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Care about Provenance

Were you ever confused about *cimicifugas* and which was which? Well, the situation is worse than you thought and it is my special pleasure to tell you so, in case you didn't know. *Cimicifuga* as a genus ceased to exist on the day that Jamie Compton earned his doctorate for proving it (that's the gist of the matter anyway). All *cimicifugas* are now lumped into *Actaea*.

The purple-leaved one that you are growing is likely to be *Actaea simplex Atropurpurea Group*. Why Group?, you may wonder, and that's the nub of what I want to say. These purple-leaved kinds are almost never raised from splits, nearly always from seed. And seedlings are variable; some come purple, some green, some a sort of half-hearted purple, which the salesman looks at and decides are purple enough to pass as purple. The customer feels vaguely disappointed but hasn't enough to go on to make a head-on complaint. Moral: don't trust anyone. Only trust your eyes and use them before making the purchase, not after.

I am afraid there are a great many cases where plants are more easily raised from seed, giving variable results, than by any vegetative method, which would probably give a true replica. *Clematis recta Purpurea* is another similar example. For some reason, The RHS Plant Finder does not tack Group on to this designation. Yet seedlings are just as variable as with the *actaea*. Actually, you should be able to propagate this one from cuttings of the forest of young shoots made by an established clump, each early spring, but they are not all that simple to root.

You don't have to be too suspicious all the time, because there are several factors, not necessarily inherited, which may be affecting leaf colour. If the plant has been kept at a high temperature or at an unnaturally low light level for a couple of days, which is more than likely in a garden centre, the colouring will become wan. Given full exposure from the start, the colouring is intensified.

There is all sorts of rubbish going around in the *Astrantia* world, because they self-sow so freely. Division of roots is quite a tough proposition, physically, but not so difficult as to be forbidding. In this case, it is a good plan to divide stock when it is still quite young and easily handled. For this you need to carry quite a bit of stock and seedlings sold as the genuine article are a temptation. For instance, quite a lot of bastards go around as Shaggy, that are not nearly as shaggy with long bracts as Margery Fish's original *A. major subsp. involucreta Shaggy*. And the luminous *Ruby Wedding* is sometimes downgraded in the same way.

At Dixter, we have a particularly good form of *Inula magnifica* - at least we think it good but it is currently on trial with others at Wisley, so time will tell. This is a giant yellow daisy with a handsomely branching inflorescence. The daisies should have really long rays, that will quiver in the lightest breeze. But many clones going around have shorter, less impressive rays. You simply cannot trust seed-raised plants, although they self-sow freely.

Pimpinella major is normally a white-flowered umbellifer of no great distinction, whose presence in a hedgerow bank you might easily overlook. The pink-flowered *Rosea*, although not a clone, can be a charmer when the clear pink colouring is sufficiently defined and intense. Jill Richardson, a Lincolnshire plantsperson, gave me my original stock, being seedlings from her own garden. It is delightful in early summer, being a 2ft to 3ft perennial of open texture and, at its best, of a colouring that is none too common in our gardens. But the seedlings are very variable, many of them pale and wan, so you do need to know what's going on and be prepared to be a fairly rigorous judge of your own stock. Don't let it run to seed if you want to keep it clean. (No one will be strong-minded or vigilant enough to take that advice.)

That wonderful foliage plant, *Melanthus major*, is a difficult case. I have had my original group for forty years, at a guess. I rejuvenate it annually by cutting it to the ground each spring, and its glaucous, pinnate and deeply toothed foliage gets better and better right through the second half of the year, often still at its best in early December, but finally, in most years, frosted. It does not yield much material for taking cuttings. By far the readiest method of increase is from imported seed, but seedlings often have less bold foliage, and who's to say they are as hardy as my original clone? I have my doubts. But there's a great demand for *Melanthus major*.

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