

Comment



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



RHS/TIM SANDALL

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Grow your own memories

Editor of *The Garden*, Chris Young

It is amazing how a smell can bring back such strong memories. During my childhood, I would wander around our garden, enjoying the various sights, colours, sounds and scents found there.

Often, however, I would go to see what my father was up to in his glasshouse. It was a small aluminium-framed one, but to me it held an air of excitement – and mystery. Here things not only magically turned from seed to an edible crop, but it was also a retreat, a place where my father could have time to himself and his plants.

Even today, the smell of being inside a glasshouse takes me back to those times. The aroma of leafy tomatoes (it was normally 'Moneymaker' and 'Alicante')

steadily reaching for the glass roof, mixed with the dry smell of heat from the paving slabs is a memory I cherish. Outside the glasshouse, other edible plants also produced memorable smells – the sharp scent of lush rhubarb leaves being cut off their stalks; onions drying on the warm earth of the vegetable bed. Elsewhere, perfumed strawberries ripened on beds of straw.

As we celebrate the diversity of 'growing your own' this issue, and as the RHS Gardens open their doors to members for a GYO weekend (23–24 March, see pp90–91), it is worth taking a moment to reflect on your memories of growing home produce. For me, these smells (and subsequently the tastes) are evocative reminders of growing up, of growing our own food, and of the

sensual delights gardening can give. It is something that I hope in turn to pass on to my children. ●

GET IN TOUCH: TELL US YOUR FAVOURITE SCENTS

In preparation for a feature we plan to publish next year, we are asking RHS members to let us know about their favourite flower scents.

Do you enjoy the spicy smell of wintersweet, the heady perfume of spring violets or a summer rose in full bloom? What are your favourite scented flowers through the seasons?

Please let us know your suggestions for each season, and we will try to include them in next year's article.

Write to: The Garden, RHS Media, Churchgate, New Road, Peterborough PE1 1TT; thegarden@rhs.org.uk

THE PLANTSMAN



With informative, topical articles, *The Plantsman* is the quarterly sister publication to *The Garden*.

The March 2013 issue is available now – highlights

include expert writing on:

- ✿ new variegated cultivars of *Euphorbia characias*, and their growing requirements;
- ✿ how rose breeders are using wild species to make rose-breeding advances;
- ✿ an expedition searching for wild *Kniphofia* in South Africa.

To subscribe: 020 7821 3401; www.rhs.org.uk/plantsman

FROM MY GARDEN



JANE SEERHE

It's true – all wildlife is sacred

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

I had a bad fright in the garden recently. Picking up a potted plant from its saucer I noticed something large underneath – shiny, black as patent leather, fat bodied and long legged. It moved. I shuddered.

Rushing to the shed, I grabbed a glass and a stiff postcard, dashed back, put the glass over its head and slipped the postcard underneath. Running to the main drain, I shoved the grating off the top, and the scariest-ever spider disappeared with a loud plop. I retired to the kitchen to recover.

But half-an-hour later I began to feel guilty. Wildlife is sacred, isn't it? Especially if you're a gardener. However many legs it has, it shouldn't be shoved down a drain. And if you spent as much of your youth as I did in a Scottish church you have a lavish supply of guilt.

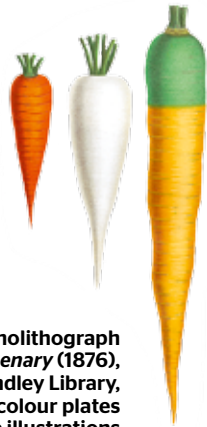
So, flat on my face in the muddy yard, peering down the drain with a torch, I made many futile rescue attempts – each wetter than the last.

The moment I described it to Fergus Garrett at Great Dixter he knew immediately what it was: a false widow spider, which people used to think was harmless, but is capable of a painful bite.

I usually reserve the glass-and-postcard method for a non-stop rescue service for bumblebees in the alpine house, especially on sunny March days. I love bumblebees; they work so hard and make such a comforting noise. An army of resident (but less sinister-looking) spiders lies in wait for them, and if I don't get there in time the bees are rapidly parcelled up in a web, their buzzing getting fainter by the second. ●



ILLUSTRATION: AMANDA RIGBY



Detail from a chromolithograph of carrots in *Album Benary* (1876), held by the RHS Lindley Library, which contains 28 colour plates of vegetable illustrations by Ernst Benary.

Getting meadows right can be tricky

The Garden's columnist and garden writer Mary Keen on achieving a natural look



RHS / NEIL HEPMORTH

The meadows in the Olympic Park were a great draw last year, and in the autumn I spent a day at London's Garden Museum learning how they were developed from designer Sarah Price and the University

of Sheffield 'meadow makers' James Hitchmough and Nigel Dunnett.

This may be the year when everyone says 'I want one of those,' but I think home gardeners may find meadows harder to organise than they seem. What appears to be an effortless mix of perpetually flowering plants that need no aftercare is in fact a tricky exercise. If you get it right, it can be amazing, and it is true that for the flowering months from midsummer to autumn frosts

– provided you have done exactly what you are supposed to – little work should be needed.

For the last four years I have been using the classic Pictorial Meadow seed mix developed by

Nigel Dunnett. This is a carefully blended mix of annuals – not all British wildflowers – designed to flower from June until October, with no work whatsoever. For the first two summers I went up about three times a day to see the magical spread (pictured) of poppies, cornflowers, *Ammi* and *Linaria*, and was so excited by this new way of gardening that I planned to do it forever, trying different mixes each year.

But the third summer the meadow was a bit disappointing, and last year it was a flop. Literally. The rain may have been part of the trouble, but like any crop I doubt whether a 'monoculture' will succeed year after year in the same place. The ground was fertilised and Nigel confirmed this was a good idea when I saw him last spring. Later in the year he did admit, a bit reluctantly, that meadow mixes are not as easy to manage as they seem – and perhaps they may deteriorate after a few seasons.

This year I thought I might try to develop my own mix: some perennials mingled with the annuals that I love, so that I change gradually to a more permanent planting. The perennial Prairie Meadow at RHS Garden Wisley (another Sheffield inspiration) is fine where it is, but a chunk of Midwest plains is never going to look quite right in a corner of a Cotswold rectory garden.

I have yet to see Tom Stuart-Smith's perennial meadow at his home, but I know from talking to him that the seed was fabulously expensive. If plants are to succeed they need to be sown thickly, at the rate of almost 100 per square

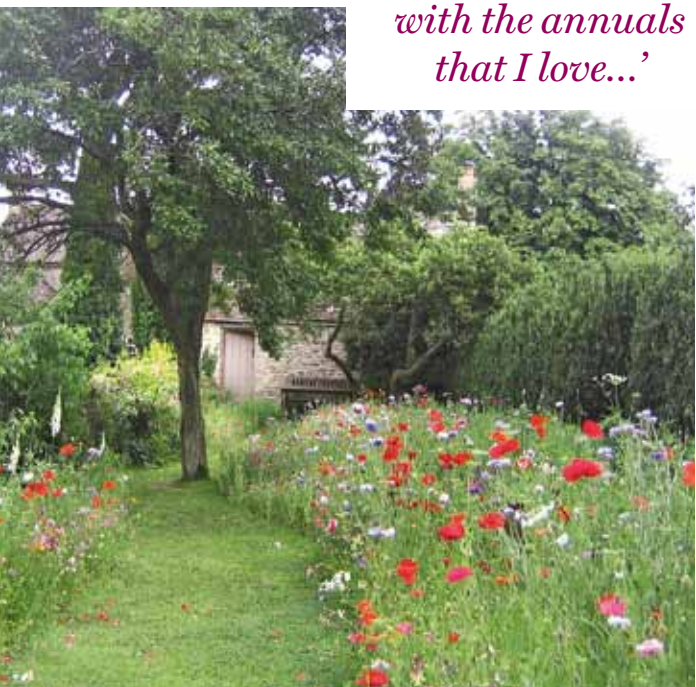
metre. I want to be meaner with money, and not wait as long as Tom for my results. I also want something that is more airy meadow than bold prairie, but I do plan to include grasses, which are not much in evidence in the rest of the garden.

The key to this naturalistic planting is not to use too many selections, and to mingle rather than mass plants. The aim is to create a matrix of repeated patterns as nature does. My high points will be grasses *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Overdam' and *Chasmanthium latifolium*, plus umbellifers *Selinum wallichianum* and purple fennel as well as *Chaerophyllum hirsutum* 'Roseum' (I may regret this pink-flowered cow parsley, which I have to spare, as I know how it spreads).

I plan to add some long-flowering plants that like my soil, including *Dianthus carthusianorum*, *Scabiosa columbaria* subsp. *ochroleuca*, *Linaria dalmatica* and *Linaria purpurea* 'Canon Went'. Welsh poppies, which seed everywhere, may be allowed. *Dahlia* 'Waltzing Mathilda', *Eryngium x tripartitum* and *Aster divaricatus* will provide late colour, as will irresistible *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *deamii*. Low-growing plants suppress weeds if all is perennial, but I hope that over-sowing the permanent plants with a shorter, annual, meadow mix will do that instead.

Preparation, for either annual or perennial meadows, is hard work: the soil must be weed free before you start. Ideally you then add a 7.5cm (3in) layer of sand over the whole bed to discourage weeds, in which the meadow seeds will germinate. Netting is wise to discourage birds as is water in April and May if no rain falls. And weeding and controlling thugs will still need to be done annually to keep the balance. So, an Olympic meadow is worth a try, but I am not expecting it to be an easy, no-gardening option. ●

'This year I thought I might try to develop my own mix: some perennials mingled with the annuals that I love...'



MARY KEEN

RHS GROWING FOR SUCCESS TALK

Nigel Dunnett on Olympic Park plantings; see p98.

✦ Mini-meadow workshops: see p91.



Grow it yourself and be proud

Joy Larkcom is a garden writer, specialising in vegetables. Her recent book, *Just Vegetating* is part memoir, part anthology of past articles.



TESSA TRAIGER

I was brought up in a Berkshire village, in wartime, with a medium-sized garden, and must have been at least seven years old before I realised that not everyone grew their own fruit and vegetables: some people actually bought theirs. Our small village had a butcher, baker, dairy, post office,

tailor, home-made ice-cream shop, chemist, garage, watchmender, shoemaker, carrier and coal merchant, but no greengrocer. I can scarcely remember seeing vegetables in the only grocer. Everyone grew their own. It must have been different in towns but, even there, allotments and back yards would have produced a lot of the vegetables that were consumed.

Once affluence gripped our lives, vegetables took a back seat; subsequent surges of interest in 'growing your own' coincided with downturns in the economy. It is happening again. There are currently 100,000 people on allotment waiting lists, community gardens are springing up and lawns are being turned into vegetable plots.

Will it last? Probably not on this scale. A few setbacks perhaps will send some would-be enthusiasts scurrying back to the supermarkets (there's little risk of backache pushing a shopping trolley), harbouring cynical thoughts about those it's-so-easy pundits. Weren't they being 'economical with the truth'? Because, of course, growing your own is *not* so easy.

But many many more will be hooked, seduced forever by the thrill of a seed germinating and the satisfaction, weeks or months later, of savouring their own produce and long-forgotten flavours. It never palls. Recently we had friends to a simple meal – home-made bread, pumpkin soup made from my favourite cultivar 'Crown Prince', and huge baked apples of that fabulous 18th-century apple 'Blenheim Orange'. I was as proud as if it had been the first time I had eaten our own produce... yet I've been doing so for half a century.

A friend sent me this quote from *Tottel's Miscellany*, a 16th-century poetry anthology, that rather says it all: 'From heavy hartes all doleful dumpes the garden chaseth quite.' ●

RHS GROW YOUR OWN

Celebrate all things edible with the RHS and the four RHS Gardens during **Grow Your Own Weekend** (23-24 March); for more, see *RHS Life*, p90. ♦ For your free packet of carrot seeds, see p91 (UK members only). ♦ Visit: www.rhs.org.uk/growyourown

RHS LINDLEY LIBRARY



This is my year of the carrot

The Garden columnist Lia Leendertz on why it is better to be expert in one crop than master of none.

This year I intend to become an expert, and my chosen subject is carrots. I am turning myself, quite intentionally, into a carrot 'nerd'. I hunt them down on the internet and scour catalogues for heritage cultivars. I quiz fellow gardeners on their favourites and – end goal firmly in mind – fill veg-friendly cookbooks, such as those by Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and Nigel Slater, with sticky notes. On my plot, this is the year of the carrot.

It is shameless copying of a system I saw last summer in a school garden. They pick a crop each year, grow as many different selections of it as they can squeeze in, cook and taste test them, then learn about their botany and origins. I realised that these eight- and nine-year-olds were all-too-quickly going to know more about carrots than me – Jack-of-all-veg, master of none – and found myself getting inappropriately competitive. I wanted to be master of carrots.

I am now finding a use for those large blue bags you get from Ikea by filling them with compost to make instant raised beds, and am warming other areas by covering them with plastic. I have chosen 'Dragon Purple', 'Solar Yellow', and 'Blanche a Collet Vert' as carrots of the unexpected, but want a range of your ordinary orange roots too, hence I will also be growing 'Autumn King 2', 'Chantenay Red Cored', 'Early Nantes 5', 'Little Finger' and 'Mokum'.

Though this (I hate to admit) is in part one-upmanship with schoolchildren, it is also part-reaction to last year's terrible weather, which resulted in too many vegetable failures. Rather than relying on delicate and borderline crops (such as Florence fennel and sweet potato) for culinary excitement, I need to get my kicks from the temperate-loving and the reliable – and there seems to be a world of carrots to explore.

In planning for a lousy summer I am hoping to taunt the gods of gardening into sending a scorching, lengthy warm season, one of aubergine-ripening proportions too, so everyone wins. But particularly me, at carrots. ●



RHS / NEIL HEPWORTH