

# When the heat is on

John Hoyland talks to gardeners and garden designers about the plants that coped best with this summer's drought

**T**HE summer of 2022 will rest painfully in the memories of most gardeners. Across large parts of the country, weeks without rain, searing temperatures and hose-pipe bans combined to reduce most British gardens to sad and shrivelled remnants of their usual glory. As many plants succumbed to the testing times, however, a few did thrive. I spoke to gardeners and garden designers around the country about how their gardens had fared and which plants had dealt well with the challenging conditions.

It could have been predicted that aromatic plants from Mediterranean areas would enjoy this summer's heat. Lavenders, artemisias, santolinas, rosemaries and perovskias all grew vigorously as the mercury rose, but many unexpected plants also flourished. Surprisingly, one group that cropped up regularly in conversations was roses, with several gardeners recounting that theirs

had performed extremely well this year. At Glyndebourne in East Sussex, the roses in the Mary Christie rose garden continued to sing throughout the summer, with rugosa hybrids such as *Rosa* 'Blanche Double de Coubert' and *R.* 'Fru Dagmar Hastrup' not only flowering consistently, but resisting disease. Head gardener Kevin Martin thinks that the deep mulch the shrubs get in early spring had strengthened them.

## ‘The standout trees were the hawthorns’

Glyndebourne's soil is free-draining chalk, but nearby nursery Marchants Hardy Plants operates on clay and many traditional cottage-garden plants such as phlox and asters suffered not only from the heat, but from the months of drought that preceded it. 'Phlox are disgusting things in drought,' says

Graham Gough. His colleague Henry Macaulay pointed out that eryngiums and salvias continued to flower well, but that the two stand-out flowering plants were the sphaeralceas and *Althaea cannabina*.

The althaea is part of the hollyhock family, all members of which seemed to have shrugged off the difficult conditions. Of them, *Althaea cannabina* was singled out by several people I spoke to, including garden designer Angel Collins. 'It looked beautiful throughout the summer,' she reveals, also commending the prolific flowering of its relative *x Alcalthaea suffrutescens* 'Parkallee'. Mrs Collins noticed that it was the gauras, thalictrums, scabious and other plants with wiry stems that came through the summer unscathed. Her favourite plant this year has been a little-known tall, white thistle called *Klasea bulgarica*.

Garden designer and nurseryman Sean Walter praised the tall perennials *Cephalaria* →



**Above:** The thistle-like flowers of *Vernonia arkansana* 'Mammuth' are proving resilient against dry weather, despite all expectations. They reach 5ft, when the ground is moist, and attract bees and butterflies. **Facing page:** *Scabiosa columbaria* subsp. *ochroleuca* has lovely pale-yellow flowers on wiry stems, followed by handsome seedheads, and was a winner for the designer Angel Collins







*dipsacoides*, *Eryngium yuccifolium* and (once again) *Althaea cannabina* for ‘hardly flinching’. Like many gardeners, he does not irrigate his display gardens, which means that, in extreme summers, they can look ‘rather sad’, as he understates. Among this sadness, he found that some shrubs sparkled. His favourites include indigofera and colutea, which looked completely unaffected and brought an optimistic note into the garden.

The herbaceous perennials that most surprised Mr Walter and other growers are the vernonias, tall leafy plants that have the appearance of needing lots of water and a cool environment. Looking green and healthy throughout the summer, ‘they have defied expectations and contradicted everything that is written about them,’ says Mr Walter.

## ‘Plants with wiry stems came through unscathed’

In many gardens, trees lost their leaves or took on the colours of autumn long before the season was due. This is a defensive mechanism on the part of the tree and should not cause long-term damage. Philip Nieuwoudt of the New Wood Trees nursery has noticed that the field maples (*Acer campestre*), hornbeams and pine trees, such as *Pinus nigra* and *P. mugo*, coped very well with both heat and drought. The stand-out trees were, however, the hawthorns, particularly *Crataegus persimilis* ‘Prunifolia’ and *C. x lavalleei* ‘Carrierei’. More important than the species of tree is the way that they are planted and Mr Nieuwoudt recommends digging holes that are just large enough for the tree’s root ball, as anything larger disturbs the soil structure, resulting in the soil drying out.

British gardens have until now benefited from a gentle, temperate climate and would be unlikely to flourish if the extreme conditions we have seen this year were to continue. We do not know what next year will bring and it would be foolhardy for any gardener to redesign and replant their garden based on one hot summer, but it might be prudent to take a critical look at what plants we grow and how we look after them.

Two years after the heatwave of 1976, nurserywoman Beth Chatto published her book *The Dry Garden*, which was influential in proposing techniques and plants suitable for periods of drought. Fifteen years later, the transformation of her nursery’s car park into a gravel garden that is never irrigated became an inspiration to gardeners and designers and has been instrumental in changing the



Above: *Lavandula angustifolia* ‘Arctic Snow’ coped well with the heat, as did other silver-leaved, aromatic Mediterranean plants. Facing page: The statuesque and fully hardy evergreen perennial *Eryngium yuccifolium*, which barely suffered during the drought

range of plants we grow and in how we nurture them. Gardeners are well practised in hoping for the best, but preparing for the worst. The summer to look forward to would be one of warm sunny days interspersed with gentle rain, whereas the likelihood is that we will experience more parched gardens and scorching heat. For our gardens

to thrive in these changing conditions, filled with plants known to tolerate harsh winters and hot summers, we need to seek out the expertise and advice of a new generation of adventurous designers and growers, our own group of modern-day Mrs Chattos.

*John Hoyland is gardens adviser at Glyndebourne, East Sussex* →









## Hot picks

### ***Rosa* 'Fru Dagmar Hastrup' (top left)**

Not as flamboyant as many roses, this has delicate, single, pale-pink flowers that have a light clove scent. It blooms from early July through to early September and then grows crimson hips. It reaches about 4ft tall and is often used in informal hedges

### ***Colutea x media* 'Copper Beauty' (top right)**

A shrub that will grow in coastal situations and poor soil, as well as tolerating heat and drought. The deep-orange flowers resemble those of the pea family and are followed by inflated pods, from which it gets its name of bladder senna. If a harsh winter knocks it back, new stems will grow from the base

### ***Althaea cannabina* (middle left)**

An herbaceous perennial with wiry stems that climb to 6ft tall. The flowers, pale pink with a raspberry centre, look like miniature hollyhocks about 1in across and cover the plants in late summer. Despite its size, the plant has the same see-through quality as *Verbena bonariensis*



‘There is barely a moment when it is not covered in bees’

### ***Vernonia arkansana* 'Mammuth' (middle right)**

An unexpected success in many gardens this summer, vernonias are relatives of asters, with similar leafy stems and late-flowering blooms. Resembling a small thistle, the purple-pink flowers attract masses of butterflies and bees. This grows to about 5ft tall, even taller when the soil is moist



### ***Klasea bulgarica* (bottom left)**

The 6ft-tall stems, topped with white thistle-like flowers, make this an imposing plant. When it is flowering, there is barely a moment when it is not covered in bees or other insects. The serrated grey-green leaves are much softer than those of the common thistle

### ***Crataegus persimilis* 'Prunifolia' (bottom right)**

A North American hawthorn tree that forms a rounded, compact crown. The clusters of scented white flowers are followed by highly polished crimson berries and, in autumn, the foliage turns bright orange and copper. As well as coping with heat and drought, the tree flourishes in coastal and windy sites 🐦

