

# THE GARDEN



## The pick of Garden talk



From January 2007 to July 2011 a monthly column was published in *The Garden*. Called 'Garden talk', each issue featured **Ursula Buchan**, garden writer and author, as the 'anchor' columnist alongside a guest columnist.

A selection of Ursula's contributions follows.

January 2007



## January 2007 ...on her garden and weather

Nostalgia may be a slightly dirty word, but gardeners are fully justified in indulging in it. By the very nature of what we do, we have to look back as well as forward; especially at this time of year. Indeed, gardening is one of those activities in life where there is absolutely no substitute for experience. While the garden is locked up by winter, we have time to dwell on the triumphs and disasters of the last year and, in particular, how the weather spiked our guns or saved our skins. It is not because we are boring or unimaginative that we dwell so much on the weather, but because it has such a tremendous influence on everything we do, or would like to do.

And what an extraordinary year 2006 was. In my corner of north Northamptonshire, where I have lived for more than 25 years, we endured a dry winter, a dryish, cold, windy spring, a wet May, a hot, dry June, a blistering July, a wet August and a long Indian summer, which only finally gave way towards the end of October. Even such a remarkable year, no doubt, will soon fade in the memory, replaced by others equally extraordinary. Long ago, I

took to keeping notebooks to record weather incidents, and daily rainfall and temperatures, so that I might learn from my own experience.

The rain gauge and thermometer add materially to the enjoyment I get out of my garden. And, from the post I receive whenever I mention them in print, they matter to many other gardeners as well. The truth is that almost every garden varies in this respect. Even people who live just a few miles from me have markedly different experiences, I have discovered. The rain gauge and thermometer I use are nothing fancy, believe me: a triangular, calibrated cup, with a plastic stem that can be put easily into the soil of the border nearest the house (out of the drip of any plant) is hardly likely to be pinpoint accurate. Close by, on a shaded, sheltered shed wall, hangs a maximum and minimum thermometer; on the shed's ridge is a weather vane so I can determine wind direction. Although none of these gadgets is likely to be particularly accurate, it is comparisons that matter to me. That is why I write daily notes in a notebook. Let's

face it: there may be no substitute for experience, but memory can play some strange tricks.

The whole morning exercise can take up as much as a minute. Although I sometimes hanker after a proper weather station, I know that too much complication is self-defeating. How useful to me would it really be to know wind speed? I can tell enough from the swaying trees and there is precious little I can do about it anyway.

In gardening, as in so much of life, you constantly have to ask yourself what it is all for. Knowing in what months the most rainfall has occurred, what the final annual amount will be and how this compares with earlier years, matters to me, because it informs my garden plans. With knowledge, expectations can be edited: a dry autumn will almost certainly lead to 'blind', non-flowering daffodils next spring and reduce the display of hellebores; a cold, delayed spring will alter vegetable-sowing schedules; a dry winter means my trees may well suffer stress from drought next summer. Gardening, like politics, is the art of the possible, but the possible is only possible if you are well informed.

November 2007



## November 2007 ...on end-of-season attitudes

November is the month when I am most at the mercy of the malevolence of inanimate objects. Things appear to have a life of their own, taking a malicious pleasure in foiling my endeavours. I feel it most strongly now, when I attempt to tidy away all the garden equipment that I have been using during the summer months.

At this time of year I wrestle with pea netting, a seemingly inoffensive polypropylene material, which somehow resists all my efforts to roll it up into a neat sausage, so that I can hang it from the shed rafters. I grapple and struggle, eventually succeeding in wrapping it neatly, only to have it unravel once more as I reach for string and knife.

Having finally defeated the netting, I pit myself against the hose, which kinks and bends and knots as I wind it fully onto the reel, until I could scream with irritation. My mood is not improved by the calm and orderly business of cleaning and hanging up my tools. In the intervening months, something malign has occurred, so that, when I hang a garden fork on a hook, it bends like some rubber nail from a joke shop, and the tines crash painfully onto my toes. My reaction is unprintable in a family magazine.

While tidying the shed, I come across grease bands, which I remember I must put on the trunks of fruit trees, to prevent wingless winter moth females from climbing to lay their eggs in

branch crevices. Grease bands are extremely sticky, so they must be applied to the tree with care. Somehow, the grease band will always get the better of me, sticking fast first to one hand, and then to the other, as I attempt to unstick the first. With both hands now gluey, I use one foot to prise the band from my hands in a slapstick pantomime worthy of a Buster Keaton movie.

Looking back, I don't remember these petty frustrations in spring, although, goodness knows, the pea netting and the kinked hoses must have been just as annoying. But then, in spring, I had so much to look forward to. Now, however, these putting-away tasks signify the downbeat end to the season and the slow dying of the light.

## January 2008 ...on wind

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. The 1990 event 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.

August 2008



## August 2008 ...on inappropriate foliage

For a while now, I have fought what has felt quite a lonely battle against the excessive or inappropriate use of coloured-leaved shrubs and trees in country gardens, especially where they are not hidden away behind fences or walls. What people do in the privacy of their own gardens is, of course, their own affair; I am thinking more of the impact these plants have on innocent bystanders like me.

Plants have a capacity to 'sport' (mutate), so that yellow- or purple-leaved versions of green plants arise not infrequently, and they have come to constitute a substantial chunk of the plant market, especially of 'novelties'. To show you the strength of my feeling about coloured foliage, I have just cut down a perfectly

healthy, yellow-leaved *Robinia pseudoacacia* 'Frisia'. Sure, it has taken me 15 years to get round to it, but I can finally breathe a sigh of relief that this handsome, but inappropriate (for this country garden) tree, is no more. (I should add that I have planted more than 400 native trees in the outer reaches of my garden, so I really do not feel badly about this.)

Whenever I broach this subject, I get supportive letters in about the same numbers as brickbats. And I quite often meet gardeners of like mind. One such is Graham Cousins, whose 'green-leaf' Orchards Garden in Leicestershire was admiringly described in *The Garden* (Dec 2005, pp894–897). Graham is as keen as I am on the multifarious shapes,

textures and shades of green foliage. He knows the importance of context, and also would not plant a coloured-leaved exotic in the countryside. His garden, bordering rolling farmland, has many colourful flowers, but the hedging, shelter belt and many of the ground-hugging perennials are green. He describes his garden as 'a green wood laced with sunlit clearings of bright flowers'.

One notable feature of this year's Chelsea Flower Show was how sensitively planted the show gardens were – with one or two glaring exceptions. Those by Tom Stuart-Smith and Robert Myers were intrinsically dependent on green foliage. I hope Graham saw them and felt vindicated. I did.

## January 2009 ...on the cost of plants

Whenever two or more gardeners are gathered together, you can almost guarantee that they will have an argument, genteel or otherwise, about:

- a) who should present *Gardeners' World*, and
- b) whether plants in garden centres are good value or too expensive. I think I will duck out of the first argument, if you don't mind, but the second is also an intriguing one, particularly at a time when growers' costs – especially labour and fuel – have gone up so sharply.

The Horticultural Trades

Association has warned that these costs are bound to be passed on, at least in part, to garden centres, but the latter have problems of their own. In your average garden centre (although so many are single-site businesses that you could argue there is no such thing) a two-litre pot of an herbaceous perennial might well cost £5.95. Or more, if it is something a bit rare, special or difficult to propagate; named strains of hellebores, for example, can easily cost twice as much. That may seem rather a lot of money for a plant – but don't

forget you may be able to divide it into three, for free, the following year.

However, if you agree that garden centres are retail operations, rather than labours of love – like a fair few specialist nurseries I could mention – you have to think what difficult businesses they must be. We keen gardeners may deprecate the barbecues and the sun loungers, the chocolates and the chutneys, and the endless Christmas decorations in



autumn, but at least these stay still, and only gradually degrade. On the other hand, plants that look bright and bushy-tailed as they come off the Danish trolleys from the wholesalers can soon become, even if carefully looked after, as weary of life as a consumptive Victorian maiden. If the plants are placed outside, they risk being waterlogged in wet weather while, if under a glass canopy, they can dry out too quickly in summer. Plants that don't sell can rarely be stored for any length of time, and must be binned instead.

If the extreme perishability of the goods were not enough, decent garden centres will offer hundreds of different 'lines', which must be placed alphabetically if customers are ever to have a chance of finding what they are looking for. Plants sell when they are in flower – there is no getting away from that – but they have an infuriating propensity for 'going over'. Estimating expected demand is therefore really tricky. What might have been a great seller last season may well languish this year, for fashion

plays a part, as does media exposure. One can only pity the garden centres, which have to provide on Saturday for the demand created for a particular plant on Friday night on *Gardeners' World*. True, the list can be found on the programme's website beforehand, but you have to be really on the ball to order plants from the wholesalers in time to take advantage of a sudden spike in demand. No, all in all, plants may not be cheap at the price, but I think it is hard to argue that they are expensive.

## April 2009 ...on advice given to customers

Did you know that summer bedding plants make up almost a third of the market in horticultural stock? No, I didn't either, until I looked the figures up. It is a remarkable statistic and, at least to me, initially counter-intuitive, until I consider how many millions of hanging baskets and terracotta pots are planted up each year. Now that April is here, bedding plants have started to arrive in the garden centres. Lobelias, pelargoniums, fuchsias, bacopas and petunias are pouring off the Danish trolleys, to be followed next month by ageratum, begonias, coleus, impatiens, salvias and verbenas, ready to tempt the post-daffodil appetites of gardeners, many of whom have just started to garden again after a winter break.

'Plant Colour Now' is the slogan of the British Protected

Ornamentals Association. You may not know the name but you will probably have seen the slogan in your garden centre by now. One cannot criticise the garden centres for wanting to milk this market for all it is worth, nor for the growers of 'protected ornamentals' for wanting to chivvy them along. But the word 'Now' worries me, since it is so easily misunderstood.

If nearly one in three horticultural pounds is spent between early April and late May, a complex thing like the weather cannot be allowed to get in the way. Yet, in truth, in many parts of the country, a ground frost in May is possible and has the power to melt to mush any begonia planted out in the garden.

One of the most difficult decisions garden retailers have to make – and one made

particularly difficult by trading conditions this year – is when to order plants from growers, and how many. I don't envy them; they have a bunch of unknowables to contend with. What is knowable, however, is that a good proportion of the people who buy those summer bedding plants will not appreciate how vulnerable those plants are to frost damage. And here I think many garden retailers could do better.

I often buy plug plants of tender annuals for containers in April, because I know to pot them on in the glasshouse, then gradually harden them off before planting out in late May or early June. Yet, I have never, ever been asked by a sales assistant at the till



whether I realised that the plants I was buying would need to be protected under glass or in the house until all danger of frost was passed, or that I would otherwise have to put horticultural fleece over them

outside if frost were forecast in April or May. Have you? Of course, garden retailers should stretch their main sales period in spring as far as practicable. But, at the same time, they must ensure that customers have the

advice they need, so that the tender plants they buy don't suffer a check, or even death, before they have a chance to bring lively colour to summer gardens.

## June 2009 ...on opening one's garden

There are two ways in which gardeners measure their performance against that of others: one is the local flower show, the other is the garden opening. Having done too well in our show last year, and not wishing to risk annoying my neighbours again, I have decided to keep away from the flowers, fruit and vegetables and opt for photography, Victoria sponges and mint jelly instead – in which classes I will be soundly trounced, for sure.

This gives me more time to concentrate on the other village event this year, the church's fundraising weekend at the end of June, when a dozen of us open our gardens to visitors on Sunday afternoon. This event is

triennial, which allows just enough years to elapse for me to forget how much work it was last time. Instead of choosing vegetable cultivars for the show bench, I have been sowing like mad to fill in gaps, rubbing aphids off the roses... and weeding, weeding, weeding.

It is harder to open a garden than exhibit at a local show; both take a lot of time, but with the former you cannot anticipate how onlookers will react. Will they go round the right way, will they be able to read the labels, will they, let's face it, understand what I am trying to do? In the past I have opened the garden before all the beds were fully planted up, but no-one wants to see a garden in development.

They can't 'read' it. They want to see the finished article even though there can really never be such a thing. I exhibit the same lack of realism when I visit other people's gardens.

Opening your garden exposes you to the public gaze, and that gaze is not always friendly. I will never forget the remark of a woman who came round three years ago. As she was leaving, she pointed to a 'Duchess of Albany' and said: 'Very nice, dear, but did you know your clematis has mildew?' Ah well, in President Harry S Truman's words (on a rather graver matter than garden opening): 'If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen'.

## September 2009 ...on bees

Have you ever watched a worker bumblebee suck nectar from a honeysuckle flower? What I find so fascinating about it is the way the bee balances on the protruding stamens of the flower to do so. 'Bumblebees are the best', my son used to say when he was small, and I couldn't find it in me to disagree. They are more interesting to a child than any

other kind of bee, because the queens are so comparatively large, slow and clumsy, drone like Lancaster bombers and, if childish hands are very careful, can even be gently stroked on their backs without alarm (to them, that is, rather than the child).

To intrigue our children, we used to name bumblebees 'white

bums', 'orange bums' and 'ginger bums', according to species. The use of the demotic appealed to them and so made these bees memorable. Its use also hid the fact that we grown-ups couldn't



remember their Latin names (*Bombus hortorum*, *B. lapidarius* and *B. terrestris* respectively), since bumblebees mostly don't have the common sort.

Quite a lot of what I do in my garden is now aimed at fostering bumblebees, if only because they are excellent pollinators of my fruit; indeed, they are as good as honeybees, although rarely given enough credit for it. Recently, when I opened the garden to

visitors on a sunny summer Sunday, I was asked why there was great swathes of thick and waving grassland, in what we call the 'paddock' beyond the garden proper. The grassland probably looked a little lank and dull to visitors, and was certainly an invitation to hay fever.

However, for me, it is a draw for insects of many kinds, especially butterflies, and a haven both for small mammals and bumblebees,

which often nest in old mouse holes or in the basal tussocks of thick-growing grasses. Our policy of only mowing paths through the paddock, and leaving the rest to grow tall, has considerably increased the incidence of the commonest bumblebees – *B. lucorum* and *B. pascuorum* as well as our old friends white, orange and ginger bums – in the garden. What's more, I now know their proper names.

## October 2009 ...on mixed-colour annuals

Another gardening season is nearly over, and another quest for single-colour flower seeds in catalogues will soon be upon me. At the Thompson & Morgan trials ground this August, I asked Managing Director Paul Hansord why the firm offers so many seed mixtures of bedding plants, and comparatively few single colours. The answer was unequivocal: 'Because that is what our customers want!' T&M did not become *Gardeners' World* Best Mail Order/Online retailer for 2009 by not giving customers what they want, so it is plain that, on this matter, I am the oddball. But why is it that gardeners like mixtures so much? I am genuinely baffled.

I find that many (not all, but many) mixtures make for horrible colour combinations in the garden. Some *Impatiens* for example: *I. Accent Series*, mixed – a commonly available busy lizzie – has oranges mixed with carmine pinks that make me recoil as if stung by a serpent. It is not that I don't like bright colour; it is just that I like to make my own combinations, not depend on the seedsmen to do it for me. I am presently planting out seed-sown wallflowers (*Erysimum*) and, as usual, I made the effort to source a clear yellow selection (Mr Fothergill's. *E. 'Primrose Dame'*) to associate with some selfseeded, true-blue forget-me-nots for a bright

spring display. It is hardly subtle, but more satisfying than if I had planted, say, *E. 'Monarch Lady Fair'*, mixed. Single colours tend to cost more than mixtures, which may have a bearing. Certainly, I have been known to grow mixtures of expensive *F<sub>1</sub>* petunias to flowering size (purposely starving them in the pot so that they flower prematurely) before planting them out, in order to have the last word over what colour goes where. There is something else I can do, of course: help create a demand by ordering lots of single-colour seed but also ask seedsmen to provide single colours of popular mixtures. Would you like to join me?



## February 2010 ...on snow and sweet violets

February, it is generally agreed, is the most testing time of the year. But until 2009, many British gardeners had, for 18 years, no experience of what deep snow was like, or what it could do to the garden. As a result it was brought home to us how valuable an asset good 'bone structure' can be.

I discovered last year that I was a really committed gardener – if I had ever doubted the fact. Despite acquiring two cracked elbows and a damaged wrist in an accident on New Year's Day, I shuffled on my coat, hat and Wellingtons and (much against my better judgement, it must be said) ventured out the day it snowed, broom in hand, to shift the snow from the fruit-cage netting. This was because the netting will readily bow and break, once the snow freezes. Having achieved that, I brushed the worst of the snow from box and yew hedges, although I left the Leyland cypress boundary hedge (not planted by me) to its fate. By this time, I was covered in snow from head to foot and nursing two painfully aching

arms. But I was cheerful, even triumphant.

It seemed to me a pleasant irony that I had long since stopped advising people in print to knock the snow off fruit-cage netting and evergreen shrubs, since winter after winter had passed without any snow to speak of. Just as motorists had forgotten that high gear and low revs are better in these conditions than low gear and high revs, so gardeners like me had forgotten what terrible damage can be done by the weight of frozen snow. But will the same thing happen this February? I have no idea but, now that my arms are knitted, I shan't mind much if it does.

We think of snowdrops and aconites as being the February flowers, *par excellence*, but I get as much pleasure from the blue and white sweet violets, which grow in dappled shade in my garden, and which appear at about the same time. On a still day, I sometimes catch the scent of them when I am outside but the surest way to enjoy it is to pick a bunch and bring it inside,

to sit in a sherry glass on the kitchen table.

I don't know why sweet violets are so rarely praised; certainly, they are small, but they are hardy, reliable, brave, fragrant and popular with the earliest insects, notably bumblebees. At present I grow only *Viola odorata* and its common white selection 'Alba' but there are many, many cultivars (single, semi-double and double in colours from white through blue, violet, purple to pink). Sweet violets have been grown in our gardens for many centuries; in fact, Gerard the herbalist in the 16th century called them 'the greatest ornament, chiefest beauty and most excellent grace of gardens'. A bit strong, perhaps, but certainly, when late February comes round, I love to see these diffident, charming little flowers open on their fishing-rod stems. When I browse through Roy E Coombs' excellent book *Violets* on the history and cultivation of scented violets, I can see how moreish they could become – especially if we get no snow in February for the next 18 years.



## March 2010 ...on preparing her garden for a wedding

The moment has come, which fills me both with delight and apprehension: my daughter has announced that she is engaged and would like the reception after the wedding to be held in our garden. After the initial intense relief that the wedding was not to take place on a beach in Bali, there was the sudden sharp anxiety about whether 'the garden would be looking its best'. Thank goodness our daughter accepted the marriage proposal on Christmas Eve, so a summer wedding is in prospect, for no gardener wants their daughter to marry in December, however much fun the festive party afterwards might be for the guests.

Early July. I breathed a sigh of relief because, with luck, the roses would still be flowering madly and I still had time to order masses of summer bulbs, especially lilies, to cram into borders and plant in tall pots, perhaps even using them to act as a leitmotif in church, garden and marquee. What is more, lilies come in so many colours that

even the most particular bride should be able to find cultivars to suit her colour scheme.

At this point in my post-Christmas reverie, I was feeling pretty chipper, even smug. Then a thought hit me like a book thrown at the back of my head. Last Christmas, the night-time temperatures were regularly well below zero, sometimes as much as -9°C (16°F). After such a warm autumn, I had failed to remember to protect my *Myrtus communis* subsp. *tarentina* which grows in a south-facing wall border. Now it might well be too late. I had planted this myrtle years before, for the express purpose of providing sprigs to put in my daughter's bridal bouquet; now it was in danger of dying before the wedding took place. I had read that the myrtle in Princess Anne's wedding bouquet in 1973 had been taken from a shrub struck from a cutting from Queen Victoria's posy in 1840, and such a pleasing tradition seemed just right for my girl. I don't yet know

whether the myrtle has come through unscathed. It is now blanketed in horticultural fleece; I fervently hope that the fleece won't turn out to be its shroud.

Talking of low temperatures, one piece of absolutely essential kit for the serious gardener is a min-max thermometer; or rather two, since we need one both outside in the garden and in the glasshouse. So it is with dismay that I have discovered that it is becoming increasingly difficult to acquire mercury-filled thermometers. Mercury is noxious, of course – although I have never heard of anyone being poisoned by a min-max thermometer – but I have found the mercury-free ones are useless, since the vital black markers too easily slide into the alcohol, which is less dense than mercury. And the electronic one I once bought broke after a couple of years. After some searching, I have finally found a rotary thermometer, which relies on a bimetallic spring. This is old technology, apparently, but new to me – and very welcome.



## April 2010...on encouraging beginners

It is customary for me, now that April's here, to misquote Robert Browning to myself while luxuriating in the delight (and it really is one!) of working the sweet-scented soil in a seemingly new-minted garden. All the disappointments, floods and pestilences of last season are forgotten in the delicious sensation of being out in the fresh air, when the sun is shining brightly and there is a warm wind blowing. I married on such a day in April, which is perhaps why it holds such allure for me, but there cannot be many people who remain immune to the charm of a garden on a dry, bright day in spring.

Why, then, do we so-called 'experts' often fail to emphasise

this simple truth? Perhaps we think it is self evident? Well, it isn't. We risk bleeding the enthusiasm out of novice gardeners by burdening them in minute detail with all the myriad practical information that we think a gardener needs to know.

Sure, practical information helps give a person confidence to have a crack at gardening. In the end, though, what gives anyone the courage, energy and enthusiasm to go out in a cold drizzle in November to prune apple trees? It's the hours spent in spring pulling up the early weeds, or sowing rows of carrot seed, with the sun on your back and accompanied by blackbirds singing full-throatedly.

It is hard to imagine it now, but

Beth Chatto (as she often, modestly, reminds us) was a beginner when she moved to her present garden just outside Elmstead Market in Essex in 1960. But she took the trouble to look, ask and learn; so much so that her deep plant knowledge and interest in ecology, together with a creative spirit and excellent 'eye', have combined to make her one of the most universally admired (and liked) of all contemporary gardeners. The golden jubilee of the Beth Chatto Gardens is a great moment to celebrate, and to reflect on, her many achievements. Not that she is resting on her laurels, either figuratively or literally.

## July 2010...on pet hates

At the risk of sounding like an electioneering politician (which I really do not want to do), I spend a lot of time travelling up and down this fair country of ours. While driving (safely), I look into front gardens, and I am now forced to conclude that there are one or two plants that are almost too well behaved for me. Somehow, I end up mistrusting them or, at the very least, treating them with careless disdain.

Which pretty much sums up how I feel about *Photinia* × *fraseri* 'Red Robin'. I know it sounds perverse, even snobbish, to be critical of a plant that is

never wayward, is easily clipped and usually proves to be hardy (if kept away from cold winds). But 'Red Robin' just seems smug to me, with its neat, orderly foliage, and its sealing-wax-red young growths, which are supposed to enhance the effect of the glossy evergreen leaves, but are just plain unsettling. (In that respect it is like *Pieris* 'Forest Flame', which mercifully is restricted to growing on acid soils.) *Photinia* can be put to many uses – hedge, standard, specimen... which somehow just makes me grumpier. Thanks to the prominence given by garden centres to those plants with

coloured foliage that are not much trouble, you see it absolutely everywhere – in the South and West at least. I don't mind, if it's an intrinsically attractive plant: I am always pleased to see *Cotoneaster horizontalis*, for example. But, in the case of 'Red Robin' – well, if this plant is the answer, then the question must be: 'What can I plant that won't give me much bother, but won't give me much pleasure, either?'

September 2010



## September 2010 ...on brownfields and squirrels

'Garden-grabbing' has been a contentious issue ever since a previous government redefined the guidelines on gardens as 'brownfield' sites, making it easier for property developers to get permission to build residential houses on them. Since garden soils are not contaminated, like the land around disused factories can be, there were obvious economic attractions for those developers. A rash of applications to knock down large residential houses, and build blocks of flats in their stead, were granted. In a few years, the look of cities, as various as Guildford, Cambridge, Sheffield and Norwich, changed noticeably. It seems that a worthy desire to enable young people in cities more easily to own their own homes turned

into a ravishing of vital city green space, and the loss of homogeneous, aesthetically pleasing streetscapes.

The news that the coalition Government is changing the designation, so that gardens can only be built upon if desired by local people, must be welcome to many people who live in urban areas. And welcome also to the myriad wild creatures, which require the continuous, contiguous shelter that a string of urban gardens provides, if they are to thrive.

Although generally pro wildlife, I am not keen on aliens that make my gardening life a bit more difficult. Muntjac deer and American grey squirrels come pretty low down my cake list, frankly. Squirrels, in

particular, cause me steam-puffing frustration in September, as they take the hazel nuts from my 'nuttery', before the hazels are properly ripe. I have to pick them before the squirrels do and, as a result, they are not as good as those I can buy in the shops (how shameful for a gardener to have to admit that). Since the nuts have no opportunity to drop naturally, I cannot use the Nut Wizard, an ingenious harvesting tool consisting of a round basket, which has flexible, spaced wires, at the end of a long handle; you simply roll it over the ground and it picks up any kind of nut. If you aren't plagued by grey squirrels, I recommend you order one from the Agroforestry Research Trust, [www.agroforestry.co.uk](http://www.agroforestry.co.uk). The rest of us needn't bother.

## October 2010 ...on best intentions

All gardeners know failure. It comes in many guises. Peas get mildew, polygonatums are skeletonized by sawfly larvae, flowering in carefully planned plant associations doesn't coincide and vital structural box hedges get blight. Some failures and disappointments we can shrug off with a self-deprecating laugh, but others buffet and bruise us, leaving an ache of regret. I knew that kind of failure this summer.

When our daughter said at Christmas that she would like to marry at home on 10 July, I

thought how lovely it would be to have large pots on the house terrace, filled with flowering lilies, of a colour to match the pink, cream and green scheme she had devised for church and marquee. I bought and planted bulbs that I thought would fit the bill – *Lilium* 'Vermeer', *L.* 'Belle Epoque' and *L.* 'Antonia' – to flower in July and August. I thought I might have to force them a bit, as they were planted comparatively late, but there was still a good chance they would flower with great distinction at the right moment. I didn't make

much of a thing of it with my daughter, thank goodness, for, at the time, we were more concerned with whether the myrtle had survived the winter, and could be picked for her bouquet. (It did, and it was.)

I kept the 40cm (15in) pots in a sheltered place in shade while the roots formed, then put them in the sunshine as the stems elongated. I made intricate and attractive hazel twig structures to support the stems, and



examined them daily for signs of slugs and lily beetle. From the second part of June, I watered and liquid fed as temperatures rose and the rain ceased.

Alas, my original intention to force the lilies gently in the glasshouse became buried under a myriad preoccupations concerning tents, caterers, orders of service, mulching, staking and deadheading. In any event, planting them in such large pots had made them well nigh impossible to move about. When

I had a moment to think, I was reassured by the sunny weather. I trusted to luck. These temperature-sensitive plants can be forced into flower for Chelsea in May, so surely, I thought, in a warm summer, they would flower in the month when they were supposed to, even taking into account the late planting.

However, that was to ignore the many cold nights in May and June. By the first week of July, it was obvious that the plump buds at the top of every lily stem

would not open in time. Almost, but not quite. But almost was nowhere near good enough. As the guests walked into the garden, and passed the tall masses of green leaf and hazel twig in the terrace pots, I averted my eyes. No-one said anything; too polite, of course. The first 'Vermeer' lilies, perfectly pink and cream and green, opened on the Monday after the wedding.

I'm sure I'll get over it. One day.

## July 2011 ...on municipal pruning and three decades of journalism

You have all heard of guerrilla gardening, when people stealthily sow flower seeds on traffic islands and the like, but I am contemplating becoming a guerilla pruner. I would like to go out at night with stepladder and loppers and, by the light of streetlamps, sort out the shortcomings of street trees. It is too common to see a cherry tree with a stem growing up from the rootstock to flower, which not only looks rather odd but also threatens the scion. Even worse is the square chunk cut out of one side of a tree's crown to allow double-decker buses and lorries free passage. There is a particularly beautiful avenue of mature *Carpinus betulus* 'Fastigiata' on the side of a road on the northern outskirts of Oxford, which has been treated in this way, and it pains me every time I drive past. Is it too much to ask for local-authority tree

officers to ensure that trees planted close to the road are pruned symmetrically, and all the way up to the top of the crown?

My first article to be published in *The Garden* concerned the Royal Glasshouses in Brussels, written when I was a callow student at Kew in 1977. It was the usual novice mixture of arrogance, ignorance and straining for effect, but the magazine's editor, Elspeth Napier, must have divined some spark, for she kindly agreed to publish it. I will always be grateful to her for giving me the break and so began a happy association with a succession of editors (Elspeth, Susanne Mitchell, Ian Hodgson and Chris Young) which has lasted to this day. Finally, however, after more than 30 years, I have decided to give up horticultural journalism in order to have enough time for writing books and lecturing. The

last 30 years have been a fascinating time in gardening. Increased general prosperity and, with it, the rising status of the garden designer, as well as the development of high-quality garden photography and colour printing, and the impact of enormous tranches of money via the Heritage Lottery Fund, have all helped improve our knowledge, sharpen our skills and expand our horizons. There have been low points, of course, for recessions hit creative gardening badly (even the RHS has felt the pinch) but, generally speaking, gardens and gardeners are in far better heart now than they were in the mid-1970s. I can only marvel at my good fortune in having had the chance to write about it all. So, farewell and thank you. It has been great fun.

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