Notes from the Arnold Arboretum

*Perennials for Low Maintenance Gardening*  
*Part II*

**Dictamnus** — Gas Plant, Dittany, Burning-Bush

Of all the plants discussed in this article, *Dictamnus albus* (listed as *D. fraxinella* in most catalogs) is, along with Peonies, without doubt the most permanent of all perennials in the garden. The best treatment is simply to leave the plants alone, and they will increase in vigor as each year passes. In fact, the best way to ruin a good clump of *Dictamnus* is to divide it and attempt to reestablish the resulting plants elsewhere. For this reason, it is advisable to begin with young plants of seedling size, preferably started in pots. Even then it may take several seasons before they give the desired effect, but the results will be worth waiting for.

Although it will tolerate partial shade, a sunny location with moderately rich soil is probably best for the Gas Plant. Situations which remain wet for any length of time should be avoided, and the plant can be counted upon to withstand moderate periods of drought. Although it is slow to start, a well-grown specimen will take up a lot of room in the border and it is best to leave about two feet in each direction for expansion. Annuals can be used to fill the gaps in the meantime. A well-grown Gas Plant will eventually attain a height of three feet, and is of value as a specimen plant in the background of the small garden or as a middle-of-the-border subject when combined with shrubs. Staking is not required as the stems do not have the tendency of other plants of similar height to fall over.

The short period of blossom (about one week during July) has been listed as an objectionable characteristic. Perhaps this would be true if it were not for the handsome pinnate leaves which remain in good condition throughout the season and provide an excellent accent wherever the plant is placed.

The name Gas Plant or Burning Bush is derived from the fact that under exactly the right conditions the plant exudes a volatile
gas, particularly around the flowers, and this can be ignited by a match. The author has yet to encounter “exactly the right conditions” under which this can be done. Supposedly they exist during calm sultry evenings while the plant is in bloom.

*Dictamnus albus* has white flowers and those of its variety *D. albus var. ruber* are a soft rose-pink.

**Digitalis — Foxglove**

The Common Foxglove, *Digitalis purpurea*, is an old time favorite, but it is excluded here because of its biennial character. Plants must be renewed each year from seeds and winter protection is necessary in areas of severe cold. It is true that Foxgloves will, under the right conditions, self-sow in the same manner as Hollyhocks. In a semi-wild garden, this may be a distinct advantage, but in most borders considerable time must be spent pulling out the hundreds of seedlings which come up in the most unwanted places.

There are a few perennial species of *Digitalis*, but they are not particularly showy in the border, and suffer from the same over-promiscuity in their seed sowing activities.

**Echinops — Globe Thistle**

If the reader is unfamiliar with the appearance of Globe Thistles, he should make an attempt to observe them growing in another garden before deciding to plant them in his own. Opinion seems to be divided pretty nearly 50–50 for or against this group.

Some people object strongly to the coarse general appearance of the plant, and the harshness of the thistle-like leaves. Others, including those who like to arrange cut flowers, prize the blue globular flower heads which are made up of many spiny bracts and flowers. The thistle-like leaves are white on the undersurfaces and give character to the plant.

Aside from this, the author has a distinctly unpleasant recollection of once having to dig and divide a large clump of *Echinops*. The vigorous fleshy root system penetrates the soil to more than a foot in depth, making this a particularly arduous chore, so it is best to leave *Echinops* alone as long as the plants maintain their vigor. The task will probably have to be faced, however, every four or five years.

There are a number of species and varieties to choose from, but without question the best is the cultivar of *E. exaltatus* called 'Taplow Blue.' This selection comes from England and has
glistening rich blue flower heads up to three inches in diameter.

To be seen at their best, all varieties of the Globe Thistle should be planted in full sun and in a soil which is somewhat on the lean side. Shade or rich soil conditions encourage them to grow tall and lanky. In general, however, they are quite easy to grow.

**Epimedium — Barrenwort, Bishop’s Hat**

This group is well known to a number of advanced gardeners, but has been undeservedly neglected by the majority of the gardening public in this country. Although they will grow well in full sun if the soil is moist, they are best used as ground covers in shady areas where the soil is fairly rich and damp. This would exclude *Epimedium* from many perennial borders and they are mentioned here mainly because they will grow well at the base of a tree if fertilizer is applied occasionally.

The problem of what to plant at the base of the tree is always encountered, and a number of very charming herbaceous borders have been planned around existing small trees such as Crab apples or Magnolias.

The pinnate foliage (some varieties have very interesting leaf patterns) is attractive when the plants are not in flower and is made more valuable by its ability to persist into the winter. The foliage should be cut back to the ground in late winter or very early spring to enhance the beauty of the new leaves in spring. New leaves are pale green, tinted with a delicate shade of rose, but in the summer become deeper and often are mottled with purple. The cooler weather of autumn brings out an attractive crimson coloration.

Many varieties can be obtained if one is patient enough to sift through a number of catalogs. Unfortunately, where this group is concerned, incorrect names abound in the trade.

*E. grandiflorum* produces the largest flowers of any in the genus. They vary between one and two inches, the outer sepals are red, the inner violet, and the spurred petals are white. *E. grandiflorum* var. *violaceum* has pure violet petals.

*E. pinnatum* has small bright yellow flowers with rose-red spurs. Most plants listed in catalogs under this name are probably *E. pinnatum* var. *colchicum* which grows a foot tall and blooms later than *E. grandiflorum*.

One of the showiest is *E. x rubrum* (*E. alpinum* x *E. grandiflorum*) which has large, brilliant red flowers flushed with yellow or white. The juvenile foliage is red, a most attractive asset.

The author’s favorite is *E. x youngianum* var. *niveum*, a hy-
brid between *E. grandiflorum* and *E. pinnatum* var. *colchicum*. Plants are a bit shorter than those listed above, usually only reaching a height of ten inches. The bronze foliage provides a handsome contrast to the pure white flowers.

**Eupatorium — Mist-Flower, Hardy Ageratum**

Only one species in this genus is suited to the perennial border, all others being more suitable when naturalized in wild gardens or woodlands. *E. coelestinum* is native from New Jersey to Florida and Texas, and its pale lavender flowers can be used in the same manner as the more fickle Asters to provide a contrast to the rich yellow, orange, and bronze of many autumn flowering plants. It resembles Ageratum when in bloom and some people will mistake it for that plant even though it does not have the compact habit of Ageratum.

This has been listed in several books as having invasive tendencies, but although it will spread fairly rapidly, the author has not seen a situation where it was out of hand. Best results are obtained when plants are exposed to full sunlight, and perhaps its most serious drawback is that even in sun the two-foot plants may become straggly after a few years and need to be divided.

*E. coelestinum* 'Wayside Variety' was grown at the Arnold Arboretum last year and seems to be somewhat more compact in habit. It is a distinct improvement on the wild form.

**Euphorbia — Spurge**

Several members of this genus have given it a bad name among gardeners. *E. marginata* commonly called Snow-on-the-Mountain is an annual with decidedly weedy and invasive tendencies. *E. cyparissias* can be a great nuisance if planted in too rich a soil, becoming rampant and soon outgrowing its welcome. This is, however, a good rock garden subject and can be used as a ground cover in very arid places. *E. myrsinites* is another species which may be difficult to keep in bounds.

However, *E. epithymoides* (sometimes seen in catalogs as *E. polychroma*) is a neat, symmetrical plant for the front of the border. It grows to a height of one-and-a-half to two feet and produces globular umbels of bright chartreuse-yellow bracts from the end of April until early June. As with the rest of this family, flowers are really not the conspicuous feature, and color is produced by the enlarged bracts which surround the true flowers. The foliage remains attractive all summer and turns to a rather handsome dark red in autumn.
**E. wulfenii** is of value for its handsome clusters of yellow bracts in May. It is taller than *E. epithymoides* and reaches a height of three feet. It is an unusual cut flower, and even more so for its blue-green leaves.

All species of Euphorbia do best in well-drained sandy soils and should be considered by anyone who has dry soil conditions. The last two species above are the best and they can be expected to last for many years with very little attention. In fact, all Euphorbias resent being disturbed when well established and it is better to start with young plants than with divisions.

**Filipendula — Meadow-sweet, Dropwort**

This genus used to be included with Spiraea, and unfortunately, like Astilbe, it can still be found by this name in some catalogs. *Filipendulas* are usually grown for their large feathery panicles of numerous small flowers. Several of the species in common cultivation are quite tall and suitable for the rear of the border, used in combination with shrubs, or as woodland or streamside plantings.

*F. hexapetala*, the Dropwort, seldom exceeds two feet, however, and is an excellent border subject. The fern-like foliage is especially pleasing and can be used to advantage to tone down the leaves of certain coarser plants. The creamy-white flower panicles are produced in June. It is another plant for those who have poor dry soils, as it will succeed in such locations if fertilizer is given from time to time. Occasionally one can find the beautiful double-flowered form *E. hexapetala* 'Flore-Plena.' This is lower, to fifteen inches tall, and well worth the effort to locate in nurseries.

*F. rubra*, Queen-of-the-Prairie, is one of the best back-of-the-border plants. It grows from four to six feet tall and produces large terminal clusters of small pink flowers in June and July. Its variety *F. rubra* var. *venusta* (Martha Washington Plume in some catalogs) is a much better form with deep pink flowers.

*F. ulmaria*, Queen-of-the-Meadow, is another tall species which will reach four to five feet in height under good conditions. This is a Eurasian species which is now rather widely naturalized in New England.

*Filipendulas* are of added value because they can go for many years without needing to be divided. A possible drawback to the last two species discussed above is that watering is essential during dry periods and these are best planted in moist, fertile soil.
Gaillardia — Blanket-Flower

Gaillardias can cause great disappointment unless they are grown in a very well-drained soil. Even then, permanence is somewhat questionable. Many types sprawl unless staked early, and the best ones are seldom very hardy. Some people are greatly attracted to the bright color of the flowers, others think them too gaudy. Some varieties are advertised to bloom on and on during the summer, and this is true if one is careful to remove dead and fading flower heads faithfully.

One member of the Arboretum staff has suggested that these might best be used for colonizing gravel heaps, and although this suggestion might have some merit, it must be said that Gaillardias are best left to those with the time and patience to cater to their specialized needs. For those in this latter category, some of the good varieties to watch for in catalogs are as follows: G. 'Burgundy' — deep red, two feet; G. 'Goblin' — red and yellow, one foot; G. 'Sun Dance' — red with yellow edges; and G. 'Sun Gold' — yellow, two feet.

Geranium — Cranesbill

These are sometimes confused with Pelargonium (whose common name, unfortunately, is Geranium), a showy group of great value as pot plants and for summer bedding. True Geraniums come from temperate parts of the world. Some (but not all) of the handsome species are hardy as far north as Boston and among them are several which will adapt well to low-maintenance plantings.

The most commonly planted is G. sanguineum, a plant which forms a mound about a foot tall and two feet in diameter and produces rose-purple flowers in profusion from May until early August. The attractive leaves turn bright red in late autumn. G. sanguineum var. album has attractive white flowers and those of the selection G. sanguineum 'Johnson's Blue' are a good bright blue. G. sanguineum var. prostratum (still in most catalogs as G. lancastriense or G. sanguineum var. lancastriense) forms a neat mat of foliage seldom over six inches high with freely borne light pink flowers with red veins.

It would be a mistake to plant any of the above in an overly rich soil as they may spread too rapidly and have to be divided after a few years. Although they will withstand light shade, flowering will be more profuse in full sun. Under this latter condition, plants should be able to remain undisturbed for a number of years. Sometimes grasses can invade an old clump to such an extent that it will have to be lifted and divided.
Another nearly indestructible hardy species is *G. grandiflorum*. This species is usually only a foot high and produces large purple-blue flowers with red veins in clusters on fifteen-inch stems from May to July. *G. grandiflorum* var. *alpinum* is a smaller plant with larger, nearly true-blue flowers. As with *G. sanguineum* an overly rich soil encourages excessive spreading tendencies.

**Geum — Avens**

Geums have had a bad name among gardeners in the Boston area for some time. Many people have heard glowing reports of the wonderful flower colors but have been dismayed when their newly acquired plants have died during the first winter. A number of beautiful cultivars such as 'Mrs. Bradshaw' and 'Lady Stratheden' are derived from *G. chiloense* which is reliably hardy only as far north as Long Island. These are the ones which have caused the trouble and they should be avoided in our area.

*G. coccineum*, a species with bright orange-red flowers, is native to Asia Minor and Southern Europe. Breeders have selected hardy forms of this and crossed them with the less hardy *G. chiloense* to produce a remarkably showy and valuable group of cultivars which are quite hardy in our area and which do not require the biennial divisions necessary to maintain the old selections of *G. chiloense*.

Several of the outstanding newer hybrids to watch out for and try are as follows: *G. 'Dolly North'* — flowers gold overlaid with orange; *G. 'Fire Opal'* — flowers rich red with bronzy overtones; *G. 'Princess Juliana'* — flowers clear rich orange; *G. 'Red Wings'* — flowers scarlet; *G. 'Wilton Ruby'* — flowers ruby-red.

These hybrids grow to two-and-a-half feet tall and bloom from May to July. Young plants are slow to start and it may take a year or two for them to become established. Those who have been disappointed with the old cultivars of *G. chiloense* should be aware of this latter characteristic before making hasty conclusions about the newer ones.

**Gypsophila — Baby's-breath, Chalk-plant**

The latter common name given above and the generic name derived from the Greek word which means lime-loving give one of the main clues to success with this group. It is wise to have the soil tested before growing most perennials, and this is particularly so with *Gypsophila*. If the reaction is lower than
pH 6, ground limestone should be applied to bring it up to pH 7 or pH 7.5. One other soil condition is equally as necessary if success is to be achieved. Gypsophilas will not overwinter in moist soggy soils and a well-drained sunny situation is essential. Further care should be taken in choosing a good location because all except the dwarf varieties of Baby's-breath take up a lot of room, and once established the thick fleshy roots resent any disturbance.

This may seem a rather long list of requirements for a plant that is included in a list of supposedly maintenance-free garden subjects. These requirements are, however, relatively simple if properly understood; and once established the plants can be expected to last for years if they receive the necessary dose of ground limestone from time to time. Many people who use relatively low-maintenance plants soon discover that mulching not only cuts down on the incidence of certain weeds, but improves the growth response of many plants. Baby's-breath will benefit from this in still another way, as a mulch will help prevent the thick fleshy roots from being heaved in the winter. The mulch, however, should not cover the crown of the plant or rotting may occur before the ground becomes completely frozen. In the coldest of winters in the Boston area, some plants of Gypsophila may be killed and a good mulching may prevent this.

The best and probably the easiest to obtain of the cultivars of G. paniculata is the double white G. 'Bristol Fairy.' This is an extremely vigorous plant which can eventually fill up an area in the border four feet wide, with stems three feet high. It has long been known that by proper placement of Gypsophila the large gaps left by the withering of early flowering plants such as Oriental poppies and Dicentra spectabilis can be filled. Other varieties of G. paniculata include G. paniculata 'Perfecta,' a recent introduction from Europe with flowers supposedly twice the size of G. 'Bristol Fairy,' and G. paniculata 'Pink Fairy' a form with fully-double pink flowers.

_Helenium — Sneezewood_

Cultivars of our native H. autumnale have long been considered essential for fall color in the border. The older forms grow from four to six feet tall and must be divided, if not every other year, then every third year, to maintain any semblance whatever of tidiness. Fortunately there are several newer cultivars which are shorter, do not fall over or need to be staked, and can be recommended here. H. 'Bruno' has dark red flowers on two-and-a-half-foot stems; H. 'Moerheim Beauty' has velvety
maroon-red flowers on two-and-a-half-foot stems; and H. 'Pu-
milum Magnificum' has yellow flowers on stems that are only
twelve to eighteen inches high.

Chrysanthemums were described earlier in this article as too
finicky to be included in a low maintenance scheme. The three
cultivars named above can be used as a substitute to provide
nearly the same effect at the same time with much less effort.
They will grow almost anywhere, but do best in a moderately
moist soil. Exposure to full sun will help to produce the desired
bushy habit.

Hemerocallis — Daylily

Hybridizers have produced so many cultivars of this nearly
perfect plant for the low maintenance garden that probably the
greatest problem one will encounter is knowing which varieties
to choose. In general the plants are nearly indestructible if
placed in a reasonably fertile soil in sun or partial shade, but
excessive fertility will lead to rank growth and poor flowering.
Although it is often thought that Daylilies can be left to their
own devices almost forever, division at infrequent intervals will
produce superior plants. One of the biggest chores with Day-
lilies is the need to remove the unsightly flowering stalks after
the flowers have gone by. This can be a task if one has exten-
sive plantings.

Professional growers and amateur fanciers are now produc-
ing a completely new race of tetraploid hybrids which undoubt-
edly will be widely popular in the future. Although these can
be obtained at present, prices still prohibit widespread use and
they must be classed as “collectors items.” Gardeners in the
Boston area who wish to see these coming attractions of the
Daylily world will want to visit the Hemerocallis plantings at
the Case Estates of the Arnold Arboretum in Weston.

It would be extremely difficult to choose the best moderately
priced varieties to grow today were it not for the 1970 Popularity
Poll published in the December, 1970, issue of The Hemerocallis
Journal. Daylily fanciers throughout the country have sent in
lists of what they consider the best cultivars, and it is interesting
to note that the six which are most popular in the Northeast also
appear high up on the list of national favorites.

Those especially recommended are as follows: H. ‘Frances
Fay’ — a low-growing variety with flowers of a melon tone (the
melon in this case refers to cantaloupe); H. ‘Satin Glass’ — this
is a new break in the “melon” color, being towards the pale
creamy side; H. ‘Hortensia’ — the top winner in the national
poll with well-shaped golden yellow flowers, the petals are slightly twisted and ruffled; *H. 'Luxury Lace'* — has medium-sized lavender flowers with a greenish throat; *H. 'Cartwheels'* — with medium-sized golden yellow flowers, which are almost round, a desired quality; *H. 'Little Rainbow'* — the unusually colored attractive flowers are pale yellow with blendings of pink, lavender, and green. It is somewhat surprising to note that no red-flowered varieties appear on this list. One of the best of these is *H. 'Bess Ross'* which has good clear red flowers without the brown-red or purple-red overtones present in some varieties.

None of the above varieties are tetraploids, and all are easily available at a moderate price.

*Heuchera* — Coral Bells, Alum Root

For best results in most locations Heucheras need to be divided every third year, a distinct disadvantage for a very charming group of plants. Although perfectly hardy, they are susceptible to heaving during alternate periods of freezing and thawing, and one should take the extra precaution of applying a mulch in winter. These traits are most unfortunate when considering a list of plants to be grown with a minimum of maintenance, and they cannot receive the high praise in this discussion that they would most certainly deserve elsewhere.

Modern hybrids come in a good range of flower colors and the beautifully mottled leaves can be decidedly attractive as well. Some of the good cultivars presently available are derived from *Heuchera sanguinea* or *H. sanguinea x H. micrantha* and include the following: *H. 'Chartreuse'* — chartreuse flowers; *H. 'Fire Sprite'* — rose to rose-red flowers; *H. 'Freedom'* — rose-pink flowers; *H. 'June Bride'* — a very good white flower; *H. 'Pluie de Feu'* — deep pink to almost cherry-red flowers; *H. 'Rosamundi'* — one of the best cultivars with coral-pink flowers; and *H. 'White Cloud'* — white to creamy-white flowers.

*Hibiscus* — Rose Mallow, Hardy Hibiscus

The numerous cultivars which have arisen from the selection and crossing of *Hibiscus moscheutos* and *H. palustris* are not frequently seen in the Boston area even though most of them are perfectly hardy. This is strange because the equally showy tropical representatives of this genus are featured in many amateur greenhouses.

Some of the newer cultivars display gigantic flowers up to ten and twelve inches across making them the largest-flowered
herbaceous perennials that can be grown in this area. Some people object to the size and bright colors as being too gaudy but when grown as a single specimen in the mixed border, striking effects can be achieved. One great drawback is their susceptibility to attack by Japanese beetles. The large leaves become decidedly tattered if such attacks cannot be controlled.

Although they will grow well in an ordinary soil if watered during periods of drought, Hardy Hibiscus hybrids do especially well in moist situations and are the perfect answer where conditions are too moist for most other perennials. They attain a height of four to five feet in most situations but die back to the ground during the winter. One problem is that under good conditions, they seed themselves in a copious manner and all volunteers must be discarded if the good named varieties are to be retained. A number of the newer cultivars are presently being grown in the nurseries of the Arnold Arboretum, and it is hoped that in a few years we will have a good display of these valuable mid-summer flowering plants for visitors to see.

Some of the numerous varieties which are easy to obtain are: 

- H. 'Appleblossom' — crinkly petals which are light-pink margined with a deeper rose-pink; 
- H. 'Raspberry Rose' — flowers deep rose-pink with a bright red throat; 
- H. 'Satan' — flowers a brilliant fire-engine red; 
- H. 'Snow White' — a shorter plant (about three-and-a-half feet) with pure white flowers; 
- H. 'Snow Queen' — the white flowers have wide, overlapping, crinkled petals and a deep red throat; 
- H. 'Super Clown' — flowers white and pink; 
- H. 'Super Red' — the medium-sized flowers dark red; 
- H. 'Super Rose' — brilliant rose flowers up to ten inches in diameter; 
- H. 'White Beauty' — pure white flowers ten inches in diameter with a red throat. Many other cultivars are on the market and there will undoubtedly be an upswing in interest in this group before long.

Hosta — Plaintain-lily

If given a proper location as regards both soil and light, this can be another large group to delight the gardener who cannot spend a lot of time pampering his plants. A moderately rich soil with partial shade (preferably the shade of high trees) is about all that Hostas require to develop into majestic, eye-catching specimens. A visit to the Hosta collection in the woods at the Case Estates can be a rewarding experience as most visitors are unaware of the exciting range of variations in this group. This special planting is one of the most extensive collections of Hosta in this part of the country.
As with the Daylily, the most demanding seasonal task with Hostas is the removal of the scapes once the flowers have gone by. They not only are unattractive but should not be allowed to go to seed, as certain named varieties do not reproduce true to type and the resulting seedlings can be a distinct nuisance. Nonetheless some of the good cultivars on the market today have arisen as chance seedlings in just this way. For an interesting article on this subject and the development of a number of cultivars see Francis Williams and Her Garden Adventures by Gertrude C. Wister, Arnoldia, Vol. 30, No. 4, pp. 148–154. 1960.

There is little doubt that most Hosta cultivars are seen to best advantage if planted singly as specimen plants rather than being massed. This way the handsome radial symmetry of the individual plants can be seen to best advantage. Some of the more vigorous varieties will eventually occupy up to four feet of space in the garden and this must be taken into account at planting time. Some types make excellent ground covers, and when planted for this purpose the symmetrical effect is sacrificed. *H. undulata* with its white and green wavy leaves has been used extensively for this purpose and is often seen growing in the full sun — a condition not tolerated well by most other varieties.

The taxonomy of Hosta is confused and synonyms and incorrect names abound. The following is a list of some of the best varieties as they appear in the majority of nursery catalogs. It should be noted here that they fall into two different groups, some grown for the interesting leaves only, and others for their flowers. Plants in this list have been selected to provide a period of blossom from late June to September. *H. 'Betsy King'* which was hybridized by Frances Williams is grown mainly for its rich purple flowers which appear on twenty-inch scapes in August. *H. fortunei* (often listed as *H. glauca*) has glaucous, pale green leaves with lavender-blue flowers on spikes two to three feet high in August. A number of worthwhile variations exist and are grown as much for the flowers as for the leaves. *H. 'Honeybells'* has very fragrant white flowers with violet veining which appear on forty-inch scapes in late August. The leaves are light green. *H. 'Royal Standard'* has very sweetly scented white flowers on two-foot scapes in August and September. It is grown more for the sweet smelling flowers than for the foliage. *H. sieboldiana* and its varieties and forms are grown for the remarkable large heavy-textured leaves. It is one of the very best of all the plants for semi-shaded to heavily-shaded conditions. One of the most sought after of all varieties is *H. siebol-
diana 'Frances Williams' sometimes called *H. sieboldiana* 'Yellow Edge' or *H. sieboldiana aureo-marginata*. This form has lovely round glaucous leaves which are bordered in yellow.

*H. undulata* has white and green wavy leaves and has been much used in foundation plantings and as a ground cover. It blooms in July and forms a plant ten to twelve inches high. *H. ventricosa* (*H. coerulea*) is especially valuable for its beautiful dark violet flowers on spikes three-and-a-half feet high, and for its deep green leaves. It blooms in late June and early July.

*To be continued*

ROBERT S. HEBB

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Summary of weather data recorded at the Dana Greenhouses, January 1971.

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*Salix lucida with Skunk Cabbage.*
*Photo: P. Bruns.*