

## In the garden

A dull grey day with a wind today, it was good to get into the greenhouse. I finished planting French bean and runner bean seed in pots. I had my potting mixture fairly dry, so I left a full watering can in the greenhouse to warm up before I pour it on my seeds.

There is a sunny day forecast for tomorrow, when everything has warmed up I shall go in and water them. It won't hurt being a little damp, but overnight cold and sodden would do them no good.

I often save seed, sometimes I buy a new packet but with beans I find it is easy to have a huge surplus. From these I pick all the biggest and best looking seeds, I then always plant up far more than I need and when it comes time to plant out choose the biggest and strongest plants. That seems to work year on year.

Of course I also have a surplus of young plants, the yellowish ones, the ones with a missing leaf, the stunted and misshapen, these I cull mercilessly. The Third Reich would salute my mentality, there is a time and place for everything. I know gardeners who try to save every plant, they are fools.

I still have a fair number of plants left after this, and, although not as good as the ones I plant, others seem grateful for them

It is a bright, sunny day today, almost too hot to work in the sun, and I have been digging over a piece that is in partial shade from the trees at the bottom. It is intended for the celery which is still in pots in the greenhouse.

Last night I pinched the dead heads from the yellow daffodils which are in a large clump by the old apple tree in the lawn at the top of the garden. When I moved here I rotovated everything except the apple tree and planted grass, the daffodils were a tight clump of bulbs, crammed together and growing into one another.

I have separated them and replanted twice now in the last fifteen years and they have recovered enough that they make an oval of dense yellow about six foot by four in the early spring. Now they are over I have a drift of white narcissi with pale yellow trumpets at the bottom of the garden where I planted all the odd bulbs I found.

There is a vase with a couple of dozen of these in on the kitchen table, scenting the room. On the windowsill there is a narrow brass vase with four or five heads of snake's head fritillary. They are not usually a cut flower but they are one of my garden favourites and I do like them in that vase.

Looking down the garden the magnolia stellata is in full bloom under the Prunus autumnalis, that stays in bloom in this garden from December until the end of February, all winter despite its name. Very pretty with its dark twigs and boughs lined with little pink flowers.

At the top end of the garden the chaenomeles, is glorious against the wall of the top shed and next to it the thing I call Mongolian dogwood and the missus refers to as Jew's mallow is covered in yellow pom-poms. Between the stones of the patio the veronica has turned into a mound of vivid blue, and there is the first flower on one of the strawberries that I plant in big

tomatoe pots to keep near the back door.  
It's all happening again out there.

I have been digging, it is something I try to avoid, and with forethought one should be able to avoid it. I am somewhat annoyed with myself, I have discussions with other gardeners about the sort of customers who call us up on the first summery, sunny days requiring our services, when we arrive the garden is overgrown with weeds and they say something like, "I was thinking of growing some vegetables this year".

If I had known I would have come last Autumn and covered the ground with weighted down plastic, then I could have turned up now and lifted it to reveal the odd twisted dock or dandelion that had enough root to survive, the ground would be soft and damp under the rotted grass and I would lift them easily with a fork.

As it is the customer and I are looking at a piece of overgrown meadow, the plants have sucked the moisture from the ground and it is rock hard. I usually suggest a sheet of builder's plastic with grow-bags on it for the first year or "I will never get it dug over in time to plant.". That is a bit of a white lie, take it steady and you can get through a lot of ground in a day, but what is a pleasant job on a cool, damp autumn day becomes murderous in hot sun and I can think of better ways of using my life.

Gardening is like life, the less prepared you are the more work you do in the long run.

Digging is not good general practice in my gardening book. Digging breaks up the structure of the soil, it cuts worms in half takes their homes away; it creates an artificial environment for the plants. It is a practice for occasional emergencies and to expedite some things that would take years. When ground has become infested with docks or is very compacted it can take a couple of years to recover it by other means, for example.

So why have I been digging, well, my brother in law gave me a tray of celery seedlings, and they prefer the damp, partially shaded conditions that are found at the bottom of the garden in a part I have not brought into use yet, so I have dug over a small square (They do better in a grid than rows) and have then dug in a couple of barrow loads of compost, they should do well there, but I will be weeding out seedlings all summer that would not have been there if I had been prepared and mulched.

Near the top of the garden on the west side is an apple tree that is one of the few things remaining from the previous occupants. Like most fully mature specimens of fruit trees it is an old variety, this is in the nature of trees.

They have a saying round here, 'Plant apples for your children and pears for their heirs.'

Being an old variety it varies in its cropping year to year, some years there is barely a flower on the tree, this year it is a mound of pink and white, and wafts of scent keep drifting across the garden. If we do not have a late frost I shall have to thin the apples to get them to any size.

That late frost is a real possibility, I'll bet all over southern England, where we are experiencing a heat wave, people are going out to garden centres and buying tender bedding and seeds that they are putting straight in the ground. There is a real chance they will die, this is England and as my Dad used to say "In other countries they have climates; in England we have weather."

Some people mock these optimists, I like that people are optimistic, and sometimes it pays off and the garden is filled with flowers. I still like to hedge my bets. I planted a tray of forty tomato plants and got about three dozen germinated. I have junked a couple of real losers and put two lots of six smallest ones out the front on a small table. I leave a note "Free plants" and a description of what they are, then stop the wind blowing it off by standing a plate on the blank end. I was left a total of £2.41p, people unload their loose change, the seed cost £1.69p I make my own compost, and the pots came from a skip, I am in profit, don't tell the tax man. Of the two dozen plants that are left I have planted four out in the garden, if the weather favours me they will do well, otherwise there are four in the greenhouse bed, four in large pots I can have on the patio, four to replace those killed by a late frost, and a lot left over. I'll give some more away if all goes well with the others.

There is a shaw runs along the bottom of our garden, or that's what they call it round here. It is a narrow strip of land that was once a driveway with ordered trees either side. It has been left for years since the old house burnt down. There is a fine mixture, mature trees, young trees, heavy brambles and some quite open places. I think the most attention it gets is when I climb over the back fence and sever the largest ivy bushes threatening to strangle one of the trees. The trees are a good windbreak but the ivy is thick and evergreen and blocks the light, and in winter its evergreen leaves catch the gales and threaten to bring down the trees. There are a number of birds that inhabit the shaw and make forays from it, magpies, wood pigeons and doves, a wren, and last winter there was a pheasant. Tonight , and for the last few nights, there has also been a nightingale, wonderful.