



# In defence of snails

Penelope Bennett, author of *Window-box Allotment*



RHS / NEIL HEPWORTH

If I told you I had designed a creature who transports its mobile home sealed to its back, surely you would be intrigued. Not only that, this miniature home is also an exquisite piece of moveable architecture, its domed shell constructed of gradually diminishing whorls, giving it an Oriental, voluptuous

appearance. Unlike the rigid architecture we are accustomed to, snails' shells change in size and shape from hatching to death. And the hermaphrodite snails' way of mating is as exotic as their shells: luxuriously sensuous and unhurried, their lubricated bodies and feelers entwine and gently touch. They are the opposite of those other garden dwellers, ladybirds, whose frantic, un-ladylike mating resembles fire engines in a hurry.

Every shell is different in colour and design – enough to have kept a flock of gastropod artists busy for centuries. Obviously the colours and patterns inspired the snails' intriguing names: moss-slipper, dusky, eccentric, plaited door, mouse ear and Carthusian.

The shells are also used as air-raid shelters in times of danger. The snail's whole soft body can glide into the shell. Although it must be somewhat claustrophobic, it is safe. To deter enemies, snails produce a bubbly foam that covers the entrance. If the danger is more serious, they seal it with a secretion, making an epiphragm. Some desert snails stay in their shells for years without moving or eating. Not an enviable existence.

Another invaluable snail product is slime. Without it they would remain motionless. Not only does it enable their soft, vulnerable bodies to glide along on rough surfaces and slowly toboggan up and down the hills and dales of cabbage patches, it also allows them to adhere, even when upside down, to branches. Apparently snails can slide over razor blades without being hurt – not a particularly useful occupation, but yet another addition to their CVs.

Snails have four feelers which sprout antler-like from their heads. Two are used for smelling and feeling. At the tip of the others are eyes, resembling lighthouses on stilts.

Sadly, enough snail-killer products are available to turn the whole miraculous population into endangered species before we have really looked at them. ●



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## 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.

✦ An expanded and illustrated edition of *Window-box Allotment*, by Penelope Bennett, Frances Lincoln, RRP £16.99, ISBN 9780711231733 will be published on 24 May 2012. Available at RHS Shops or by mail order from 01483 211320; [www.rhsshop.co.uk](http://www.rhsshop.co.uk)

# What triggers us to plant?

Writer and *The Garden* columnist Mary Keen

In his brilliant blog ([www.groundeddesign.com](http://www.groundeddesign.com)) American landscape architect Thomas Rainer recently wrote about why we plant – not how or what, but *why*. It is, he suggests, something we do purely for pleasure. This is true if you discount productive gardens and I have often thought

about why gardens mean so much to us. Thomas quotes Fletcher Steele, another American landscape architect, who said that 'the chief vice of gardens is to be merely pretty'. It sounds austere, but I suspect most of us want more than exterior decoration, that gardens give us more than just a pretty picture.

My own take on why we plant involves otherworldliness. Good gardens for me are places where human time stands still and you start to feel that there is something going on under the surface. If that never happens, if the garden does not communicate some deep emotional message, then all the flowers and designer tricks are pointless.

Thomas thinks that the goal of planting in gardens is to remind us of some larger moment in nature. After Britain's Industrial Revolution, city dwellers made nostalgic expeditions to watch haymaking or harvesting, or simply to enjoy the fresh air that no longer surrounded them. Today, because so many people live in towns and cities, nature is no longer part of everyone's daily life. Unlike the Victorians who actually knew what they were missing, some people have no memory of the sound of wind in long grass or walking under trees.

I think it is true that, deep down, there must be some shared subconscious memory of the natural world, but I also think that there may be another kind of nostalgia that governs our planting – and which I suspect most landscape architects might scorn. For many people the gardens of their childhood – of visits to a grandmother perhaps, or to a place they went for holidays – may also influence why they plant. This is a different kind of memory, a recalling of the lost world of childhood, that some might dismiss as sentimental. Maybe. But I am sure it is equally as compelling as the idea that we are triggered by a collective nature reflex. ●



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