THE EXPERT GARDENER CHRISTOPHER LLOYD



Stocks for summer

Everyone loves stocks, with their warm fragrance wafting to us as we pass by. But they are not so straightforward to grow well, as came up in a recent forward-planning meeting on seed-sowing at the Royal Horticultural Society's Wisley garden.

We need to appreciate that there are two principal types of stocks: the biennials and the annuals. The biennials are sown in summer, to flower early the following summer. They must be kept cool throughout the winter. If they grow too lush prematurely, they won't last through to flowering time. And stocks will never recover if at any time their growth receives a check. To an extent, you are at the mercy of weather temperatures in any particular year. Moles Seeds (01206 213213, molesseeds.co.uk) has a good selection and my choice of a biennial would be 'Legacy Mixed'. This can also be treated as an annual, sowing in January to February.

That is a normal time for sowing annual stocks, our other group, but in respect of timing the spring sowing of this and many other annuals, there is a great deal of flexibility. If you fall down on a late winter to early spring sowing, you have plenty of scope for later sowings. In fact, with quick developers, sowings can be continued right into summer, which will suit those of us who have little or no artificial heat on offer.



There is an art to growing double-flowered stocks, pictured above

Column stocks, which produce only the one spike and no side branches, are geared to the cut-flower trade. Of the summer-flowering stocks, I go for the 'Beauty of Nice' strain, which makes quite large plants. I find the dwarf kinds, such as 'Cinderella' stocks, too dumpy and congested.

Double-flowered stocks (such as 'Midget Lavender', pictured) are preferable to single. If you prick out the strongest seedlings, you will get a high proportion of doubles. But there are also selectable stocks. You sow the seed at 13-15C. When the seed leaves have developed, you drop the temperature to 10C. There will develop a change of colour in the seedlings. Those with light-green leaves will be doubles, the dark-leaved ones, singles. Prick out only the light-leaved seedlings and raise the temperature to 13-15C again. Eventually, you'll harden the plants off completely, but never let them receive a check to their growth.

Stocks are only one example of annual and biennial plants we grow from seed. Rather a complex example, as it happens, but worth struggling with because I, and quite possibly you, have a special affection for them.

gardenspace

LIA LEENDERTZ

Your questions answered

I want to buy Christmas presents for two keen gardeners in my family. My daughter is thinking of getting an allotment, and my uncle has had one for years. Any suggestions?

My own allotment bible is Grow Your Own Vegetables, by the marvellous Joy Larkcom; my copy is covered in mud and thoroughly well thumbed. It is a no-nonsense affair, but she has other books (with pretty pictures) on the more creative side of vegetable gardening. Your uncle may know all this already, so perhaps Men And Sheds, by Gordon Thorburn, is more up his street. It looks at 40 men, their sheds and what they get up to in them, all documented in lovely black-and-white photos. Finally, both would get great pleasure from the DVD of The Allotment, a 15-part series with seasonal advice and tips for beginners as well as the more advanced. Inspiring stuff for the depths of winter. For details, visit allotment.info.

I have a large trellis that is empty in winter as the clematis ('William Kennett') lasts only over summer. What colourful thing could I plant for winter to cover the bare lower stems in summer?

There aren't many winter-flowering climbers, so try for some evergreen foliage interest — perhaps a coloured-leaf ivy such as the golden-yellow *Hedera* 'Buttercup'. You could plant evergreen winter-flowering *Clematis cirrhosa*, which produces bell-shaped creamy green flowers, or its cultivar 'Freckles' (spotted inside). For summer cover, try cheerful annual climbers such as sweet peas, black-eyed Susan or the Spanish flag, *Ipomoea lobata*. You may be getting excessively bare stems through a lack of pruning. Large-flowered, early clematis such as 'William Kennett' flower mainly on stems produced the previous year. Many people don't prune them at all, resulting in the flowers being borne higher and higher up. In late winter, cut back to a bud. Reduce a few of the stems quite far down, to encourage new growth from the base; this will bear flowers the following year.



Send gardening queries for Lia Leendertz to Guardian Weekend, 119 Farringdon Road, London EC1R 3ER (weekend@guardian.co.uk), giving details of aspect and soil type. We regret that we cannot respond to all of your questions individually.

elegance which, like a kind of Freud of fashion, relieved us of the anxiety of having to dress ourselves.

And, of course, he was lucky. With the timing — the rising feminism of the 1970s helped. Clothes had traditionally been seen as a symbol of the oppression of women. His innovation was casual chic — it's often said he introduced gentleness to men, and strength to women. To which other designer would the new female executive, with her enhanced sense of her own seriousness, turn?

And he was never luckier than in the casting of Richard Gere in Paul Schrader's 1980 film, the extraordinarily good American Gigolo. It was meant to be John Travolta who played the main role but by 1980 he was out of fashion — Gere was his late replacement. Dandyish, narcissistic, the ultimate parvenu, Gere's Julian Kaye intuits all our social insecurities. In public, armoured head to foot in Armani's free-flowing suits, he is effortlessly assured. In private, folding and unfolding his wardrobe, he is like someone rehearsing their personality.

Giorgio Armani is shy, as his friend, the actor Michelle Pfeiffer, points out in her congratulation speech at the Fashion Award ceremony, "I don't know who is the more shy, you or me." And to me he agrees, happily, that he prefers to live smiling behind the walls of his reputation, securely hemmed in by his achievement. "I am happiest in public, working in my world. Then I can be the star. That I can do. When I am not working I am more guarded, set apart. It's not my life, that. I like interactions, but interaction that is not forced." This was clear at the Vanity Fair dinner where, seated at the high table, Mr and Mrs De Niro to his right, Liam Neeson opposite, Armani looked on as if he would rather be anywhere else. (It is the case that he doesn't speak English, has always refused to learn — though he is bilingual, in Italian and French.) Throughout the evening, he kept getting up to check on his friends, sitting at a table in the social equivalent of Siberia, and seemed reluctant to return to his seat.

There was what looked like a difficult moment when one of the Italian guests came over to his table to question De Niro about why he had failed to turn up in Milan to receive the freedom of the city. De Niro, clearly angry, and not prepared to reply, turned his back. The guest told me later that Armani had said to him that he thought he was perfectly right — he had wanted to know the answer himself.

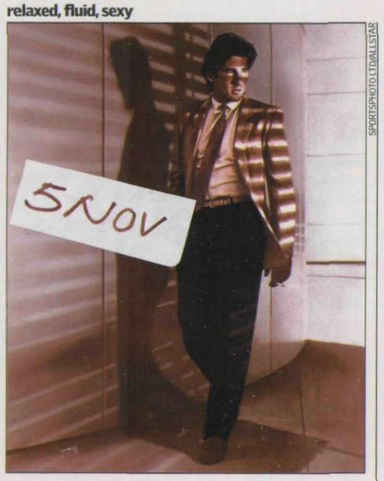
There is nothing sycophantic in Armani and nothing exclusive either. At a private lunch, full of wealthy young potential customers — exactly the clientele you would think he would want to woo — he retreated into a back room. "I like America," he said, "but sometimes I find it a bit much. They can't even bring you a glass of water without a mountain of ice." But the next day, on the second floor of Bergdorf Goodman, Fifth Avenue, signing copies of the Vanity Fair book, a collection of photographs called Oscar Night — to which he has written a brief foreword — he was in his element, beaming, content to stay as long as he could. And much longer than any of his entourage would have had him do. A queue of fans stretched through the store — men his own age; young kids who clearly had no intention of making a $75 purchase; Madison Avenue grandes dames who bought three. Every one was pecked on the cheek and posed for pictures while the assembled paparazzi called "Giorgio! Giorgio!" — the only time I heard him called by his first name. These were interactions that he would call real — each individual a surprise, each with their own story, a live audience.

He looked contented, too, if a bit tired, at the fashion show of his spring 2005 collection, which he staged at the cavernous hangar of Pier 94. His "gift" to New York, he said. Unusually, for a fashion show, he invited not only the fashion press but also the public on a first-come, first-served basis. Before the show he spent hours backstage orchestrating everything from the make-up to the lighting design — and, as he went round, with his nervous fastidiousness, he'd be reassuring the models, correcting their walk, touching them, patting their cheeks.

Even as a small boy, growing up in the ancient city of Piacenza in northern Italy, he used to long for physical intimacy, Armani says. This was partly conditioned by the times. He was born in July 1934, at the height of Mussolini's fascist dictatorship and one year before his army invaded Ethiopia — an action that ultimately precipitated Italy's disastrous entry into the second world war on the side of the Nazis — "that war that was so dreadful for everybody". It was a time of pervasive insecurity — bombs in the night that meant, as children, they would be led from their beds into shelters. Two of his young friends were killed in one of these bombardments. After the war he was seriously injured himself when he and a group of teenage friends found a bag of explosive, which they threw on to a lighted brasier. "Before this I'd had curly hair. It went dead straight and remained straight, as you see." He risked losing his eyes and had to lie in a shaded room for 20 days with both eyes closed. (Until he told me this, I had thought his insistence on wearing sunglasses in the merest light was an act of vanity. It is not.) "My eyes were never as good again."

But the need derived also, he says, from his personal circumstances. He was the middle child of three; his brother Sergio was four years older. And though they were close, there was, inevitably, a rivalry between the brothers, in which Giorgio knew he could never be the victor. "He was the favourite of my mother. He was tall, he had girlfriends. He looked a lot like Joseph Cotten." (Interestingly, a close colleague of Armani told me that one of his strongest character traits is that he has no envy. ➔

The Armani revolution began with the 1980 film American Gigolo, starring Richard Gere (below) — his suits were relaxed, fluid, sexy



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