

We Love May

for its magical transformations

May has arrived in a tornado of growth and fecundity. It is the all-powerful wizard of warm days waving its wand across our gardens – as if Gandalf or Merlin had landed outside the back door in a great plume of coloured smoke and a shower of glitter. Kazaam! The roses start flowering. Plumpff! The seedlings are unstoppable, Abracadabra! The trees are packed with nesting birds. And Fitoosh! The grass is as lush as a billiard table.

The memories of cold days and colder nights have faded away, and we are off on the magical romp towards summer.

Words by James Alexander-Sinclair

STAR OF THE MONTH

Aquilegia vulgaris stellata 'Nora Barlow'

Once you have one aquilegia, they will always be with you and your life will be much better as a result. The name comes from the Latin for eagle – the long spurs at the back resembling the talons of an eagle. Over time, new varieties have had their spurs shortened in favour of extra petals. This particular one, 'Nora Barlow', is named after Charles Darwin's granddaughter (a very distinguished botanist in her own right). It is a glory of pink and green petals as ruffled as the skirt of a particularly lively flamenco dancer.

Seed best sown as soon as it is ripe. Self-seeds when happy. Good in gravel gardens or free-draining borders.
Height x Spread 90cm x 40cm

PHOTO: TORIE CHUGG



SPRING ZING

You know when you taste something and it is just a bit bland? Fine and nourishing, but needs just one more ingredient to turn it from commonplace to something memorable. This euphorbia will be that ingredient for the mundane spring border. A shot of that electrifying green is like putting extra chilli in the stew or cranking the volume up as the soprano hits a prolonged high 'C'.

Euphorbia characias wulfenii 'Lambrook Gold'

Good, evergreen foliage. Divide in early spring. Always wear gloves when handling as the sap can burn. **H x S** 1.5m x 1.5m

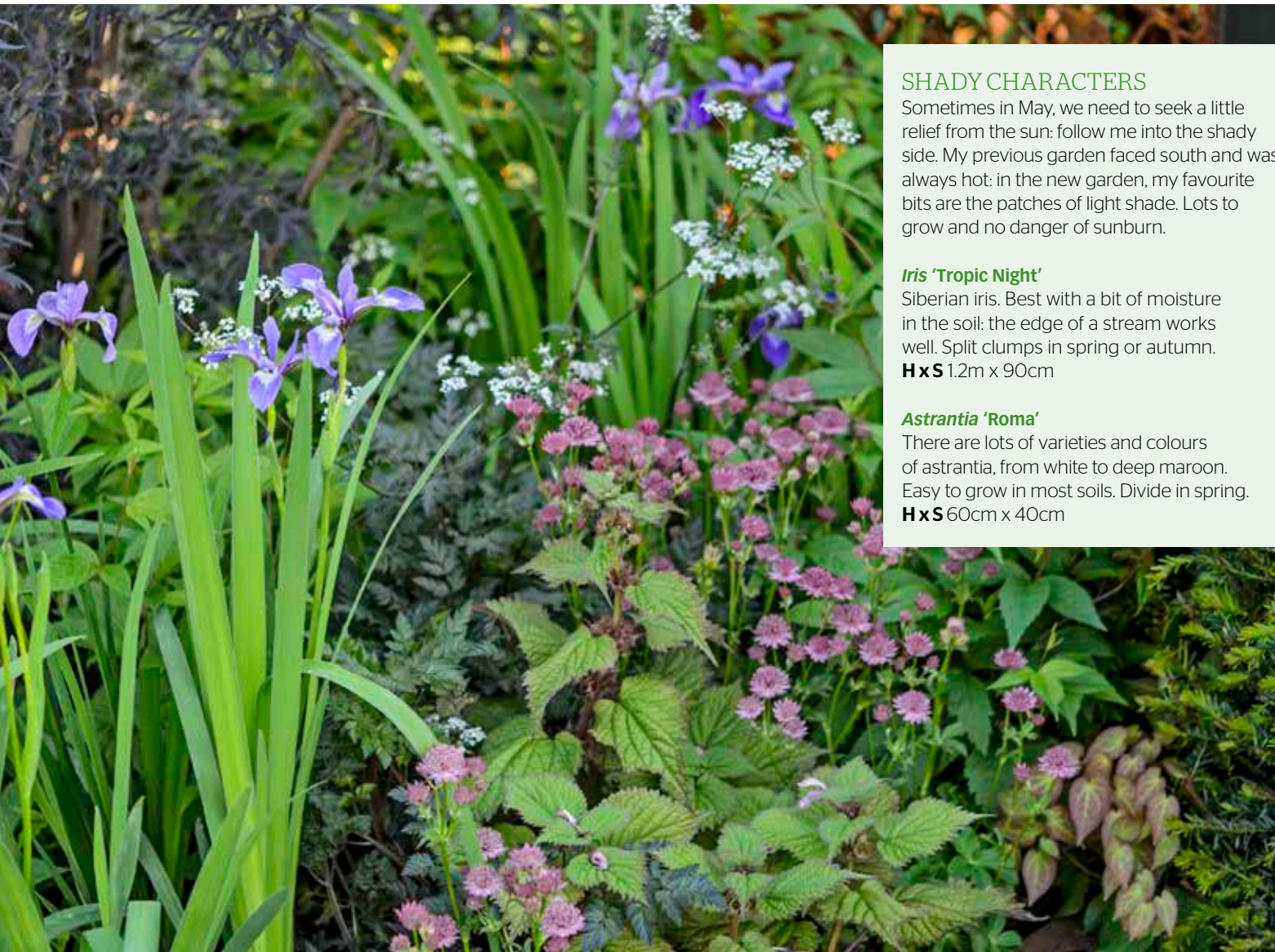
SCENT OF SUMMER

When Ivor Novello sat down at his piano and waited for inspiration, he glanced through the window and, just outside, stood a majestic lilac. The early summer sun warmed the flowers and their sultry scent wafted through the open window. That was all he needed, and the great song of yearning and joy was born: "We'll gather lilacs in the spring again, And walk together down an English Lane".

Syringa vulgaris 'Sensation'

This is a special variety, with white edges to the flowers. Excellent for wildlife. Deadhead carefully in midsummer. **H x S** 5m x 3m





SHADY CHARACTERS

Sometimes in May, we need to seek a little relief from the sun: follow me into the shady side. My previous garden faced south and was always hot: in the new garden, my favourite bits are the patches of light shade. Lots to grow and no danger of sunburn.

Iris 'Tropic Night'

Siberian iris. Best with a bit of moisture in the soil: the edge of a stream works well. Split clumps in spring or autumn.

H x S 1.2m x 90cm

Astrantia 'Roma'

There are lots of varieties and colours of astrantia, from white to deep maroon. Easy to grow in most soils. Divide in spring.

H x S 60cm x 40cm

TICKLED PINK

Rhododendrons are very divisive plants as only some of us can grow them - anyone with alkaline soil should not even be looking at this picture, lest it provoke feelings of envy and resentment that will need years of counselling. Those of you with good acidic sand or peaty soil are fortunate indeed, for you are granted access to the fulsome delights, colours, scents and foliage of the munificent family of rhododendrons

Rhododendron 'Nova Zembla'

Flowers are a glorious pink that almost (but not quite) tips into the brash. Good in either borders or containers. Mulch generously in spring.

H x S 1.7m x 1.7m



PHOTOS: TORIE CHUGG; JASON INGRAM