

# Comment

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RHS / TIM SANDALL

## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

### Sharing our gardening lives

Editor of *The Garden*, Chris Young

When I was 18, I spent the summer working in my parents' garden. The plans of shade beds, a new summer border and seating areas may never have quite materialised as hoped, but it was a memorable summer. For, with hindsight, it affirmed everything that I do now as a gardener, and gave a framework to why I believe gardening is a vital part of our lives.

Of course, people garden in different ways and for different reasons – growing vegetables, improving the visual look of their back garden, collecting unusual plants or just making somewhere pleasant in which to sit out and relax – yet these are but the end results of the activity; for most of us there is a deeper motive.

Over that happy summer I realised I gardened for three reasons: to be physically connected to the land and seasons; to submerge myself in the endless possibilities of growing things; and to create spaces that can be used and enjoyed. Every time I now step into a garden, or work in mine, these tiers of understanding come back to mind.

Perhaps this personal-and-shared passion for gardening is at last being understood by people outside the horticultural world. The RHS careers conference, part of National Gardening Week, gave those of us working in the field a confidence to be more proud and loud about the virtues of a career in horticulture (see News, p8, and Mary Keen's Comment, p17). There is ever-increasing recognition that horticulture can help improve self-esteem and communities, whether in towns, prisons or schools. And many of us have long known how good it is for our wellbeing. Indeed, Richard Thompson (patron of the charity Thrive) recently stated that 'doctors should prescribe a course of gardening for people who come to them with depression or a stroke' rather than prescribing drugs.

What is exciting to all but the most reluctant gardener is the widespread possibilities – and benefits – offered by horticulture. We who share this enthusiasm should encourage everyone, whether 8, 18 or 88, to realise that a life with gardening is a life well spent. ●

## FROM THIS ISSUE

*“Much of our wildlife is not choosy about location: it simply takes advantage of areas of habitat that meet its requirements.”* Andrew Salisbury: *Living gardens Part 3* >> Pages 69–72

## FROM RHS ONLINE

**Shows and Events pages on [www.rhs.org.uk](http://www.rhs.org.uk)**

This year's RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show will highlight how community gardening can bring people together and improve their local areas.

New at this year's RHS Flower Show Tatton Park will be an orchestra garden and a 'Celebration of Sport' themed flowerbed competition.

For more information or to book tickets, see: [www.rhs.org.uk/shows](http://www.rhs.org.uk/shows)

## DID YOU KNOW?

### Faster than the blink of an eye

Author: **Mike Grant**, Editor, *The Plantsman*

We generally regard plants as sedentary organisms, rooted to the spot and growing rather slowly. So those that perform sudden actions intrigue us. The seed pods of *Impatiens* are a classic example of explosive action. The best one to play with is Himalayan balsam, *I. glandulifera*: the seeds are edible so getting one to explode in your mouth is great fun.

More dramatic mobility is exhibited by Venus' fly trap (*Dionaea muscipula*). The sensory hairs have to be triggered twice within 20 seconds of each other for the trap to close, and it closes in 0.1 second. The closing mechanism is complex but ion transport and osmosis are involved. The suddenly folding leaflets of sensitive plant (*Mimosa pudica*) are another familiar example, a trick that is thought to deter herbivores.

But one of the most sinister fast movers is *Thalia*, an increasingly popular marginal aquatic plant with spikes of purple flowers. The style in its flower has an extremely fast S-shaped movement, which happens in 0.03 seconds. This aids pollination in its native tropical America, but in the UK it simply serves to fatally trap visiting insects such as hoverflies by their probosces or even their necks. ●

❖ **The Plantsman is sister publication to *The Garden*; [www.rhs.org.uk/plantsman](http://www.rhs.org.uk/plantsman) 020 7821 3401**



RHS / JANET CUBBY

Venus' fly trap



# Letters

## Gardening is a career to be proud of

In the April issue of *The Garden*, Alan Titchmarsh (Comment, p21) discussed the value of careers in horticulture, while in a news analysis of the same month (pp22–23), News Editor Anisa Gress asked how we can ensure students gain the right skills for a horticultural career. Here are some of your responses:

❖ My son is studying horticulture at Hadlow College, Kent. The reaction from my friends to this is: 'Oh well, we know where to come to get our lawns mown'.

I see a happy, healthy future for my son, but a debt-ridden, stressful life for my daughter, with no guarantee of a job after studying English literature and language at university.

Patricia Sage, Kent

❖ Alan's comments are relevant to many of the problems we see today. I did not garden for a living, but have been a gardener since the age of four, when my father gave me a handful of radish seeds to get me from under his feet so that he could get on with his gardening. I will be 90 this year, and still get a buzz from gardening.

George Dade, East Sussex

❖ When I was a horticulture student, at least 40 percent of the course was practical and work began before breakfast. I later became a lecturer at Hadlow College, Kent, which had extensive facilities used for specialist hands-on training on both full- and part-time courses.

This practical training was expensive, but such colleges were subsidised by county councils until the early 1990s. When this ended, extensive reorganisation meant smaller student numbers and a need for 'productivity' by more diverse routes. Although horticulture still had a place, other disciplines expanded, such as landscape architecture, arboriculture, environmental studies – anything 'land-based'.

All this has been the saving grace for many colleges. There has been an increased

involvement with schools and expansion into leisure gardening courses, helped by government grants (where the course leads to a recognised qualification).

I welcome these changes and believe that things may turn full-circle, so that practical instruction once again plays a larger part in training.

Hilary Newman, Kent

❖ I have an RHS Level 2 qualification in horticulture as well as plenty of amateur experience, but am finding it almost impossible to get work in this field. Financial constraints have made a college placement difficult, and I have not found any voluntary opportunities.

I am still looking for that elusive job that will enable me to fulfil my ambition.

Linda Hewitson, Lancashire



In April, Alan Titchmarsh commented that university education 'is not the be-all and end-all in life'.

❖ I wish I had been directed towards a career in horticulture instead of a secretarial course. I am surprised gardening is considered an unskilled activity – people only need visit one of the many garden shows around the UK to realise that there is a great deal of skill involved in growing flowers and vegetables.

Instead of a packet of sweets, why not give children some seeds and a little bit of garden in which to grow them? Perhaps then a few more horticulturists will also start to grow.

Margaret Hutchinson, Hertfordshire

RHS/NEIL HEPPWORTH

**Farmland biodiversity** In April, in a new series on Living Gardens, Steve Head included an explanation of how the intensification of farming has affected British wildlife (*The Garden*, April, pp70–73). Comments in response included:

We have 12ha (30 acres) of woodland and have created wildlife fields on our farm – they are ablaze with wild flowers in spring and early summer, and butterflies thrive. Our ditches are bright with yellow iris and water plants, and intensively farmed arable fields have 6m (20ft) strips around them, sown with flowers for insects, mammals and birds. We have also replanted and infilled hedges. Neighbouring farmers have treated their farms similarly.

Encouragement of gardens as areas of high biodiversity is to be applauded, but to say the more intensive management of farmland has 'resulted in the decline of much of our countryside wildlife...' is an incorrect and out-of-date farmer-bashing assertion. It perpetuates the myth of uncaring farmers and annoys those of us lucky enough to have the stewardship of acres that we care about passionately.

Janet Walford, Somerset



RHS/ICAROL SHEPPARD

❖ **Jon Ardie, Technical Editor, *The Garden* replies:** 'We never intended for this section to be "farmer bashing". Since the Second World War, British agriculture has delivered huge increases in food production, but this intensification *has* impacted on many plants and animals – as has urbanisation.

'The figures refer to UK farming as a whole: there are many farmers, like yourselves, who do much for wildlife. We did not apportion blame to farmers, or accuse them of being "uncaring". In expecting high yields and cheap food, we have all contributed to intensification.

'Nationally, 98 percent of flower-rich meadows have been lost, and there have been steep declines in numbers of some birds since the 1980s – these figures are neither incorrect nor out of date. The tide may be turning with the sort of approach you have adopted on your own farm: urban or rural, garden or farm, we should all encourage wildlife.'

## Using grey water

Is it safe to use bath water on edible plants? What might be the effect of any products in the water, including shampoo?

Corinna Macintosh, Berkshire

❖ **Guy Barter, RHS Chief Horticultural Advisor, replies:** 'Within reason, grey water from the kitchen, washing machine or baths may be safely used in the garden. Unless making heavy and repeated applications, household soaps and detergents are harmless to plants but long-term use of water containing bleaches, disinfectants, dishwasher salt and stronger cleaning products can harm plants and damage soil structure. Avoid using grey water on salads and other produce that is eaten uncooked.'

Watering in drought p57



RHS/NEIL HEPPWORTH

**More from RHS Online**

For more on re-using water enter 'grey water' in the search box at: [www.rhs.org.uk](http://www.rhs.org.uk)

## Botany degrees

The decline in the number of botany degrees (*The Garden*, January, p13) is mainly due to the erosion of plant biology from biology courses at GCSE and A level. Students coming to university have had little exposure to plant science and, as a result, are often under the misapprehension that plants are boring. This results in even fewer students wishing to study plants.

In 2011 the last true botany degree closed at the University of Reading. But at Bristol, a botany degree can be awarded to a student taking all the relevant botany and plant-science modules of their biology course.

None of the University of Bristol's botany and plant-science teaching has been cut and it has invested in a new Botanic Garden ([www.bristol.ac.uk/botanic-garden](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/botanic-garden)). A new plant science module called 'Green Planet' is also being launched this term.

Simon Hiscock, Professor of Botany, University of Bristol

## Correction

The profile of *Saxifraga* 'Tumbling Waters' (*The Garden*, April, p122) was accompanied by a wrongly labelled image. The plant shown was one of its parents, *Saxifraga callosa*, also an Award of Garden Merit plant.

In his North Wales garden, John Good's *Trillium kurabayashii* (below) has produced many seedlings.



## Comment

**BELIEVE IT OR NOT**

## Will raising the cutting height increase lawn drought tolerance?

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

During dry weather, traditional practice is to raise the height of cut on your mower so grass stays greener for longer. The theory is that, with increased density of the sward, grasses shade one another and the soil – increasing humidity around plants and reducing transpiration and stress. Larger plants also produce more roots and a deeper root system. Initially this has a positive effect but, eventually, in prolonged drought the grass turns brown.

If the lawn is walked on, then longer grass lays down which exposes a greater area to the sun and transpiration increases. So the advice to raise cutting height is correct – providing you do not walk on the lawn.

Raising the height of cut does make a lawn more drought resistant but most websites and books neglect to say how high. 'Lawns: care during drought' on the RHS website, counsels us to 'raise the height of cut in dry weather'. Anglia Water's leaflet 'Tips on being waterwise' is more specific '...mow your lawn once a week to no lower than 3cm'.

## The verdict

Other practices can help, such as mowing in the evening (as cut grass loses more water in the heat of the day) while cutting regularly (up to three times a week) keeps clippings small so they act as a mulch if the grass box is removed. However, lawns have remarkable powers of recovery, and the grass is always greener on the other side of the drought. ●



ISTOCKPHOTO



# Let landscape lead us

The Garden columnist and designer Mary Keen on the importance of landscape

A lan Titchmarsh recently grabbed the headlines with his attack on a speech made by the Prime Minister, which claimed that gardening was less of a career than a last resort for dropouts (see *The Garden*, April, p21).

David Cameron's statement did not surprise me. Over the years I have struggled to convince readers as well as clients that gardeners need brains and skills; that they need to be paid properly and treated with respect. Sometimes people have looked at my hands and asked, 'You don't actually garden do you?' Recent research indicates that any totally absorbing physical activity – and gardening is as high on the list as extreme sports – can help reduce the stress levels of modern life, and lead to

undreamed-of improvements in wellbeing. How can I explain that to someone I meet at a party? And then begin on why being concerned with what we do to our fragile and disappearing landscape really matters.

I was once involved in a landscape project for a retirement village with a 'Premier League' architect, who attached little importance to what went on outdoors. When I asked him what he thought landscape was for, he answered that it was for prettiness, a tidying-up of the site after the architect had finished. Which smacks of the litter-picking David Cameron chose to illustrate the level of intelligence needed for 'garden work'.

Readers of *The Garden* need no convincing that gardening involves much more than manual labour. We should also know from the push for science by the RHS that it is vital to understand our responsibilities to the land we cultivate, especially in a year when half the country is under a hosepipe ban.

Persuading the estimated 70 percent of 18-year olds who would rather sit indoors than dirty their hands is harder. How can we tell them that caring for land is important work, not just for our own health, but for the health of the planet?

The image of a gardener as someone who is either really thick or really old may be hard to change, but landscape architect Kim Wilkie's new book on landscape looks like being

**Above: Watercolour from the RHS Lindley Library of Rosa 'Climbing Mrs Herbert Stevens' and R. 'Climbing Lady Hillingdon' by Graham Stuart Thomas, rosarian, writer and artist.**

a powerful force for raising awareness of what really matters to the young. I think the next generation already has a stronger understanding of climate change than some readers, given *The Garden's* demographic.

From the moans in the press about hosepipe bans and the death of lawns, it seems many gardeners are reluctant to rethink how they tend their plots. But Kim is a landscape architect who goes far beyond prettiness, pattern-making and horticulture, to explore ways of living that put our welfare and that of the land first. His book is called *Led by the Land* (Frances Lincoln, May 2012) and it explores themes that could make a difference to everyone's lives.

If water continues to be scarce (London now receives less rainfall per capita than Israel), and if lack of food security hits developed as well as Third World countries, Kim will have shown us ways of recycling rainwater and grey water so vegetables can be grown in cities. The ambitious plans for the Chelsea Barracks site in central London include a huge vegetable garden and a market at its heart. He has already designed a similar scheme in Oxford, where vegetables are redistributed to local charities through a food bank. Much of Kim's other work has been with fragile agricultural economies.

Restoring biodiversity to water meadows; new ways to bury the dead; connecting with communities; making landscapes that flow with the land, not dominate their setting – Kim's work can give us all ideas that should make us take more responsibility for our own small patches of earth.

Most importantly of all he has raised the intellectual stakes. Understanding the ties and the responsibilities that link us with land is something that should be required reading for all gardeners. As well as for architects and Prime Ministers. ●

*'Over the years I have struggled to convince readers as well as clients that gardeners need brains and skills.'*



RHS / NEIL HEWORTH

# Blooming good for taste buds

Cook, author and broadcaster Nigel Slater



RHS/NEIL HEPPWORTH

The most exquisite thing I have eaten was not a perfectly honed signature dish. Nor was it a homely supper full of good times and bonhomie. It was a flower. More precisely, a flower bud, presented as a single, minute, tightly closed bud on its stem, about the size of a petit pois, its flavour fleeting, musky and tantalising. To add

to the intrigue, the chef refused, coyly, to tell us what it was.

I have been including some edible flowers in my cooking for years, and grow them in my garden. They always raise an eyebrow and often polarize opinions. But why shouldn't we include the brilliant orange and mahogany petals of a marigold such as *Calendula officinalis* 'Indian Prince' in a leaf salad, or a few calm mauve chive flowers?

Edible flowers I grow range from angelica and spicy cornflowers (*Centaurea cyanus* petals) to jasmine (*Jasminum*) and fennel (*Foeniculum*), which is interesting with marinated mackerel or herring. Flowers I use most are added to salad or decorate desserts: chives, hyssop, pinks (such as *Dianthus* 'Old Red Clove'), roses, marigolds (*Calendula* petals, *Tagetes*) and rosemary – which is a beautifully fragrant addition to goat-cheese salad.

The flavour of most edible flowers is subtle, as are many of our favourite salad leaves and vegetables. Borage's cucumber flavour is charming. Diminutive violets have both flavour and scent; few ingredients sit more pleasingly with dark chocolate. Primroses have little flavour to speak of, but how beautiful they are when sugared and used to decorate a tiny lemon cake.

More pungent flavours include the citrus notes of lemon verbena (*Aloysia*), slightly spicy daisies (*Bellis*), and fennel flowers with their aniseed character.

Roses have much perfume and colour, but little to taste. I chose mine as much for fragrance and suitability in cooking as for their form. I use *Rosa* 'Francis Dubreuil' or *R. Tridacata* ('Ausdir') scattered over a bowl of poached peaches or apricots, or make a jam of them to eat with roast quail. You can also brush them with egg white then dust with a little caster or icing sugar. A tart of crystallized rose petals is a pleasure to behold.

Farmers' markets and some supermarkets stock edible flowers, but we have a long way to go until they are generally acceptable as an ingredient. Is it not high time they made their way from the garden to the table? They certainly have in mine. ●

## DO YOU AGREE?

Please send your comments to: The Garden, RHS Media, Churchgate, New Road, Peterborough PE1 1TT or email [thegarden@rhs.org.uk](mailto:thegarden@rhs.org.uk) (please include your postal address). Letters may be edited for publication.

## RHS ADVICE

Always ensure flowers are edible before you use them in food. For example, only the petals of composite (daisy family) flowers are edible; the pollen may cause reactions in some people. Sufferers from asthma and hay fever in particular may be best advised to avoid eating any flowers at all.

RHS LINDLEY LIBRARY



# Making the most of allotment space

The Garden columnist and writer Lia Leendertz



RHS/NEIL HEPPWORTH

I have run out of space; it happens every year. That tray of lettuce seems so compact in the glasshouse but planted out it takes up half a raised bed. Seedlings will insist on growing – and how the space disappears when they do.

I look at the allotment with a sharply assessing eye, not for weeds and diseases but for indispensability: does anyone eat all those runner beans? And who on earth decided to put that row of cabbages in?

More and more I want flavour over bulk. Increasingly I find myself thinking rather as a balcony gardener might – how can I get the most flavour out of this small patch of earth? What can I fit in alongside something else? What can I do without? And so I find my gaze falling upon my potatoes with their shocking, plot-engulfing tendencies. That bag of seed potatoes seemed modest before they were chitted and planted, but now, properly spaced out, they luxuriate across the front of the plot, impossible to partner up with anything else. They are lucky they go into the ground early, when allotment space seems infinite, and I am grateful to have something, anything, to plant.

If they went out at the same time that everything else was jostling for space, I doubt I'd be so lenient. They are an allotment stalwart, sure, and I can't quite imagine doing without the soft, sweet, yielding bite of a new potato, boiled minutes after being pulled from the earth. But on the other hand, just how much citric sorrel, peppery watercress, bitter endive or soft, mild, pillowy lettuce could that same potato patch yield?

For similar reasons, onions were shown the allotment gate long ago, to be replaced by garlic and shallots. Cabbages – but for their unsanctioned incursion – have been long ousted. I make sure I grow nothing out of habit, or simply because I have seed hanging about. Question everything and ensure that each crop makes a good case for its space, even the sweetest little new potato. ●