

GARDEN NEWS

KINGS, NOT
CABBAGES

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I have to confess to some hurt pride on behalf of the *Verbascum* genus when I recently over-heard someone refer to the mighty Mulleins which grow in Hare Court as cabbages, and feel the need to put the case for the defence for these magnificent plants and how exceptionally well they perform in that area.

The growing conditions in Hare Court are: courtyard enclosed by brick buildings, surface of Myplex over hardcore covered with pea gravel, shallow soil pockets, full sun, high summer temperatures, frost free, no irrigation, swirling winds and heavy pedestrian traffic.

All of which limits the plants to be grown there to ones which will flourish in this near-desert micro-climate and, to be frank, cabbages don't fall into that category! *Verbascum*, commonly referred to as Mulleins, have hairy, sometimes woolly leaves, a protective adaptation which reduces their transpiration rate as well as reflecting sunlight. The large, alternate leaves often form basal rosettes, producing one or more tall, erect stems which bear flowers in dense spikes or racemes. Although the outward-facing, saucer-shaped flowers, usually yellow, are short-lived they are numerous, so their flowering period is a long one. Not a single one of these characteristics is shared with cabbages – they are *Brassicaceae*, easily identified by its floral characteristics of four petals arranged in a cross (hence originally being named *Cruciferae* by the father of modern taxonomy, Carl Linnaeus, in the 1740s), and a *Verbascum* wouldn't be a particular toothsome accompaniment to the Sunday roast.

They are far from being a modern choice for a horticulturalist. Gertrude Jekyll, still regarded as one of Britain's most influential designers, included Mulleins as a celebration of summer in many of the 400 gardens she established; and Christopher Lloyd of Great Dixter fame wrote that they were essential for any garden. I chose two varieties for Hare Court (there are in fact over 360 species of



them, most biennials but also a few annuals, perennials and evergreen sub-shrubs). These are both biennial semi-evergreens, *Verbascum olympicum* and *V. bombaciferum* 'Arctic Summer', grown equally for their overwintering rosettes of white, woolly leaves and for their statuesque blooms in high summer, and are placed so that the proud branching candelabra of *V. olympicum* create the illusion of different levels and depth, and the groups of *V. bombaciferum* 'Arctic Summer' emphasise the luminescent yellow of the flowers. The species originated on the dry, stony hillsides of the Mediterranean, most notably on Mount Olympus, managing to thrive on poor, dry, alkaline soil in full sun – a little like Hare Court but with better views.

I take my hat off to such strong, awesome plants, able to withstand conditions which would wilt an English rose in an instant, and even causes our tough yews to struggle. Apart from their looks, they also offer greater benefit than any cabbage, being long known as an effective treatment for asthma and other respiratory disorders and for alleviating ear infections. Let us all salute their longevity and regal beauty, and not offend their sensitivities by comparing them to cabbages!