heads less finely cut but of a brighter blue and is probably the best-known species in cultivation. In *E. amethystinum* the colour is of a particularly fine metallic blue which extends some distance down the stems. *E. planum* has much smaller heads in large sprays. Nomenclature is somewhat confused in the sea-hollies and one cannot always be sure of getting plants correctly named. Indeed experts differ as to which is the correct name in some cases but two species commonly offered are *E. bourgati* and *E. variaefolium*. All are worth-while garden plants.

A biennial species of striking appearance is *E. giganteum*. The specific epithet seems hardly justified. It is large certainly, but not quite a giant. The bracts and upper parts of the stems are whitish in colour and have a unique character. This plant seeds itself down freely in most gardens, much as do foxgloves, and, provided one goes easy with the hoe, a supply of plants will always be available. This plant was a favourite of that great gardener of the early part of this century, Ellen Willmott. Its almost spectral appearance earned the appellation "Miss Willmott's Ghost."



Eryngium giganteum

The tropical American species are of doubtful hardiness and I would doubt if any have withstood the past winter except in the extreme South-West. They are characterised by their narrow undivided leaves with spiny teeth. They make interesting specimen plants but are of botanical interest mainly.

The spurges or euphorbias are made up of coarser stuff. Several are common annual weeds. Most were despised as garden plants until recent times. Today they are in fashion. They have character and subtleties which suit modern tastes. Pride of place for showiness must go to *Euphorbia griffithii*. The form usually offered is called "Fireglow" but whether it really differs from the species I do not know. The bright orangy red of the stems and bracts reminds us that it is related to the poinsettia. This is a slow spreading, rhizomatous perennial which does best in heavy moist soil. The emerging shoots in the spring look like buds of red asparagus. The plant is at its best as I write this article.

Of similar general character and coming from the same region (Northern India) is *E. sikkimensis* but this has yellowish green heads in the late

summer. Both these species die to the ground each winter.

The growth characteristics of the euphorbias vary considerably. *E. robbiae* is evergreen and is invasive by means of root buds which are freely produced, even on quite thin roots some distance from the parent plant. It is an excellent ground-cover plant and an attractive spring flowerer. The native *E. cyparissias* reproduces similarly but is less vigorous and quite a dainty little plant for the odd corner.

E. wulfenii and *E. characias* are short-lived plants relying on seed for their continuance. They make large bushes and may survive for a couple of years but they become untidy and are then best removed if nature does not kill them off first. Few survived last winter but seedlings are now coming up by the hundred. The flowers are greenish with black centres. A good permanent, only slightly invasive, perennial species, is *E. dulcis*. This has greenish flowers of no special merit but in the autumn the foliage and bracts take on bright autumn tints, blackish, purplish, scarlet and orange in unusual juxtaposition. In two weeks it lives its entire year.