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Time for a Fresh Look at Housing as EU Report Shames Ireland

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JANE POWERS
GARDENS



Don't get caught out by the seasonal interlude. Here are some stunners to fill a lull in your borders

There is a phenomenon known to gardeners as the "May gap", when spring bulbs and early perennials have done their bit, and the first performers of summer are still gearing up for their big song and dance. In Ireland, it often begins in late April, but this year, with our desperately slow spring, it might leak into June. Or, if the weather warms up in a hurry, there may be no gap at all and everything will bloom together in a big jumble. So perhaps we need to rename it the "maybe gap"?

Whether or not this year gives us an intermission, you can be sure that later years will. So, now is a good time to be thinking about future-proofing the garden against unwanted late-spring interludes. Plant perennials now, and they will have time to grow to a worthwhile size next year.

My favourite May bloomer is one that causes some gardeners to raise their eyebrows, or sniff in a superior manner. Yes, I know that lily-of-the-valley (*Convallaria majalis*) can be invasive, but it is also sweetly graceful, with its tiny, pure white bells emerging from rolls of broad foliage. Its scent is heavenly, heady, green and slightly fruity, the kind that has you inhaling again and again. It is the basis for classic French muguet-themed perfumes. The neat flower stems – just 6in or 8in tall – can be cut and brought into the house for wafts of fragrance.

There are a few off-beat lily-of-the-valley varieties, including 'Albostrata', which has yellow striped leaves, and a pink-flowered kind (var. *rosea*), but I feel that the simplicity of the unadorned species is most desirable. As for its tendency to take over a flower bed, I see this as a virtue. Plant it in a shady bit of ground that you don't care about and let it colonise it for you. It doesn't care for too much sun, so give it your least choice position.

Another member of the same family flowering around now is Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum x hybridum*). It's a shade-lover and, again, can become too much of a good thing, so don't put it in a prime position. It has elegant, arching stems, 3ft or 4ft long, with flat leaves spread out like dozens of wings along the spine. The white, green-tipped flowers hang in clusters under the foliage. Less-common varieties (available from mountvenusnursery.com) are 'Betburg', which has dark stems and foliage when young, *P. odoratum*, which is mildly fragrant, and *P. verticillatum*, which has upright stems.

Solomon's seal sawfly is a voracious pest. The larvae strip the leaves in a matter of days, reducing the plant to a skeleton. You can spray an insecticide on the plants, but the timing has to be perfect, and you'll also kill all other invertebrates in the vicinity, both friends and foes. In my experience, this robust plant manages to survive attacks. It has rhizomatous roots that store enough energy to keep it going through tough times.

Another woodlander, bleeding heart



Left, oriental poppies put on a striking display. Others worth finding room for are bleeding heart, above, lily-of-the-valley, below, and allium, inset



STOP-GAP TREASURES



(*Lamprocapnos spectabilis*) has dangly rose-pink flowers that bloom in this season. They are reminiscent of old-fashioned heart-shaped lockets, thus giving the plant the common name of bleeding heart. It is also known as Dutchman's breeches, and, rather saucily, as naked-lady-in-a-bath. To reveal the bathing

lady, turn the flower upside down and gently pull apart the two wings on the heart-shaped outer petals, and there she is, all pale and beautiful in her pink tub.

There is a pure white version of this plant, 'Alba', which is even prettier, while the new American cultivar 'Valentine' has bright red flowers. *Lamprocapnos* used to

be categorised in the *Dicentra* genus. Its old mate, *Dicentra formosa*, is another May performer. It has less conspicuous hearts and is best planted en masse in a shady area. It is one of those species that looks best in crowds.

Since we're talking plant relationships here, you might be surprised to know that

the above two are members of the poppy family (*Papaveraceae*). The brash and blouziest of that clan that perform in May are the oriental poppies.

These are unmissable, with their great, crushed-silk petals unfolding from huge, alien-egg buds, and their cartoonishly hairy leaves. Old gardens often have

scarlet-petalled kinds that persist for decades, while those bred in the past 50 years come in shades from white to various sherbet berry tones.

'Patty's Plum', which is the washed wine-stain colour that used to be found only on expensive lingerie, was once a must-have in all posh gardens. All are luxurious and rather fabulous.

We can't mention May without a song of praise to the most ebullient of all early flowers, the alliums, those bouncing balls of May. Plant the bulbs deeply in a sunny position and they will reappear year after year. I've grown many different kinds, and I always come back to two favourites.

The first is the enormous metallic, pinkish-lavender *Allium cristophii*, which is as large as a football in its first year, and which calms down for subsequent showings. It has geometric seedheads that can be sprayed gold or silver for mad Christmas ornaments.

The second is 'Globemaster', which has metre-long stems topped with 6in pale-purple spheres. The flowers are sterile, which means that they are unable to form seed, and so they bloom for many weeks. In a normal May, which this one isn't, they fill the gap nicely.

Grow for it

Last chance in Antrim

If you're up north, today is the final day of the Allianz Garden Show in Antrim Castle. Geared towards families, the event has mini-gardens, plant sales, willow weaving, bush craft and gardening demonstrations. Admission: £10, children go free. gardenshowireland.com



A date with dahlias

Join Christopher White, chairman of the Irish Dahlia Society, Chelsea Flower Show competitor and all-round dahlia expert for a workshop on dahlia growing at Powerscourt Garden Pavilion, Enniskerry, on Saturday May 14, 2pm-3pm. Admission: Free. powerscourt.com



Jane digs...

The Plant Lover's Guide to Hardy Geraniums, by Robin Parer (Timber Press, €23). The excellent cranesbill clan (many of which are also marvellous for May) are visited in detail by Parer, a nurserywoman specialising in the genus.



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Time for a fresh look at housing as EU report shames Ireland

Now that a new minority administration is here, it's time to look at ways this government can improve on previous ones.

One positive step could be to take on board the findings of a recent EU report on procurement practices. Entitled "public procurement – a study on administrative capacity in the EU", it looks at the systems and structures of individual member states.

The report provides an overview of individual systems and gives information on how each administration can improve the quality of their public procurement system, with a view to ensuring "more efficiency, transparency and regularity". Transparency in particular is an issue in Irish state procurement.

Unsurprisingly, the report has identified some serious problems with Ireland's procurement process. This backs up my previous assertions about government spending on housing: the state is consistently missing tricks that would bring affordability by spending money well.

Property procurement is key to the success of housing developments. It is the crucial component in the proposed public

private partnership arrangement to supply 1,500 houses at a headline cost of €300m, and the provision of 22 houses at Poppintree, in Ballymun.

If the state continues its preference for off-the-books housing provision through traditional PPPs, then the use of procurement and contracts will soar. There are other ways to build houses off the books, but even they will require some form of procurement.

The office of the comptroller and auditor-general is the Irish body that examines whether government departments and agencies are spending money

well. As with the EU report, it has recently identified recurring problems in Irish procurement practices including: non-compliance with procurement rules; delays in the process; and the tendency to award multiple successive contracts to single suppliers.

"Best value may not be achieved where proper procurement practices are not followed," the report says.

More interesting – and worrying – is the issue of the perception of corruption. Apparently, this "continues to be a barrier to participation in procurement by both local and

international suppliers". Just under 40% of respondents to the EU survey felt corruption was an issue in Ireland, and local authority procurement in particular constitutes a "corruption-prone area".

This is a damning statistic, but perhaps a not too surprising one when it is set in the context of high-profile tribunals involving the planning process and payments to politicians.

There are also issues in relation to transparency, and this is something seen with the recent construction of the "modular" housing in Poppintree, where it seemed as though considerable effort had gone into making sure as little information as possible came into the public domain, including the final sizes of the houses.

Irish state bodies seem to struggle with allowing the public timely and comprehensive access to data on all stages of the procurement process. The phrase "commercially sensitive" is too handy a catch-all reason for not being open about the use of taxpayers' money.

Another problem identified in the EU report was the lack of professionalisation in the practice of procurement. In other words, often the person commissioning



A new administration offers the chance to take a close look at the issues

the goods or services has little or no training in how to do so to best effect. Fewer than a quarter of those involved in procurement have a qualification in this specialised area.

This is worrying when we consider the legal complexity of supply contracts and the enormous sums of money at stake. In 2013, for example, Ireland was already commissioning work with an

overall value of €15bn through procurement. As many local agencies have total responsibility for their own staffing deployment, however, this is difficult to counteract.

The EU report recommends allowing more of those who are engaged in procurement access to training, as well as establishing a help desk to provide support.

The move towards large-scale

contracts has meant the neglect or exclusion of the small to medium enterprises sector. Again, this was seen in the procurement for Ballymun's houses, where the prequalifying annual average turnover requirement was set at €10m.

Has the design of this threshold excluded non-preferred suppliers? Preferred suppliers certainly face less competition because of this threshold. The report calls for an increase in SME involvement.

It suggests providing incentives to SMEs to form consortia to compete for larger contracts. By publishing information on the pipeline of large projects, SMEs can prepare better, it says.

Finally, the state must speed up the time it takes to make decisions around awarding contracts. In Germany it takes about 58 days for the procuring authority to make a decision. In Ireland it's 148 days – almost three times longer.

As many local authorities move towards becoming administrative hubs for contracting work, both they and the state have a duty to improve their procurement practices and the value for money they achieve on behalf of the Irish taxpayers.

LORCAN SIRR ON THE HOME FRONT

