

A down-to-earth garden tome



IRENE VIRAG

Everybody who tills the good earth needs a good garden reference book. The trouble is that sometimes it's difficult to get past the botanical-speak — the sort of jargon that has as little relation to understandable English as legalese and medical mumbo jumbo.

So, I'm happy to report that I'm enjoying an excellent new compendium that steers clear of this sort of terminal terminology. It's the "American Horticultural Society Encyclopedia of Perennials" (DK Publishing, \$40) — the brainchild of editor-in-chief Graham Rice, who spent four years working with more than 45 contributors from Britain, the United States and Canada.

Along with its clarity, the book is enhanced by boxes on everything from the invasive peril of purple loosestrife to how and when to move peonies. Graham is not afraid to confront an evildoer when he sees one, and the encyclopedia takes *Lythrum* head on. "Purple loosestrife spreads extensively both by seeds and with its creeping roots; it should not be sold or planted." To which I can only say, "Amen."

Graham's credentials include a previous book on perennials that won Britain's Garden Writers Guild Award and his standing as a judge at the Chelsea Flower Show. Both the boxes and the jargon ban were his ideas. "When I sat down and thought about what a perennial encyclopedia should be like, I thought both these elements were important," he told me when we chatted by phone recently while he was on tour in his native England. "So, you'll find boxes on pests and propagation, but you won't find words like *subtomentose* or *bipinnatifid* or *achene* — and there's no glossary, because you don't need one."

Not that it was easy. "The trick was being accurate and authoritative and writing in accessible language," Graham said. "And not using so many words that we had to cut plants. Of course, we had to be selective. With *heucheras* there are so many new varieties — and with *echinaceas* and *hostas*, too. We chose ones that are widely available, ones that won awards, ones that are tried and true. The cover of the book says



FROM THE "AMERICAN HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PERENNIALS"

Trans-Atlantic garden writer Graham Rice, left, is the moving force behind the plainspoken encyclopedia of perennials, right. Among the marvelous photos is the one above of hellebores, top; *Ajuga reptans*, commonly known as bugle weed, middle; and comfrey, bottom.



'over 5,000 plants' but I sat down for an hour and counted them, page by page. There are actually 6,812."

To me, a garden encyclopedia that doesn't require a glossary is as welcoming as watching a romantic movie without having to see someone's backside. The book does have a plant index, but common names come first. And there are lots of marvelous photos, but none are scrunched into the pages like the postage-size variety that many encyclopedias tease us with. Some were taken by judywhite, a well-known garden photographer, who also happens to be Graham's wife. I tell you this not as mere gossip but to point out that since judywhite is a Yank, they plant and weed both at a stone cottage in Northamptonshire, two hours north of London, and a lake house in Milford, Pa.

This means that although he's English, Graham spends most of his time on this side of the pond.

I can't blame him — clearly, it's more exciting here in the Colonies. "Our garden in England is mostly shrubs and landscape fabric and bark mulch," he told me. "Euonymous and roses amid the weeds; honeysuckle up the side of the shed. In Pennsylvania, we have two acres of mostly deciduous woods. We have deer and a black bear that raids the bird feeder. I can stand in the kitchen and see this magnificent creature — we don't have such creatures in Britain; we killed the last bear in 1451."

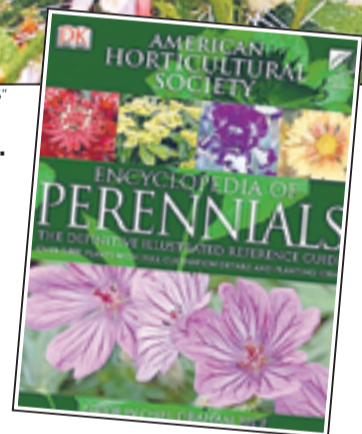
When he's not watching the bear knocking down the deer fence or breaking pots that hold banana plants, Graham is creating a woodland garden with cultivated forms of American natives — "wonderful plants like woodland phlox and Jack-in-the-pulpit, including one with a back-and-white-striped spade that I found in the woods. Shade is a great opportunity to try different plants — wood anemones and tiarellas, *heucheras*, *hostas*."

And, as befits a trans-Atlantic gardener, there's a British edition of the encyclopedia published in conjunction with the Royal Horticultural Society as well as the American edition. So, the U.S. version isn't one of those tomes written by Brits for Brits and damn the

rebels. Or, as Graham put it politely, "gardeners in America are often suspicious of British gardening books because they're written for an English audience but with new and different jackets on them."

Besides, growing conditions vary. Daylilies are a good example. "About half of the daylily varieties are different between the two editions because what grows well here doesn't necessarily grow there."

Taste is another consideration. We Americans want more bang for our garden bucks — especially when it comes to color and impact. Perhaps it's our relative youth as a nation but in the garden, as in so many other avenues of life, we seem impatient, we want instant gratification. "Immediate impact," as Graham put it. "Take the *chrysanthemums* everybody buys now and puts on the front steps with pumpkins. After they do their thing and flower merrily for a while, you throw them away. In Britain, gardeners are much more interested in the old hardy mums that come back year after year. And in North America, the plants you find in nurseries are much larger than the plants for sale in Britain."



Graham cited *hostas* and *daylilies* as the top two perennials in America. A recent survey on favorite perennials by the Royal Horticultural Society showed they didn't even make the top 10 in Britain, where hardy *geraniums* were number one and *hellebores*, *euphorbias* and *heucheras* followed. He devotes 19 pages to hardy *geraniums* in the U.S. edition, which didn't bother me at all. I love them, especially Johnson's Blue and Rozanne.

I like *hostas* and *daylilies*, but *hellebores* and *heucheras* are also my cup of tea. Make what you want of it, but I even take milk in my tea.

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