

Vegetable Gardening

It's perverse, really, to write about gardening at all. Half the point of gardening is that it repairs that part of your brain which words and thinking are constantly threatening to destroy. That's one thing it has in common with music: it lies beyond the reach of words, and you wouldn't need it if it didn't. Still, you're forced to be articulate about it sometimes, particularly when under attack. The other day one of those acid young women you come across nowadays, who give you the impression that they're on temporary release from an Urban Guerrilla Training Camp, demanded in the course of a chat how I could justify spending time on gardening when, as an academic, I ought to be reading books.

It took some time to sort out the various kinds of rage with which this query filled me. But when I'd done so I realized that it was my puritanism which had taken the worst knock. Whatever other pleasures attach to gardening, they're all based on the assumption that it's a blameless, nay meritorious, occupation. That feeling must go back at least as far as the myth of Eden. And if, as I do, you stick to vegetables and don't grow flowers, your sense of self-approval naturally redoubles.

Quite right too: for you are, after all, producing food, which is one of the few obviously worthwhile human activities. True, someone else would produce it for you, probably more efficiently, if you didn't. But then, you could find someone to perform most of life's functions in your stead if you were sufficiently comatose. By growing what you eat, you keep in touch with economic realities which lie deeper than money. As for the argument about wasting time, it's nonsense. If you're efficient you can keep your family stocked with vegetables by spending about one Saturday in every two gardening. For half the year, from October to March, you have virtually nothing to do but gather the produce – sprouts, leeks, carrots, kale, broccoli, winter cabbages – all of which will stand out in the snow and ice obediently fattening themselves for your consumption.

But these practical considerations, though sound, are by no

means the whole story. Like most puritan pleasures, vegetable gardening contains a strong element of submerged sensuousness. By that I don't mean simply that home-grown stuff tastes better than the plastic-shrouded organisms which pass themselves off as vegetables in supermarkets, alongside the disinfectants and washing-up liquids. Garden produce undeniably does have more intense and varied flavours than anything you can buy, but gardeners are austere people, and it would strike them as indecent to set too much store by the pleasures of the table. The sensuous gains they look for are more remote and devious.

Take parsnips, for instance. With the best will in the world it's difficult to pretend that the parsnip is really eatable, but it's an immense and exacting pleasure to grow. At the start of the season you grub out a row of pits with a trowel, and fill them almost to the brim with finely sieved soil. Then you poke into each soft dell about a dozen of the crisp wafers which are the parsnip's seeds, and pat earth over them. Come the summer, you pull out all but one of the seedlings from each cluster – pale gold pencils, with feathery tops, which it always gives you a pang to throw on to a compost heap, though there's nothing else to be done with them. Then, as the winter approaches, the great spreading leaves of the survivors rot and yellow, and the parsnips withdraw into their subterranean existence until, some time after Christmas, the time comes to crack the frosty crust over them and lug them out gross, whiskered and reeking, from their lairs.

Once you have done that, and have scraped the earth from their sweaty white sides with a sharp knife, the parsnip's capacity for giving pleasure is, in my view, pretty well exhausted. You can, of course, roast or boil them like potatoes, or you can put off the evil hour of trying to get them down your gullet by making them into wine, which takes several months to perfect, and is generally so vile in the end that it has mercifully to be tipped down the sink. However, these posthumous considerations don't affect the satisfactoriness of the parsnip during its lifetime. As a fellow creature, rather than a food, it is truly glorious.

Most of the rich experiences obtainable from the vegetable garden are similarly untainted by any thought of actual consumption. They feed, rather, your other senses in covert and delicate ways. To feel the damp fur inside a broad bean pod, and see how it grips its beans by their little umbilical cords, is a lot

better than eating broad beans – good as that is. With onions, nothing that happens on the culinary side is more satisfying than the business of preparing them for winter storage, after they have been uprooted and dried off in the sun. You start with a tattered, mud-caked heap, and one by one you rub the papery outer skins away to reveal row upon row of gleaming amber bellies – the onion equivalent of a riviera beach scene. Then you string the sleek bulbs together by the necks and hang them in dangling swags from the wall of your garden shed, where they will swing and glow through the dark months.

Like all garden jobs, podding beans and storing onions are seasonal – part of a pattern ruled by sky and earth which non-gardeners lose touch with, or apprehend only dimly through vulgarized annual occurrences like power strikes or Easter eggs. But the gardener's annual pattern is also a personal one, giving coherence to his life. At each stage in his year he finds himself rediscovering vivid sensations which have a whole stream of dormant memories trailing behind them. Spend a quarter of an hour, for instance, pinching out the side shoots on a row of tomatoes, and you will find your thumb and forefinger stained a deep and pungent green, so concentratedly that when you put your hand in water the greenness comes off in clouds and fills the bowl. I can still remember my pleased surprise when that first happened to me – or rather, I suppose, I can remember re-remembering it through years of renewal. Agreed, few people would take up vegetable gardening just for the sake of a bowl of green water, but if your nose and eyes are still alive it's a thing you'll find intriguing.

Since the gardener's year is circular, with life always overlapping death, these private annual ceremonies take you into the future as well as the past. Gathering runner-bean seeds, for instance, is a late autumn job with an atmosphere all of its own, compounded of weak sunlight, and that sense of wet collapse which a dying garden exudes. But the bean stems, you find, are dry and brittle, like twigs, and the pods still hanging on them crunch between your fingers into tobacco-coloured flakes, leaving in your palm the chunky beads which will be next year's crop.

As vegetable gardeners aren't primarily concerned with eating they harbour, like librarians, a tidy-minded dislike of anyone who actually wants to use the commodities they're in charge of. To have to uproot cabbages, say, from a row, and hand them over for cooking, is always an annoyance. The gaps

look unsightly, like snapped-off teeth. A stalwart, unbroken line of cabbages, on the other hand, with their hearts tight as fists and their purple outer leaves spread to catch the dew, raise your spirit every time you visit them. Among the current clichés I especially deplore is the one which refers to hospital patients kept alive by machines as 'cabbages'. This is both inaccurate and insulting to vegetables. For a cabbage is a sturdy, self-reliant being, and compared with an average specimen of twentieth-century manhood it has, when well grown, a positively athletic air.

That's not to deny that the gardener has his work cut out keeping his vegetables healthy. The only vegetable which no insect seems to attack is the leek. That makes it the easiest of all to grow, which is perhaps why it's favoured by the lyrical and carefree Welsh. All the rest are assailed by ingenious and tireless enemies, with no other purpose in life than to destroy what you have grown. Even your attempts to care for your plants draw down disaster upon them. When you weed out a row of carrots, the smell of crushed leaves brings carrot-flies flocking from far and wide.

In this situation the only adequate response is to thank God for chemical pesticides, and use them liberally. Unfortunately the strongest and most effective ones keep being withdrawn from the market on the grounds that they have been found to damage the environment. So when you hit on a really lethal sort it's a good plan to buy in a large supply, which will allow you to go on using it after it has been outlawed. I did this for several seasons with a splendid product, now alas unobtainable, which wiped out everything from snails to flea beetles. It had no adverse effect on the bird population so far as I could see, though the neighbourhood cats did start to look a bit seedy. That, of course, was an advantage from my point of view, for cats are filthy, insanitary beasts, and a fearful nuisance to the gardener. One of the anomalies of English law is that whereas it would, as I understand it, be an offence to clamber over your neighbour's fence and defecate among his vegetables, you can send a feline accomplice on precisely the same errand with total impunity. It has always amazed me that manufacturers of slug bait, and other such garden aids, should proudly announce on the label that their product is 'harmless to pets'. A pesticide that could guarantee to cause pets irreparable damage would, I'd have thought, sell like hot cakes.

But though gardeners grumble about their battle with pests and marauders, it's really a challenge they wouldn't be without for anything. It gives them a heroic sense of being pitted against the universe, and makes them realize how precariously we maintain life on our planet in competition with the swarming species struggling to shove us off it. It also peps up your aggressive instincts. With a bucket of toxic chemicals you can spread death almost as effectively as you could with a flame thrower, and far more usefully.

A different kind of pest, and just as bothersome, at any rate to the novice, as slugs or vermin, are the people who write the descriptive paragraphs about different varieties of vegetable in seed catalogues. I'm sure they don't mean to mislead, but the fact is that what they omit is far more important than what they say, and it takes years to accustom yourself to deciphering their curiously oblique literary mode. For example, the phrase 'a sure winner on the show bench' actually means 'inedible'. If, unsuspectingly, you grow a runner bean, say, which has this legend attached, you will end up with beans a yard long which have the flavour and consistency of ballpoint pens. Let us suppose that, after this experience, you vow never to grow vegetables which are not specifically recommended for their eating qualities. Next year, accordingly, you choose a strain of lettuce which has sent the catalogue compiler into raptures by its crispness and succulence. Surely now you'll be safe. But no. For the one thing that matters about lettuces is whether or not they bolt in hot weather, and since your author has remained silent on this point it means that you will find your lettuces wagging in the breeze like pagodas after a couple of weeks of sunshine. And so it goes on. Next year you carefully avoid both the show-bench successes and the secret bolters, but you forget to look for the assurance that your selected varieties are resistant to disease. Should this clause be absent, your vegetables, though enthusiastically recommended, and quite hale-looking in the catalogue snap-shots, will prove to be generous hosts to every known virus, and will topple into fungoid ruin long before you have a chance to harvest them.

Not that seed catalogues can't provide their own special pleasures, so long as you don't expect them to be helpful or informative. Learning to outwit the compilers is itself a heartening experience. There's also much amusement to be derived from those fancy catalogues which urge the simple-minded to

grow aubergines, soya beans, melons and other ungrowable exotica. It's always good to see fools and their money being parted. A more poetic source of enjoyment are the names of the vegetable varieties that any catalogue contains: Chantenay Red Cored and Musselburgh, Winter Queen and Wheeler's Imperial, Amager Rearguard and Hopkin's Fenlander. They are full of mysterious evocations, like monuments of a lost culture. Who was Ailsa Craig, now immortalized as an onion? Who was Dr Mackintosh, before he became a potato? Who was the Lobjoit of Lobjoit's Green Cos? I imagine Lobjoit as a lean pioneer bent double on some windswept smallholding, surrounded by immature lettuce plants. No doubt research into horticultural history could provide definite answers. But knowledge on such matters would be quite useless, whereas ignorance is a source of inexhaustible fascination.

As with most pursuits, one of the leading pleasures of vegetable gardening is that it makes you feel superior to those who don't pursue it. The degeneracy of the pampered masses, propped half-conscious before their telly screens, becomes, as you toil on your lonely plot, a profoundly satisfying subject of meditation. But here, as in other ways, vegetable growing has an educative, balancing effect – for there is always someone better at it than you. Take a stroll round any village horticultural show, and you will find your self-esteem draining away with horrible rapidity. Onions the size of Christmas puddings, balanced proudly on their little beds of sand; luminous tomatoes, each competitor's group of six standing demurely apart from the rest and as exactly matched as billiard balls; leeks as thick as your arm, with their vast green manes combed and beribboned like show horses; aristocratic carrots, like furled orange umbrellas – how is such grandeur achieved? Naturally you try to console yourself, remembering your experience of seed catalogues, by reflecting that this exhibition stuff is probably useless for anything else. But somehow that thought carries little conviction. For even if it were true, the artistry that goes into these prodigious creations is still daunting and, you are sinkingly aware, far beyond your powers.

This tendency to elate and humble you in quick succession is one of the factors linking vegetable gardening with religion. It is also religious in the devotion it inspires and the elect band it admits you to. Like other religions it instils a set of values combatively out of key with modern trends. The promises

dangled before the public by political leaders are likely to strike the vegetable gardener with indifference or dismay. Those rousing forecasts of intensified house-building programmes and greater industrial expansion – what kind of moron, the vegetable gardener wonders, are they supposed to attract? Who wants to see a greater and greater acreage disappearing under concrete and sewage pipes? Isn't it time we realized that, given our bulging populations, vegetables have now become more desirable inhabitants of the earth than people: less destructive, more peaceful, more serviceable for sustaining life? The day I see a row of houses being pulled down to make a vegetable plot, I shall feel that something sane and healthy has happened.

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PART TWO

The English Scene