



In defence of the garden opportunists

Garden writer and designer Dawn Isaac



REUBEN MILNE

Self. Seeds. Freely. These three words strike a level of fear into some gardeners on a par with an airborne pandemic. Is it a control issue? Many, like my parents, put a plant in the ground and expect it to do more, or less, what its label promises. The idea that it may decide to meander

around a well-planned space, gate-crash borders or muscle in on plant combinations is enough to make my mother break out in a cold sweat.

To me, this anxiety seems a little ungrateful. Maybe it is my frugal, lazy nature but nothing is better than a foxglove, aquilegia or forget-me-not providing me with free seeds and having the supremely good manners to plant them itself. And, if I do wish to take a more active role, it is easy to move new plants to fill awkward gaps or to shake the seedheads where I want them to grow.

Of course, there are other horticultural reasons to adore self-seeders. Any plant that is happy to resow itself tells me an important fact – it likes my soil. Why mollycoddle and fuss over sulky prima donnas if I have found a plant so at home in my garden that it might put the milk bottles out in the morning?

Self-seeders also make gardens dynamic. Plants will crop up where I was not expecting them. Occasionally, they create serendipitous plant combinations better than any I had planned: *Verbena bonariensis* floating above a hazy sea of *Foeniculum vulgare* 'Purpureum' (bronze fennel) or a drift of *Cerinth major* 'Purpurascens' (honeywort) next to *Ligularia* 'Britt Marie Crawford'.

It may be hard to admit but plants are better gardeners than I am. A seed in the ground will know the perfect time to start growing, often getting a head start on surviving spring droughts, while I may hang back, taking seed-packet instructions as gospel. Perhaps it is time we all put our worries to one side, and stopped looking these horticultural gift-horses in the mouth. ●



RHS LINDLEY LIBRARY

DO YOU AGREE?

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

Vegetable growing: the not-so 'easy' myth

The Garden columnist and writer Lia Leendertz

So here we go, headfirst into the growing season. March is back, and it is a frantic time for vegetable growers, sowing the seeds that will bring bounty later in the year, juggling pots of ever-elongating seedlings, clearing weeds from plots and setting slug traps to head off our greatest foe.

And it is about this time that we – by which I mean the garden media – start telling you how easy it all is. Gardeners may lose interest if we tell them it is pretty time-consuming and physically hard. The implication is: 'What could be simpler than sowing a seed? All it needs is water and sunlight! It wants to grow!'

Such bold statements, however, do not factor in that nascent seedlings maybe be besieged by frost, encroaching weeds, slugs, blight and rust the moment you breathe a satisfied sigh and turn your muddy boots towards home. In fact vegetable growing depends on annuals that must be cosseted at the start of the year, and so is at the trickier end of the gardening spectrum.

Skills and knowledge are built up over years: a cliché perhaps, yet there is just no better way of ramming a lesson home than holding a blight-blackened tomato in your hand. A book can convey everything but the heart-break that will make you do it differently next time.

What vegetable growing promises is that perfect blend of mental challenge and physical exertion: spells of dull, repetitive work alleviated by juggling, calculating and thinking. Painting a wall is easy. Sweeping a floor is easy. But you don't find people making a hobby of either. So do not believe the hype – but go forth into the March mayhem anyway.

Vegetable growing is a lot of great things: creative, challenging and ultimately satisfying. Easy isn't always one of them. ●



RHS / NEIL HEPPWORTH

More from the RHS For Grow Your Own events – and a free packet of 'Lollo Rossa' seeds – see RHS Life, pp84–85