



Ursula Buchan WHICH NIGHT NOT TO FORGET?

THERE WAS A LOT OF MEDIA COVERAGE last year of the great storm of 15–16 October 1987 and its consequences. This was just what you might expect, for the storm had combined many of the elements of a cracking good news story: personal loss, courage in the face of adversity, close escapes, a substantially changed landscape and, with it, a changed attitude towards the care of trees.

But it would be a shame if, in the process of remembering that storm, we should forget about the Burns Night storm of 1990. This affected the entire country, instead of just the southern half of England, killed many more people (47 as opposed to 19), and felled 3–4 million trees. That was many fewer than went down in 1987, but we should be in a sorry state if we were ever to care more about trees than humans. In 1987, there had not been so bad a wind since 1703; now there was another only three years later. It was the 1990 event that woke me up to the possibility of changes in our climate, because of the short interval between violent storms, just as it was the hot summers of the 1990s that convinced me that the drought of 1976 was not just a freakish blip.

As a gardener, I fear wind more than drought because it can be so sudden and savage. A summer drought I can prepare for, but a wind can arrive seemingly out of nowhere. It is so unpredictable

that it can confound the most sophisticated computer projections. That is why, for the last 20 years, I have planted young and small, especially where trees are concerned, so that their root systems can develop to cope with the top growth and I need not stake them. In the exposed parts of the garden, I grow a number of trees as multistemmed shrubs rather than standards. And I have planted hedges for defence. It is strange to think that my attitude towards my garden's design is as much shaped by fear as by aesthetics.

IT ALWAYS AMUSES ME how rarely there is anything new under the sun – and especially now we are all tuned into recycling, about which our distant forebears were extremely canny. Coir (coconut-fibre waste) was recommended as a mulch and potting material by mid-Victorian gardeners, for example, and now wool is making a comeback.

Years ago, wool shoddy, a by-product of the textile industry, was a popular nitrogenous fertiliser, and is still used by rhubarb growers in Yorkshire. Wool in pelleted form has been available for a while from GrowAid; these pellets morph into a felt-like, weed-suppressing, slug-deterrent mulch, slowly releasing nutrients. Now an enterprising Cumbrian farming couple, Jane Barker and Simon Bland, have thought of composting bracken with farmyard manure and undipped fleeces to make a potting and planting compost (www.dalefootcomposts.co.uk). I am told that the bracken provides potash while the wool promotes good water-retention and slow-release nitrogen. The only mystery is why those inventive Victorian gardeners never thought of it. ■



Carol Skinner GOOD HUSBANDRY IS ALWAYS THE PLACE TO START

SO, HOW AM I, AS A GARDENER, reacting to climate change? Slowly.

I am not a follower of trends or fashions. For example, I have certain favourite grasses which I have grown for years, not just because they are the 'in' thing. My whole gardening philosophy is to interpret the 'genius of the place', so that when people first step through the gate they feel that cottage and garden are 'all of a piece'. Our lumpy, dumpy, half-timbered 17th-century cottage just does not lend itself to bananas and bamboos.

So global warming is just another element among many others to be considered when making planting decisions. After the first few years of

gardening experience, I learned to think carefully before whacking in plants here, there and everywhere.

But absolutely paramount is the condition of the soil. Plants are like people; if you don't feed them they don't perform. So we now have to be even more diligent with soil preparation. The dilemma is: are we going to suffer from intense, drying heat or are we going to be washed away? Here geography comes to the fore. Everyone has to get to know their site and soil conditions intimately.

After nearly 40 years, I know that my soil is free draining and that the garden is excessively dry. Here, my challenge is to enrich the soil without ceasing, because drought is my number one enemy. Those whose gardens are not free draining and are prone to flooding will be wise to improve their drainage, maybe even making special soakaways and gullies to cope with extreme wet.

Most plants are just as adaptable as humans, but we need to be ultra-observant, to notice what is no longer thriving – and which plants cannot cope with new conditions. A bonus of working with herbaceous perennials is that in one season you can completely change the planting and still have a great result the next year.

I shall go on planting pinks, daisy cultivars, delphiniums, violas and so on. I don't want to move away from my favourites, because it is important not to lose all these tried-and-tested cultivars, and also because so many of my plants have been given to me by friends and family.

So let us be realistic, but not too pessimistic. The watchwords must be serious thinking and planning, observation and good husbandry. ■

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Charles Notcutt ADAPTATION–AND THEN SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

FUTURE CLIMATIC projections suggest that gardeners and the nursery trade will have to contend with challenging gardening conditions: winter waterlogging, more damaging late-spring frosts following earlier growth, and severe summer droughts (especially in the South East).

We need a swath of new drought-resistant plants. Those responsible for plant introductions and development should look to California, Western Australia, South Africa, Mediterranean

regions and southern parts of South America. Likewise, for species originally introduced from coastal or other favoured areas, we need their reintroduction, but from higher altitudes or harsher areas – the guidance and advice of the RHS could help here.

Plants will not only have to survive such direct climatic effects but also indirect ones, particularly the increasing invasion of pests and diseases new to Britain. Each year we see examples, such as, recently, the oak processionary moth. An increasing range of fungal and root diseases are now able to survive our warmer, wetter winters, and in so doing are becoming serious problems for more plants. Such pests and diseases will lead to the disappearance from our

gardens of many old favourites, and some new plant introductions may prove to have short lives.

The severe flooding in the middle of last summer highlighted a new problem: which plants can – and, even more importantly, which ones cannot – survive their roots being suddenly waterlogged for days at a time during their growing season. As these undesirable (but now, it seems, sadly inevitable) natural experiments occur, the RHS, the County Garden Trusts and the nursery trade should co-operate to collect as much data as possible, which can help us all to adapt in the future. ■

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