

# Comment



The Garden, RHS Media, Churchgate, New Road, Peterborough PE1 1TT



RHS/TIM SANDALL

## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

### Does the future start now?

Editor of *The Garden*, Chris Young

There can be few RHS members who aren't aware – or concerned – about the future of horticultural careers. For some years now, this topic has been covered at length in this magazine, and discussed throughout the trade. But now there are some encouraging signs that things may be starting to change.

'Horticultural careers', in its broadest sense, means any job in horticulture, gardening or the industry related to them. Whether you own a small urban garden, or large rural estate, we are all affected by an industry that does not have enough skilled workers coming into it – and is seen by many school leavers to be an unknown, undefined option on their careers list.

So why are things looking more positive? Firstly, across the industry a more cohesive and clearer message is being articulated. Under the banner of the Horticulture Matters Steering Group (in which the RHS plays a leading role), a report will be published this month highlighting the value of horticulture to the UK economy (see News Review, pp16–17). This should give parliamentarians and others of influence a much-needed overview of our work.

At the other end of the spectrum is the recent news that gardening is proposed to become part of the revised National Curriculum, from September 2014 (see News, p11). In February, the Government announced that the curriculum for Key Stages 1–3 (children aged 5–14) could

include the teaching of how 'to cultivate plants for practical purposes, such as for food or for decorative displays'. If confirmed, this would be a huge and welcome advancement, and one that I hope means future generations of children will no longer think that carrots come only from supermarkets – or that plants are things they see in parks or on holiday.

There are, of course, still concerns – most notably the lack of a national careers advice body for schools in England (individual schools are responsible for careers advice, so quality may become more variable).

We should welcome this wind of change in training and education, however, and that areas of the industry are starting to come together to address the skills shortage. ●

## FROM THIS ISSUE

*Because of the trueness of scale, colour and proportion, paintings are still seen as the most reliable way of recording awarded orchids*

Johan Hermans:  
Orchids and art

» Pages 70–71



JANE SEEBRE

## FROM MY GARDEN

### My theory of colour

Author: **Helen Dillon**, gardener and writer living in the Republic of Ireland

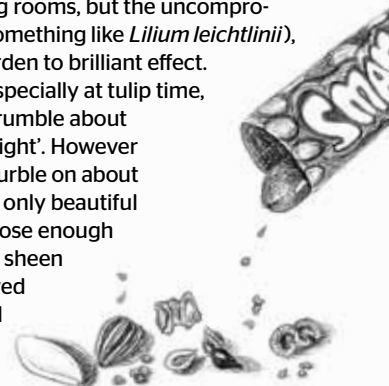
I used to have an irregular visitor who would walk round the garden, look into the middle distance, half close her eyes as if the sight of this garden was just too much, wave her hands languidly about, then whisper 'I only want green and white, just green and white...'.  
ILLUSTRATION: AMANDA RIGBY

Perhaps we've been influenced by too many for too long about how we must organize our colours – by Gertrude and Lawrence and Vita, the best and most influential of the gardening world. However, after struggling with colour borders for decades myself I have had an amazing epiphany. Never do I want to be bullied again into having colour-themed borders, so when people ask what my theory of colour is, I say that it's just like the colours in a box of Smarties.

I love the dazzling mix, with a thousand possibilities to tease the imagination. I've always loved the orange and yellow buttons in the

Smarties box, and saved them until last. The liberation of using colour, at random and without rules, miles from the oppressive grip of good taste, is quite intoxicating. The introduction of orange and yellow to a border (not the acceptable yellow of the best drawing rooms, but the uncompromising yellow of something like *Lilium leichtlinii*), illuminates the garden to brilliant effect.

I adore colour, especially at tulip time, but must have a grumble about *Tulipa* 'Queen of Night'. However many gardeners burble on about how lovely it is, it's only beautiful when seen from close enough to admire the silky sheen on the petals; viewed from a distance, all you see is a large black hole. ●





# Letters

## CONTACT US

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

## 'Growing your own' for UK food security

The news story on wasted food (News, March, p10) made some valid points. As gardeners, we all know that 2012 was a difficult growing season – and it highlights how we need to be aware of our food security.

Commercial harvests in the UK last year were mixed, forcing supermarkets to allow 'ugly veg' onto shelves. But it goes further. Prices have risen dramatically – between 2007 and 2008 soybean rose by 74 percent, corn 52 percent, and wheat 105 percent. This sparked a grow-your-own boom in 2008, on fears that our food supply was insecure.

In 2011, Britons increased food spending by £1.60 per week. With increases in fuel, electricity and other 'basics', household expenditure hit record levels. Last year's harvests mean further price increases in basic foodstuffs.

We will not see an easy end to this – we must adapt, and as a nation this will fuel renewed interest in grow your own; the driver will be security of food supplies.

Food security, defined by the Department for Environment,

Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) is '...consumers having access at all times to sufficient, safe and nutritious food for an active and healthy life at affordable prices.' In the past few decades Britain has been able to buy all it wants from the world, cheaply, but the changing world threatens that. Food security is a global issue. In October 2011, the world population was 7 billion, and it is predicted to reach 15 billion in 2100 – increasing population and urbanization places added strain on global food supplies.

At about 60 percent, the UK self-sufficiency ratio is a long way short of our needs. The UK currently imports 40 percent of its food and during the past 20 years the rate of self-sufficiency has fallen by 10-15 percent.

A great challenge for us as a nation is to be able to feed ourselves in the decades to come, and our own food security will be fundamental. We must adapt to conditions and find a way forward – one way to do this is to grow more food locally and individually.

**Tim Jeffries, General Manager, DT Brown**

## A private space

Mary Keen has it right – a garden is personal (Comment, February, p21). My garden has neatly clipped hedges, the lawns are regularly dethatched, paths swept clear of leaves, and rose borders pruned. Yet there is no overall planting scheme – the odd plant will be put somewhere because I think it might look good, and if it doesn't I move it.

Like Mary, I find my garden wonderfully calming. I have won prizes for my roses in the local show (when I have been badgered into entering), but I don't care if my roses are the best – I love them because they are mine. Gardening is not a competition.

**Michael Stanley, Renfrewshire**

✦ I have made five gardens in my life, and while I am extremely fond of many and various garden plants, like Mary I often feel that a simple or natural arrangement just speaks to me.

Nurseries continue to produce more plant cultivars, in as many shapes and colours as possible, thus giving rise to a competitive desire to own (and show off) the latest version.

I do not restrict myself to species, or to native plants, but for beauty it is hard to beat a simple *Primula vulgaris*, or a hellebore without a rash of spots, frills and petticoats.

Why is it always so important to be new and different?

**Jane Foley, Devon**



*Ipomoea purpurea*  
'Dacapo Light Blue'.

## Morning glory

Sam Gallivan says soaking *Ipomoea* seed 'for no more than two hours helps to soften its covering' (*The Garden*, February, pp57–62).

Some years ago I returned from holiday to find seed that had soaked for three weeks had put on growth and healthy roots. Transferring them into pots, I lightly covered the roots with compost – the plants grew and flowered well. Using a shallow container (so the water will not stagnate), I have treated the seed this way ever since.

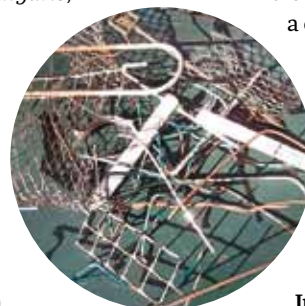
**Paul J Galea, Warrington**

## Thieving magpie

Andrew Halstead's notes about magpies (Wildlife, February, p33) prompted me to send this photo of the contents from an old magpie's nest found in the top of a yew in our garden (inset).

There was wire, tent pegs, a croquet hoop and even plant labels. Magpies may not be the nation's favourite birds but I have great admiration for their endeavours and enterprise.

**Julia Tetley, Essex**



## What's in the bag?

Nigel Colborn hit the nail on the head in pleading for clearer labelling on compost bags (Comment, February, p19).

After many years working to create peat alternatives that can be commercially produced, I agree that a lack of adequate labelling remains a problem. 'Peat reduced' products often do not declare the amount of peat in their composition, and there are 'peat-free' products that do not explain how they are made.

But not every brand in the sector is at fault – our peat-free compost packaging explains the contents and the process

used to make the products. We obtain waste from local 'green bin' collections, but the composting process is such that consumers always purchase a clean, sanitised, peat-free compost.

**Arnie Rainbow, Technical Manager, Vital Earth**

✦ I agree with Nigel Colborn about the variable standard of composts, but I hope people will not be put off using recycled green waste. When we moved here 11 years ago, our clay soil needed all the improvement it could get. We tried using manure, but it was heavy to handle, and weedy. Spent mushroom compost was good, but not for excessive use due to its lime content.

After speaking with a local nursery, we gave green waste a try. Although it requires the local authority to heat and turn it properly, it has none of the disadvantages of the other two.

**Beryl Burton, Worcestershire**



*'Many societies had their annual florists' feasts in the back room of local pubs'*

**Caroline Beck: Keeping the flame alight » Pages 52–56**

## Comment



ANDREW HAYES WATKINS

### GENIUS OF PLANTS

## More than just a spring flower

Author: **James Wong**, botanist and garden designer

In the minds of most gardeners, the words 'bulb fields' are bound up inextricably with the images of 'Visit Holland' posters. Yet in the case of *Narcissus*, the British are world leaders in the cultivation of this iconic spring flower. But there is more to this fascinating genus, for packed within their cells is a host of toxic alkaloids, which may hold the key to treating one of our most devastating degenerative diseases.

Despite being a common source of accidental poisoning (when occasionally confused for onion bulbs), *Narcissus* have been used in traditional medicines for centuries. Toxins the plant has evolved to stave off would-be predators are causing much excitement in modern pharmacology, with Britain leading the way in such research.

The key among these is galanthamine, a drug used to treat early-stage and moderate Alzheimer's disease, which affects 35 million people worldwide. So far it has proven extremely tricky to synthesise, so drug companies still rely on nature for their source material: in this case threatened wild populations of summer snowflake (*Leucojum aestivum*) in the Balkans (where it is currently harvested on an industrial scale).

Projected global demand for the drug is predicted to rise, so British scientists are working to improve the yield of galanthamine in the common daffodil – a close relative of *Leucojum* yet more practical to grow. This would secure a sustainable future for a vital drug, and likely drive drug costs down and protect large areas of the landscapes of Bulgaria and Romania.

The cherry on top? It turns out that daffodils grown on barren, windswept land produce higher levels of galanthamine in response to stress – creating a lucrative crop on marginal land where few other crops can be grown. ●



*Narcissus 'Magnificence'*

RHS/RODNEY LAY

[WWW.RHS.ORG.UK](http://WWW.RHS.ORG.UK)

## Highlights from the RHS website

### Tell us your favourite scents

*The Garden* is asking RHS members to name their favourite scented flowers for each season of the year. Take part in the online survey, telling us your choices, by following the link at [www.rhs.org.uk/plants](http://www.rhs.org.uk/plants)

### Gardening podcasts

The RHS has launched a series of fortnightly podcasts to provide advice, inspiration and practical solutions from RHS experts. Download the podcasts from iTunes or via the RHS website at: [www.rhs.org.uk/podcast](http://www.rhs.org.uk/podcast)







# Losing much more than just the plot

Garden writer and *The Garden* columnist Lia Leendertz on an ongoing battleground

Above: 1931 watercolour of *Tulipa 'Grey Dawn'* by Elsie Katherine Kohnlein, widow of WR Dykes, a former Secretary of the RHS. Taken from the RHS Herbarium painting collection.

I have recently been talking to a couple of allotment associations that find themselves under threat. Local authorities are pushing for houses, supermarkets and retail centres.

Allotment societies are clinging to asparagus beds, community spirit and fresh air. The solid and economic meets the tenuous and romantic, or at least this is how these councils would have it. It's fair to say that these are ugly fights, both sides utterly convinced they are right, and both desperate to win.

But one of the less excusable pieces of rhetoric I came across was the framing of allotment holders as a small, privileged group, selfishly sticking up for their own interests at the expense of the wider community. 'What the allotment holders have to realise is that this isn't just about them,' Mayor of Watford Dorothy Thornhill, who is behind the push to build on

Watford's Farm Terrace Allotments, told me. 'I really do have to think of what is best for the whole town here.'

It is a line I have heard elsewhere in the assault upon allotments by struggling councils keen to liquidise their assets. It is said as if allotments were some sort of luxury item, as if allotment holders were a favoured elite.

Allotments were not handed out by beneficent councils keen to indulge a few local residents. They were conceived as a result of the fury that followed the land grabs between 1600 and 1850 – the enclosures – when the rich and powerful fenced off and claimed as their own millions of acres of

common land, previously considered a common man's birthright. Before the fences went up, these were places that had been part of the everyday living of the general populace for hundreds of years, where anyone could graze their animals, forage, gather wood for fuel and building, and take small game. The removal of this land was not a minor inconvenience: it brought about massive hardship, starvation and death.

As happens when a great injustice is carried out, people got angry. There were riots and mobs. Real change to the privileged landowners' status was threatened – just as had followed the French

Revolution and would later follow the Land War in Ireland. The landowning classes offered a pressure valve: allotments. These small patches of land provided just enough to ease the gnawing hunger, but not quite enough to allow the plot holders to step outside the economic system.

The third General Enclosure Act (1845) was the first statute to require some of that land to be handed out to the poor in the form of allotments. It made provision for the enclosure of 615,000 acres of land, of which just 2,200 acres were returned as allotments.

This was a small concession, but it worked. Allotments made life bearable, and the status quo was maintained. Environmentalist Marion Shoard writes in *This Land is Our Land* that 'the English labourer's right to his allotment would be seen more as a symbol of his dispossession than of privilege'. It is worth noting that neither France nor Ireland has a great allotment tradition. Neither needs one. Land is far more equitably distributed: the majority of the land is in the hands of many small-farm owners, rather than a few aristocratic landowners. In France and Ireland it is normal to own and farm land.

So yes, when trying to save our allotments we are quite right to talk of them as centres for the community, wildlife refuges and the green lungs of our cities. All of these things are what allotments have become, and they are glorious things worth fighting for. But we should also be mindful of their history, and even more of what we gave up for them. They are our last fingerhold on the vast tracts of land we could once call upon, carved off millions of acres at a time. No-one should ever be regarded as selfish for defending that. ●

*'All of these things are what allotments have become, and they are glorious things worth fighting for.'*



RHS / NEIL HEWORTH



# On the side of sustainability

Alan Knight, Chairman of the Sustainable Growing Media Task Force on some of the choices gardeners can make



ALAN KNIGHT

If gardens and gardening didn't exist – and if we were in a situation where we were over-using our natural resources, climate change was threatening, and our physical and emotional wellbeing was adversely affecting the health of our economy – the best and most creative business

and public-policy brains would invent them.

But gardening began centuries ago, and the nurturing of nature for future generations is the soul of traditional gardening – and the soul of modern thinking on issues surrounding sustainability.

The garden and horticultural industry is a natural partner to sustainability and 'sustainable development': that which can be maintained without exhausting natural resources or causing ecological harm. There is already awareness of how 'grow your own' and attracting wildlife to gardens (which both present a commercial opportunity) can contribute to sustainability.

No one expects 'grow your own' to make a meaningful dent on the carbon footprint of food, let alone feed a nation, but it reconnects food with soil and weather. The educational benefits to children and adults seeing food emerging from the soil is critical for people to value food as the end product of a natural process and not a cheap commodity from supermarkets. Perhaps they will waste less, maybe they will value the seasons more.

As well as growing vegetables and attracting wildlife, gardeners have the choice to use peat-free rather than peat-based growing media (composts). The sustainability case against peat is a carbon issue as well as a wildlife-habitat issue. Gardeners' loyalty to peat creates a division with environmentalists when they should be the closest allies. There are new alternatives to peat that have a significantly different formulation to the coir or composted-wood mixes that created the peat hardliners.

A solution is coming, for the growing-media industry is giving the issue its due attention, but a resolution is needed and needed soon. This can only result in a future where peat is too precious to use in mainstream gardens and horticulture. ●

## DO YOU AGREE?

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## NATIONAL GARDENING WEEK

15–21 April 2013

See RHS Life, pp98–99

RHS LINDLEY LIBRARY



# To learn you need the courage to fail

Garden writer and regular *The Garden* columnist Nigel Colborn on just having a go



RHS / NEIL HEPWORTH

National Gardening Week could hardly be more timely. With events and activities planned nationwide, this early in the growing season, aspiring gardeners will discover a wealth of help and guidance. And if you add to that the constant outflow from magazines, books, garden clubs, the internet, lecturers, radio and television... there is little excuse for ignorance.

Never before has so much information been available. But with such a racket from the media, it is easy to forget horticulture's most important truism: that the best way to learn is to do it yourself.

Garnering knowledge, usually while sitting and staring at something or someone, is only the first step. The important – and the most enjoyable – thing with gardening is to do it. Guidelines help no end but we won't know how best to root reluctant cuttings or prune old, non-repeating roses until we've tried for ourselves.

Few get it right first go and the learning is life-long. Anyone who remembers the thrill of having their first glasshouse will also recall the dismay when seedlings damped off or died from sun-scorch. Yet inexperienced gardeners are too often inhibited by fear. They worry that the wrong action – pruning incorrectly, or planting in the wrong place – may result in a disaster. So instead of acting courageously, or following instinct, they do nothing. But a gardening disaster is seldom life-threatening and it is usually easy to see where you went wrong.

Expert guidance cannot be undervalued, as part of the training process. But the chief accomplishment, required of all competent gardeners, is to develop a range of skills by getting on with the job.

As new ideas and unfamiliar techniques are tried, there are likely to be expensive and embarrassing mistakes. But these will be outnumbered, increasingly, by hard-earned, heart-lifting successes. We should see our foul-ups as rites of passage, in the journey from keen aspirant to competent horticulturist. Or, put less pretentiously, to be a good gardener you must have the courage to fail. ●