

The Autumn garden

By R. W. Sidwell

The appreciation of autumn colour is a noteworthy 20th century development in the gardens of Britain.

I use the term "autumn colour" in the sense of brightly coloured fruits and the changing tints of deciduous foliage.

The late 19th century and the first 20 years of this saw the introduction from the Far East and elsewhere of many remarkable trees and shrubs which were outstanding in this field. Maples, berberis, cotoneaster and many others created a new fashion in gardens which probably reached its peak by the beginning of the Second World War but has continued to be a feature of gardens and arboreta to the present day.

Autumn colour, however, is not confined to dying leaves and ripening fruits. There are still plenty of flowers to be seen in this season. Some are just survivors from the summer. Many of our popular bedding plants continue to put on a show until severe frost. Indeed, that is why they are popular. There are also herbaceous perennials which, passing into decline, still help to keep our gardens bright. With all of these, however, one feels that one is just witnessing delayed senility. Even Michaelmas daisies and chrysanthemums, most typical of autumn flowers, seem somehow to be mere hangers-on from an earlier season.

But there are certain plants which seem suddenly to emerge from nowhere to provide us with refreshing new blossom. One of the most appealing of these is *Cyclamen neapolitanum*. From June until August the ground is bare. Then by early September the first pink or white blooms emerge from the tops of tubers, which may be a foot across in the case of old specimens. A single tuber may bear hundreds of flowers. This is the ideal plant to grow under trees. They tolerate not only shade but also summer drought, for they are more or less dormant during the dry time of the year. An added bonus with this plant is the beautiful foliage which emerges just after the earliest of the flowers and remains until June. Even the hardest of winters does not seem to harm it.

Among other autumn flowers are many bulbous plants which emerge just as suddenly as do the bulbs of spring. A few weeks ago I wrote of colchicums and autumn crocus so I will not repeat my remarks about these. There are many others of equal or greater value. Foremost among these must be *Nerine bowdenii* from South Africa. Their large pink umbels on stems 18 inches high are among the most outstanding features of the October garden. Fenwicks variety, which, I believe, ori-



Nerine Bowdenii

ginated at Abbotswood, Stow-on-the-Wold is a variety with slightly larger and deeper coloured flowers. These are fully hardy although there are some nerines which require protection in severe weather.

Nerines are easy to grow. They require plenty of light and will tolerate poor soil provided they have a deep root run. Old clumps may be split up and replanted immediately in the spring just as the foliage is starting into growth. Some of the indoor kinds are dormant during the summer and they are best re-potted just before flowering. With *N. bowdenii* disturbance is undesirable when summer growth has started. They can usually be left untouched for about five years and I have heard of beds being left for ten years or more and producing masses of bloom.

Rather more tender and not quite so easy is *Amaryllis belladonna*, the belladonna lily. This requires a really warm border under a south wall. It may take a year or so to get established and should be left undisturbed for many years. Opinions differ as to the manurial requirements of many of these South African bulbous plants. It has been traditional to apply fertiliser top-dressings to this plant and farmyard mulches were usually seen in the big gardens in the old days.

At Kew, belladonna lilies are grown in borders in front of some of the greenhouses, notably the Aroid house and the T range. These borders are edged with an attractive little South American bulb, *Zephyranthes candida*, or Flower of the West Wind to translate it into glamourised English. This grows about six inches high and, when open in the sun, has starry white flowers somewhat crocus-like. The flowers persist for several weeks during September and October.

A change in colour among these autumn-flowering bulbous plants is provided by the yellow *Sternbergia lutea*. This is a plant of the Eastern Mediterranean and is somewhat allied to colchicum. Once again we have a plant that requires full sun and good drainage. They do not

always flower well but when they are established and happy their crocus-like flowers are very acceptable.

Returning once more to the larger South African bulbous plants, mention might be made of *Crinum powellii*. This is an early autumn flower and will usually be over in September. The stems may be three feet high and bear large amaryllis-like flowers of pale pink or white. Again we find the need for maximum light and a warm site. *Crinum* bulbs are very large with exceptionally long necks. Some of the neck may be left above ground but planting crinums is a job for a spade, not a trowel.

On looking round the garden here this morning (October 7) I was reminded of another plant which does not seem to fit into any of the categories mentioned above. This is *Clerodendron bungei*. This is strictly a suckering shrub but in hard winters it is cut to ground level and becomes a simple herbaceous plant as it has this year. The large broad leaves smell offensively when bruised but the flowers which have just started to open have a delicious perfume. They are borne in flattened heads on the tops of the shoots and are of a rich pink colour. It is apt to send its suckers up a yard or two from where it is planted and it is not the plant for those who like to dictate the territory a plant shall occupy. To me it is one of the joys of autumn.