

Letters

Sweeter beetroot?

Matthew Biggs' item on growing beetroot (Comment, February, p17) reminded me of *Vegetables and Their Cultivation* (1910) by TW Sanders. He says, 'On very light, sandy soils, common salt may be applied in place of the superphosphate and ammonia, at the rate of a couple to three ounces per square yard, a week before sowing.'

In the 1970s, despite applying growmore, my beetroot was struggling. An ounce to the square yard of salt was applied, and the beetroot grew well, though whether any sweeter I could not say. Local horticultural experts I asked at the time believed that salt aided the uptake of phosphorus. **Graeme Richards, Lincolnshire**

Garden mammals

Having taken on board all advice regarding encouraging wildlife into my garden, I have had all

manner of garden birds, butterflies and moths, pondlife, hedgehogs, mice, a beautiful young fox... and a brazen, resident, one-eyed rat.

I have become fond of this particular rat, but are regular rat visits to be expected (despite never being mentioned by nature gardeners)? I am sure my neighbours will not be quite as affectionate if they spot him. **Sarah, Lincolnshire** (name withheld by request)

Breaking the rules

Like Mary Keen, I break a lot of 'garden rules' with care (Comment, February, p21). I have two areas where I only allow white fritillary to grow. When purple flowers appear I dig them up, in full flower (carefully, for the stem is fragile) and replant elsewhere in the garden – or by the roadside where I now have a dazzling display in early spring. **Mary Caroe, Surrey**

CONTACT US
Write to: The Garden, RHS Media, Churchgate, New Rd, Peterborough PE1 1TT or email: thegarden@rhs.org.uk (please include your postal address). Letters on all gardening topics are welcome, but may be edited for publication.



Purple-flowered *Fritillaria meleagris*.

RHS / LEIGH HUNT

Winter chilling

Mike Grant (Comment, February, p15) raised concern about insufficient chilling for fruit trees in the UK being a possible result of global warming. A comprehensive study by climate-change scientist Luedeling and others has shown that the UK will experience no more than slight or insignificant changes in winter chilling temperatures.

Temperatures below 0°C are not added to winter chilling effect, which is at an optimum between 0°C and 7°C. If the climate warms by 2°C, the time that was -1°C is now 1°C, and this will now be considered as winter

chilling effect. The same increase of 2°C will offset the hours that were 6°C and are now 8°C.

Reduced winter chilling will become important in warmer areas such as those in California, South Africa and Australia. **Greg Cullen, Surrey**

Global warming

In recent years there have been a number of articles regarding the long-term effects of global warming on garden plants. Many people are pessimistic, but factors other than heat have to be considered. It could result in some regions getting drier and others wetter. Drought is likely to be a critical factor, but if we take temperature as our criterion, I have faith in the adaptability of the plant kingdom.

Many plants grown in gardens come from cooler or warmer parts of the world, yet many grow well in the UK. Southern USA and Australia have a warmer summer climate than ours, yet many familiar herbaceous plants, trees and shrubs grow well there. In mountainous regions some plant species grow across a wide altitudinal range of summer and winter temperatures. There are plants that are closely adapted to their natural habitat, some high alpine for example, which fail to thrive in cultivation, but such plants can be regarded as exceptions to the rule. **Kenneth A Becket, Norfolk**



Hilary Ward's wildflower lawn in Worcestershire.



RHS / NEIL HEPWORTH

So long to short grass

In February, Nigel Colborn (left) considered new lawn management, questioning the role of a fine lawn (Comment, p19). Here are some of your responses:

✦ I have long been an advocate of low-maintenance 'lawns'. We leave one area unmown until late in August. It is a carpet of wild flowers (red and white clovers, bird's foot trefoil, self heal, buttercups, yarrow, hop trefoil), with little grass. It makes a wonderful habitat for wildlife, particularly insects. This is easy to manage, and at the end of the season it gets mowed down. Seeds of most of these wild flowers are available to buy and I would encourage anyone to have a go at creating such a lawn – it looks better than parched grass in a dry summer. **Hilary Ward, Worcestershire**

✦ Due to my long-standing interest in wildflower meadow management I was pleased to read Nigel's comments on the masochism associated with fine turf. This linked indirectly with the information on mosses (RHS Advice, February, p24) and brought back memories of a visit to Kyoto where I saw a gardener crouching by the path with his horticultural forceps, painstakingly removing the grass from his carpet of moss. **Richard Bisgrove, Berkshire**

Unusual fruits

Berberis are one of my favourite shrubs (*The Garden*, November 2011, pp43–47), and I have noticed more fruit on shrubs in recent years, perhaps because of warmer summers. The fruit, called barberries, are used in Iran in rice dishes. They are available to buy from speciality stores, and add welcome tartness and deep colour to fruit cake and mince pies.

Lynden M Lane, Kent

✦ James Armitage, RHS Senior Botanist, replies: 'At one time or another the fruit of a number of species of *Berberis* have been

used as a food in different parts of the world. However, it is a seedless cultivar of *Berberis vulgaris*, named 'Asperma', that seems to be grown as a commercial crop now. Species of the closely related genus *Mahonia* also possess edible fruit, but if you are tempted to try them beware of the seeds, and note palatability may vary.'

Correction

In *The Garden*, February, p70, it was incorrectly stated that *Pelargonium endlicherianum* is native to South Africa; it is from eastern Turkey.

Replacing peat

Paul Alexander (left) discussed the impacts of peat extraction and ways that gardeners and the horticultural industry will cope with peat alternatives (*The Garden*, January, pp68–71). Here are some of your responses:

RHS / TIM SANDALL



✦ I do not use peat, but I do raise seedlings and cuttings using home-made compost mixtures, usually including coir. My view is that plants raised in my compost do better when planted out (into clay soil) on my allotment, because they do not have to cope with such a difference in substrate as plants that have been raised in peat mixtures. **Alan Colgate, Sussex**

✦ Each year, I buy bags of fertiliser and a small bag of John Innes No. 2. I buy grit, sand and peat in bulk, to last a few years. From these materials I make seed-sowing compost, potting compost and ericaceous compost. If I go peat-free, I will have to buy each compost

because I have not found a supplier of a non-peat inert medium – only composts containing a damp, non-peat product with fertilisers, which apparently should not be kept from one year to the next. This will be expensive and wasteful. **Jeffrey Shaw, South Yorkshire**

✦ I believe that coir is the best peat replacement.

A by-product, it is made using fibres from coconut husks. In the USA, commercial growers and gardeners are converting to coir using bales that are compressed in UV-stabilized polythene bags which expand when water is added, with a water-holding capacity of 70 percent. **Derek Fell, Pennsylvania, USA**



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Highlights from RHS Online

Red, white and blue

All four RHS Gardens will feature planting displays to celebrate HM The Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the London Olympics. For advice on creating red, white and blue planting schemes, visit: www.rhs.org.uk/advicesearch/Profile.aspx?pid=765

National Gardening Week

Between 16 and 22 April, the UK's first National Gardening Week will inspire the nation to get growing. Get advice from the Compost Clinic, or border-boosting service, and log onto daily Facebook question times. To find out more about the programme of events, visit: www.nationalgardeningweek.org.uk

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BELIEVE IT OR NOT

Does planting figs in pits encourage fruiting?

Author: **Matthew Biggs**, garden broadcaster and writer

It is common practice to plant wall-trained figs in pits, to restrict root growth and encourage fruiting.

It is regularly mentioned in Victorian gardening literature, including George Nicholson's *The Illustrated Dictionary of Gardening*, published in 1900 and repeated in modern-day texts. Over time, the technique has hardly changed; RHS Online states: 'Prepare a planting pit by digging a hole 60 x 60 x 60cm (2 x 2 x 2ft). Line the sides with vertical slabs, with 2.5cm (1in) higher than surrounding soil to prevent the roots from spreading outwards. Add a layer of rubble and corks 10–20cm (4–8in) deep, in the base. Backfill, using garden soil (improved with well-rotted organic matter if necessary) or with John Innes No. 3 compost.' Alternatively, figs can be planted in a border and regularly root pruned.

But is root restriction absolutely necessary? Wall-trained fruit such as peaches, apples, pears and gooseberries fruit successfully without it and many of us will have seen untrained figs that have burst from their pit, still fruiting prolifically.

The verdict

Figs are grown against a wall in order to be trained ornamentally, so that they will benefit from the radiated heat, and to restrict their growth to a manageable size while optimising fruit production. Root restriction is beneficial but only effective when combined with correct top-growth pruning – other fruit are restrained by their rootstocks. Unpruned plants will break free, out-grow their space and still fruit, but have more fig leaves than the Garden of Eden. **O**



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