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Introducing the genus *Phedimus*

By Colin C. Walker

The Eurasian genus *Phedimus* is a member of the Crassulaceae, first described 200 years ago in 1817, so its bicentennial is worthy of celebration. It remained in relative obscurity until 1995 when it was revived and expanded to include around 20 species. Most of these plants will be more familiar as species of *Sedum*, characterised by having flat fleshy leaves that are usually serrate (saw-edged) or dentate (toothed). All are hardy in European gardens and presumably thrive in similar growing conditions in New Zealand. Most are perennial or more rarely annual herbs and many make excellent rockery or ground cover plants. The choicest

species, though, need to be grown in pots. Here I discuss the three species of *Phedimus* that I have experience of growing.

Phedimus spurius is the commonest species in cultivation. It has annual sprawling or creeping woody stems up to 15 cm long with prominently rounded serrate leaves. It grows rapidly to make excellent ground cover in a rockery (Fig. 1). However, this plant does come with a warning note because it can take over flower beds if not kept in check. This is a very variable species and many cultivars have been named. Flower colour ranges from white to deep



Fig. 1 *Phedimus spurius* in my English rockery.

crimson and the form I grow has pink flowers which are very attractive to bee pollinators (Fig. 2). In my garden it spreads readily both as creeping stems and seedlings, consequently from my experience once you've grown this plant you're unlikely to be without it! This species has a wide natural distribution from Turkey and Georgia east to Iran. It has become naturalised in many parts of Europe and probably elsewhere, but I have no idea how common a plant this is in New Zealand.

Phedimus ellacombianus is another plant that's ideal for growing in rockeries since it forms dense carpets (Fig. 3). As with *P. spurius* this species has sprawling, rooting stems bearing bright green, serrate leaves. The

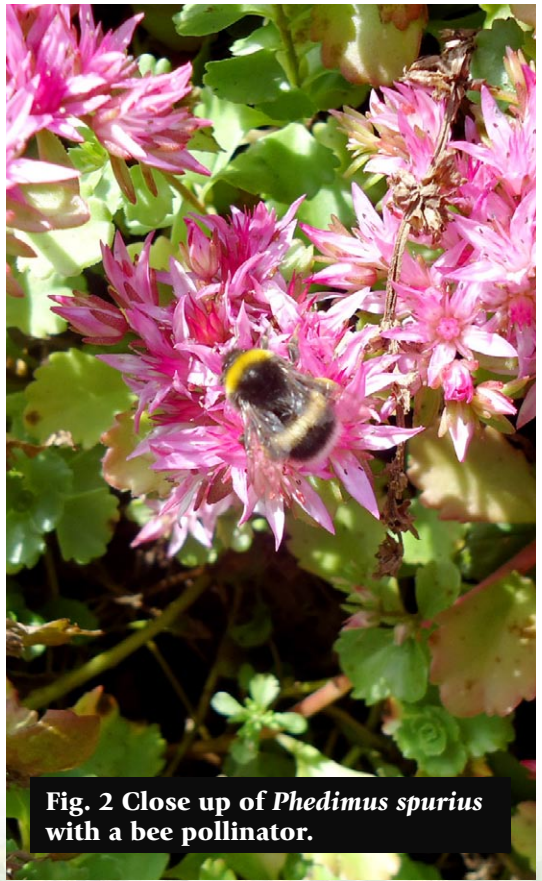


Fig. 2 Close up of *Phedimus spurius* with a bee pollinator.

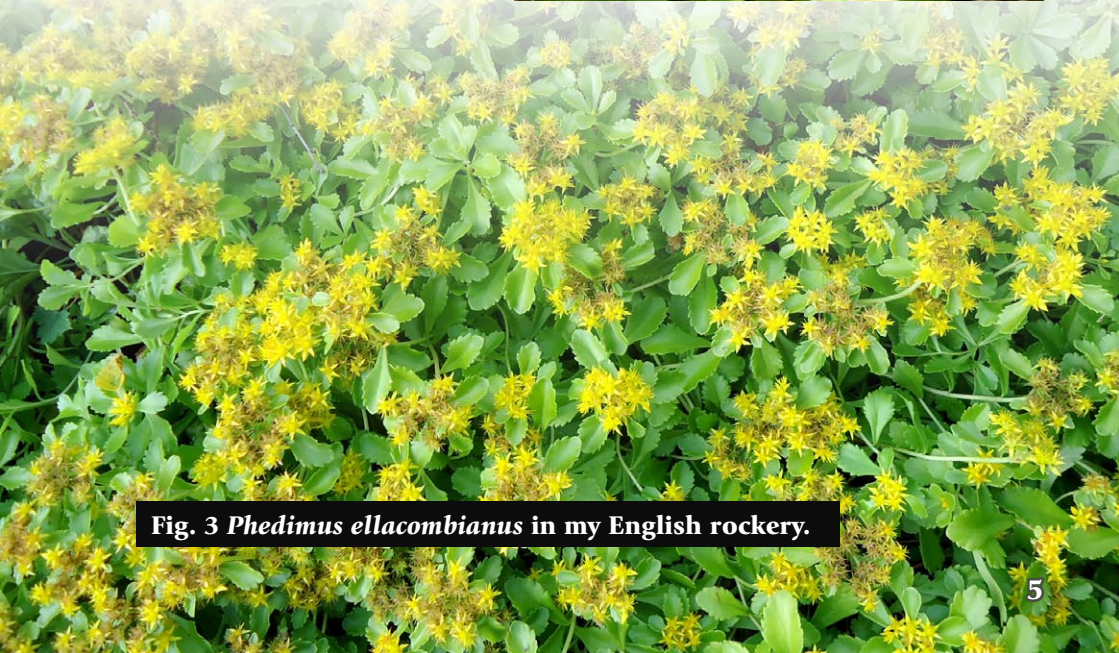


Fig. 3 *Phedimus ellacombianus* in my English rockery.



Fig. 4 Cuttings of *Phedimus ellacombianus* (left) and *P. spurius* (right).

main distinguishing feature is that *P. ellacombianus* always has bright yellow, never white–purple flowers (Fig. 4). In the wild it is recorded from Japan and Korea, but it has long been in cultivation in Europe and North America.

In contrast to the preceding two species, *Phedimus obtusifolius* is a more challenging and hence desirable plant for the collector. In my experience it is certainly not a rampant grower and hence is best grown in a pot rather than a rockery. This perennial species has an interesting and unusual life cycle. In the autumn and winter it consists of small, flat rosettes with pairs of opposite leaves, but unlike those of *P. spurius* and *P. ellacombianus*, these are only slightly serrate and obtuse, hence the specific name. In late spring the stems elongate up to about 15 cm in length, forming the summer flowering shoots (Fig. 5). The star-like flowers are produced terminally in profusion and in my plant are predominantly rose-pink, but flower colour is variable, ranging from white to reddish-purple. After flowering the stems dry up and die back completely, when the very small underground colourless miniature bulb-like buds develop with very small, scale-like leaves, from which grow the autumn flat rosettes to

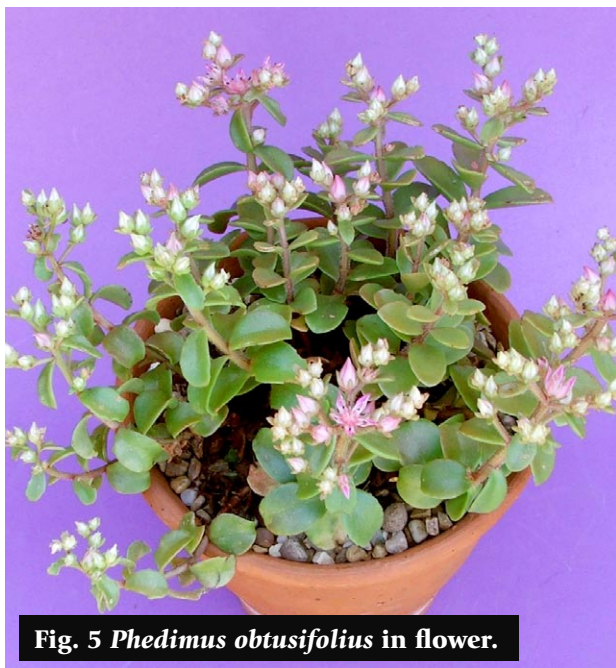


Fig. 5 *Phedimus obtusifolius* in flower.

complete the annual growth cycle, a very unusual feature within the Crassulaceae.

In my limited experience of growing this plant for four years I have had no difficulty with it, treating it as a hardy plant grown in a pot sheltered outdoors in England. Other British growers have reported difficulties in maintaining the plant in cultivation for any length of time.

As for *P. spurius*, this species has a wide geographical range, occurring from Turkey east to Armenia, Azerbaijan and Iran and hence not surprisingly it is quite variable. However, in cultivation it appears to be fairly uncommon, at least in England.

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