25 plants

Here are 25 plants that will grow in most gardens.

Herbs

Mint

There are hundreds of varieties of mint, but you can always plant out the stuff you get from the supermarket if you just want to get started. Mint should always be grown in a pot, or a small bed surrounded by brick or paving, because it can spread and take over the whole garden. I have mint growing in a half barrel planter. It did die off completely one year but I took to opportunity to replace the variety with something a bit hardier. Monty Don says not to mix the variety, because the flavours get confused.

Rosemary & Lavender

Like most Mediterranean plants, rosemary and lavender hate having cold wet feet. So, pick a spot in the garden that will be dry, preferably in the sun, and put some grit, gravel or stones in the planting hole before you plant it. It can be planted it in a pot or other container. It will do will on the front edge of a terraced bed or in a rockery. Both lavender and rosemary grow from new wood, which means if you don’t prune them back regularly they can get out of control (leggy) and flop out of shape. Apply the 8-8-8 rule (cut to 8 inches high on the 8th of August) and apparently, they will keep going for ages.

Chives

You can plant out the ones you buy from the supermarket. Otherwise, choose one with a nice flower, great in potato salad, and chuck it in a nice sunny spot near the other fruit and veg. It can go in a pot too, but needs more humus and moisture than the Mediterranean plants to do well.

Perennials

Peony

If you have peonies in your garden, learn to love them where they are! You can move them, if you need to, but they get better each year if you leave them be. There are two types of peony, herbaceous (the type that go into wedding bouquets) and tree peony which are usually grafted onto a different root stock, as are roses. Herbaceous peonies need staking or supporting otherwise they flop all over their neighbours. Duchess de Nemours has a glorious scent, but the blooms are top heavy so consider tying the flower spikes to a cane before they come into full flower. Herbaceous peonies have a relative short flowering period, and can look a little tatty as they die back, so consider surrounding them with something that flowers later in the season. Best in full sun, but will tolerate partial shade, in soil with lots of organic matter.

Hylotelephium

Also known as stonecrop or sedum autumn joy, this plant looks like a succulent as it grows. In the autumn it is topped with small flowers beloved by bees. It grows well in a sunny border but I find it will tolerate dry shade too. Can be divided easily.

Geranium

Hardy geraniums, or cranesbill, are hardy in the UK and should not be confused with pelargoniums, beloved by Mediterranean hill villages and hanging basket fans, which are not. I have a variety called Rosemoor (I think) which is tough as old boots. It spreads along the ground using a tough root, and can be controlled with a bread knife to chop of the bits that have gone too far. Once it has finished flowering, chop it right back to the ground and it may give a second flush of flowers later in the summer. Does well even in the shade, but will be covered in bees all day long if planted in full sun.

Verbena bonariensis

Since they can be grown from seed and propagated from cuttings, verbena bonariensis is an excellent starter perennial. They like a sunny spot, but since they self-seed freely around the garden they will find their own perfect spot within a year or two. It is often worth lifting some younger seedling and keeping them inside a greenhouse or porch in case there is a very cold wet winter. The will be covered in bees and butterflies in late summer.

Penstemon

I was given a penstemon cutting by a friend a few years ago and have been very taken with the ever since. Ridiculously easy to propagate, I find I must keep it pruned back regularly during the season or else one plant becomes five. Bees love the fox-glove shaped flowers. Cut off a stem, stick it in the ground, see if it grows.

Shrubs

Hypericum

Otherwise known as St John’s Wort and grows like a weed in my garden. There are several varieties, and it can make a good hedge too. Can take serious abuse so a good candidate for the Chelsea chop or to practice your pruning technique.

Forsythia

This robust shrub is deciduous, but each spring the stems are covered with bright (usually) yellow flowers that look a lot like a winter flowering jasmine. Takes sun or partial shade, but best planted in a spot that will cheer you on a later winter morning. Can grow quite large, and is a good candidate to practice your pruning skills on.

Weigela

Often chosen for its variegated foliage, it flowers in May and June. Can grow quite large, and positively relishes a good pruning. Foliage may be susceptible to a late frost, but will recover.

Hebe

There are all manner of different hebes, which are usually usually evergreen with a small flower. Like lavender and rosemary, they can spread out and get floppy after a while, and don’t always regrow from the woody part so don’t let it get too big. Hebes are usually quite easy to propage from cuttings and by layering.

Euonymus fortunei

Often chosen for its low growing habit and variegated leaves. Makes a good low hedge or ground cover.

Japanese spotted laurel

My favourite shrub in the garden, the spotted leaves look like they were caught in a paint fight in a kindergarten. This shrub will do well in dry shade under a tree, or in a dark corner of the garden giving a vibrant and exotic look. A star performer, although if you do get berries these can give a nasty tummy upset if eaten.

Grasses

Blue Fescue

Festuca Glauca. “Elijah Blue” sounds like a refugee from a boy band, but is in fact a lovely, clump forming grass. It does best in full sun, and looks fabulous when planted in groups, or as a long edging to a path. It doesn’t like other plants flopping over it, so give it plenty of space. It is easy to propagate by division, another candidate for the bread knife.

16Japanese forest grass

Hakonechloa macra could also be listed as a perennial, as it dies back every winter. Does well in shade, but needs some moisture otherwise it will struggle. Looks fabulous planted in drifts, such as along the edge of a path or a border.

Stipa

Grasses in the flower beds. My grandmother would be astonished. Stipa Gigantea relishes the hot, sunny border and works well as the basis for a prairie planting scheme. However, it was also used to very dramatic effect more than a decade ago in a Chelsea Flower Show Garden, paired with roses and aquilegias. Needs full sun and space to perform. Stipa Tenuissima, or feather grass, is a smaller but an equally tolerant prairie style grass which needs to be divided every few years to maintain its vigor. Will grow in partial shade, I find. Both of these are preferable to variants of pampas grass which have razor sharp leaves that cut your hands to ribbons.

Bulbs

Daffodils

“When all at once I saw a crowd, A host of dancing Daffodils”. Planted in grass, around a tree, in a sunny boarder or just about anywhere, nothing cheers the soul like daffs bobbing in the weak wintery sun. Planting depth is important, so if the daffs come up “blind” every year (that is, the leaves come but never the flower) they may not be planted deep enough. If daffs are planted into a boarder, it’s a good idea to use a plastic ‘planting basket’ to save uprooting the bulbs in summer when planting new perennials or annuals. Later flowering bulbs like alliums can share the same basket and all need to be planted in the autumn.

Snowdrops

Often first thing to start growing in my garden, I have a soft spot for the delicate wave of a snowdrop. There are a surprising number of varieties, and they look best in large groups. Unlike most other bulbs, these are best moved ‘in the green’, once the flowers have finished but before the foliage has died back.

Crocosmia

Known to my mother as montbretia, crocosmias are a reliable performer in mid to late summer especially if the summer is hot a sunny. Crocosmia Lucifer in particular produces tall, architectural flower spikes of a stunning bright red. Other crocosmias are smaller and can spread if they find the right spot, like the hedgerows and roadsides in Cornwall. I have Lucifer planted around my red peonies, ready to take over once the peonies have died back.

Annuals

Cosmos

If you have the space to start seedlings off, pot them on, and plant out once the threat of frost is passed then you are probably quite an accomplished gardener. Otherwise, grab them from the garden centre and enjoy the range of colours. It is possible grow them in the ground where they need to flower, but I find the slugs have them away before they can get going.

Sunflowers

Start a few seeds in a yoghurt pot with a bit of compost, and plant out in a sunny spot near a fence or a wall that can act as a support. Or grow a multi-headed dwarf variety in a sunny spot. Again, if sown in the place they are ultimately to flower, they may be prone to slug damage.

Veg

Radish

There is a reason kids are given radishes as a first crop. They will reliably germinate in the ground and are ready to harvest in about 6 weeks. Seed tapes have the seeds spaced so less ‘thinning out’ is required. If the weather is warm and the radish are left in the ground then they will bolt, but no harm done – the seeds are also edible and give a stronger radish taste.

Beetroot

If going to the trouble to prepare a bed to take radish, then there might as well be a row of beetroot next door. The young leaves can be picked for an early salad, the younger beets eaten raw or lightly steamed and the old tough ones juiced or grated into cakes. Boltardy is a good variety which doesn’t bolt.

Rocket

Nothing taste quite like a rocket leaf picked fresh from a sunny garden. Rocket seems to be one of the few leafy vegetables that my slugs don’t like. Sow where you want it to grow.

Raspberry

Planted against a sunny fence, a warm raspberry picked fresh from plant is a glorious delight. Summer fruiting raspberries fruit on last year’s canes, which makes them slightly higher maintenance than autumn fruiting varieties which grow and fruit in the same year. Raspberries like slightly acidic soil, but if you can grow them they are a wonder. There are a lot of tips and techniques to make harvesting easier and to increase the yield, so growing raspberries is a good introduction to the more technical aspects of gardening.