



Nicotiana sylvestris

Answers to gardening questions

Some interesting annuals

By R. W. Sidwell

The seed catalogues are now coming in and armchair gardeners are busy planning for 1980. There are certain annuals, and perennials grown as annuals, that are well established as bedding plants. Antirrhinums, begonias, petunias, marigolds and the like have won their place by reason of their abundance of bloom of good colour, borne over a long season without need for frequent tidying-up. But there are times when such plants are not quite what we seek.

Modern shrubs and mixed perennials, many of which are natural species, rely for their effects on subtle differences in form and texture. Sometimes their flowers demand close examination to reveal their beauty. In this company the rather blatant bedding plants are as out of place as a football crowd in an art gallery. There are, however, a number of annuals which can be used for filling gaps late in the season without appearing incongruous.

Perfume is a thing sadly lacking after midsummer in the shrub garden. An impressive plant, five feet high with four inch long tubular white flowers borne over a very long period — from July to November in 1979 — is *Nicotiana sylvestris*. This, of course, is a tobacco plant but not one of the modern hybrids that are almost or quite scentless. As I have indicated it is a big plant but ideal for planting among shrubs to prolong the season of interest. *Nicotiana affinis* is dwarfier and much better known, and it is just as highly scented. Both of these are best raised under glass. They also make good pot or tub plants.

Still on the subject of perfume we must not forget the stocks. These are, of course, well-established bedding plants but their soft colours and rich scent make them acceptable for a wider range of uses. The biennial Brompton stocks may suit our needs even better than the annuals but they are, of course, spring flowering. If you want scent alone and do not mind a plant looking a bit shabby try Night Scented Stock *Matthiola bicornis*. Just scatter a bit of seed about in any vacant spot.

Daisies are usually acceptable. The modern strains of *Arctotis* have some delightful shades of fawn, buff, orange and coppery pink looking well against soft grey foliage and sprawling elegantly over vacant spots. More compact and strictly a half-hardy perennial which can be propagated by cuttings overwintered under glass in the *Gazania*. A good strain will give a wide colour range from white through yellow, orange to bronzy red. Most of the flowers will have zones of contrasting colour such as black or green, often with white spots. They are at their best in a hot summer and should never be planted out of full sun. They should always be raised under glass.

Alonsoa warscewiczii will make a bushy plant two feet high, covered over a long period with brilliant scarlet flowers. It is one of those plants which shed their faded flowers and does not keep them hanging around like dirty washing. *Cuphea lanceolata* "Firefly" is a purplish red and grows about eighteen inches high. It is really a first-rate plant. *Emilia coccinea* which is often sold as *Cacalia* has small bright orange powder puffs over a very long period and I find it always attracts attention. It is usually sown direct but I find it better to raise it under glass. Modern seed packets are not as full as they once were and more casualties occur with outdoor sowing. If small pink dandelions appeal to you try *Crepis rubra*. The flowering season is rather short but it is very pretty.

The ultimate in blue flowers is found in *Phacelia campanularia*. It is not practicable to transplant it after cotyledon stage so it should be sown in a sunny spot and left alone. The intensity of the colour is difficult to believe. Even the finest gentians

have to accept second place by comparison. Another splash of good colour that is not offensively gaudy is provided by *Portulaca*. This grows only about six inches high and, like *Phacelia*, requires a sunny site away from strong competition. It is, however, best raised under glass. The colours range through yellow, pink, orange and scarlet and include intense amaranth purple.

I find the two common annuals *Love in a Mist* and *Linaria maroccana* useful things for filling odd gaps and they will often seed themselves down and become naturalised. The small flowered violas, although strictly short-lived perennials, will

also naturalise and provide welcome colour over much of the year.

A recently introduced strain of nasturtium known as "Whirlybird" appeals very much to me. This is a peloriate form, that is to say it has regular or symmetrical flowers instead of the normally irregular flowers of the usual nasturtiums. It follows that the flowers are spurless and presumably nectarless. Talking of nasturtiums, a favourite of mine is *Tropaeolum minus*, a small flowered species and the first to be introduced to Europe, back in Tudor times, but it is not in commerce today. I save a few seeds each year to keep my stock going.