

Gardening is easy

Gill Heavens

He who accounts all things easy will have many difficulties.
Laotse, *The Simple Way*, sixth century BC.

© Gill Heavens



My title was prompted by the government's proposition that the long-term unemployed should be required (i.e. forced) to undertake activities such as gardening and litter-picking or lose their benefits. Don't worry, this is not a political debate, certainly not the time or the place. But the proposal implies that gardening is a mindless occupation, suitable for an unskilled and unwilling labour force – amounting to little more than a punishment.

© Gill Heavens



Figs 1 & 2 Before & after

I cannot speak for street cleaners, but as someone who has chosen gardening as a career it is not surprising that I find the suggestion that ‘gardening is easy’ less than complimentary. I believe strongly in the therapeutic advantages of gardening, and in the benefits for anyone and everyone who participates, but not because it is easy, quite the contrary. So here I’ll explore how simple, or conversely not, my job is.

Gardening is so much easier these days

Our gardening world is very different from that of 50 years ago, and many of the changes have been labour saving and gardener friendly. This is just as well, as manpower is much reduced: the garden where I work originally employed eight gardeners, now we have two! Plants have been bred to be more pest- and disease-resistant, they need less support and are generally tougher creatures. No-dig systems are accepted as a viable alternative to back-breaking double digging. Machinery is less cumbersome and much easier to maintain and, especially close to my heart, to start.

On occasion, though, although aware of an easy option, one perversely chooses the more difficult route. Take the thorny issue of rose pruning. It has been well documented that taking a hedge trimmer to your floribunda offers up similar results to considered pruning with secateurs. Who am I to argue with this? Scientific trials are, I suppose, scientific trials. Personally this is anathema to me. I enjoy the meditative process of rose pruning. There is the added advantage that this annual ceremony involves more than just a quick hack – it incorporates feeding and mulching, and careful examination to detect any problems. It is all about getting down and dirty, getting to know your garden, and therefore be in a stronger position to nurture the potential contained within (figs 1 & 2).

Just bung in a load of plants, how hard can that be?

The choice of plants can also dictate how easy, or otherwise, is the gardener’s task. To illustrate this, I’ve divided plants into categories.

Princesses

In our garden we have many of these high-maintenance, delicate creatures, but I sometimes wonder if they are tougher than we are led to believe. I have been known to advocate the ‘treat them mean to keep them keen’ school of gardening, but usually weaken at the last moment and wrap and pamper and

© Gill Heavens



Fig. 3 *Isoplexis sceptrum*, crowd-pleaser but also heart-breaker.

ensure no peas are left under their mattresses. Often the crowd-pleasers but also the heart-breakers, such as *Isoplexis sceptrum* (fig. 3), and *Brugmansia sanguinea* (fig. 4), they are often totally inappropriate for the conditions in your garden, but still you doggedly persist.

Prodigal Sons

Another high-maintenance category (rod for own back springs to mind). These are the plants which struggle and complain, are spoilt rotten, do a very good impersonation of being dead, only to send up a shoot just as all hope is lost and the spade is hovering. This growth is met with much celebration and killing of the fatted calf whilst all the DDs (see below) who have been bravely flowering away can only look on in dismay. Is it really worth the struggle? For the last three springs I have searched the base of *Erythrina crista-galli* for signs of life, rejoiced when I spotted tiny buds, praised its healthy re-growth, knowing in my heart of hearts it is unlikely to recover sufficiently to flower, ever. I will continue in this vein until the winter eventually kills it. However small the potential for success, the magnitude of that success makes it worth hanging on to.

Gypsies

Many, who're not in the know, would think that a horticultural certainty is that a plant will stay in the place you planted it, but this is not always the case. These travellers, such as *Berkheya purpurea* and *Verbena rigida*, pop up in spring some distance from where last seen. Although annoying, you secretly admire them for their bad behaviour and free spirit, reminding you they are not for taming. The self-seeders can create interesting plant associations, which of course you can later take the credit for. Just one example is the red grass *Uncinia uncinata rubra*, which has very tastefully located itself amongst *Cotula hispida* (fig. 5).

Dependable Doras

Where would we be without the DDs! Rudbeckia, fuchsias, geraniums, geums –



Fig. 4 *Brugmansia sanguinea*



Fig. 5 *Uncinia uncinata rubra* has very tastefully located itself amongst *Cotula hispida*.

they are the steady, reliable plants that the gardener couldn't do without. They are the plants that make our life easy by just getting on with it, none more so than my favourite annual, the cosmos (fig. 6). They always perform, never complain and are truly simple to garden with.

The Punk Rockers

Well here we are back to the difficult, difficult and some might say evil. They include *Yucca gloriosa*, *Rubus cockburnianus* and *Agave americana*. I view them through slitted eyes, and threaten and curse as invariably they spike me, however careful I am. They occupy the most untidy places in the garden – there are few volunteers to upkeep these areas. An easy solution involves a spade, but on reflection they provide good structure and interesting focal points, so have a stay of execution for the time being. They do not, however, make life any easier for the gardener.

The Sacred Cows

These are the self-seeders we haven't got the heart to pull up. They include foxgloves, eschscholtzias, *Corydalis cheilanthifolia* (fig. 7) and *Geranium palmatum*. They are greeted with "How on earth did you get there? Well, you might as well stay". Of course you need the knowledge to identify the seedlings correctly, and these invaders must be managed effectively to contain their striving for world domination. A little chaos is a good thing, but it is a fine line, easily crossed, into total anarchy.

The Thugs

They come in various guises and, of course, one gardener's thug is another's useful

© Gill Heavens



Fig. 6 *Cosmos*, my favourite annual, frames the view.

ground cover. The rogues we grow here include *Physostegia virginiana* ‘Rosea’ and *Lysimachia clethroides*, both of which we pass to friends in exchange for a signed disclaimer.

Chuck about a few seeds

Propagation can range from the near impossible, with seeds requiring smoke treatment, exact temperatures and the patience of a saint, to those which are, quite frankly, embarrassingly easy. Blackcurrant prunings pushed around plants as a deer deterrent root with ease, cosmos (teacher’s pet) seedlings fly up in a matter of days. The two extremes serve different functions. The more obliging allow cheap and rapid clothing of the garden; the awkward give satisfaction that the former just can’t provide. However, nature always has a way to show who is boss. Last season I crowed about the *Hedychium coccineum* ‘Tara’ seedlings I had propagated. A few weeks later, while I was weeding around the parent, seedlings in abundance cocked a snook at me!

Books/TV programmes, it’s all in there

The way gardening is presented by the media has an enormous influence on the image of gardening. Gardening television programmes show everything at breakneck speed; I have even seen televised gardening competitions (a weird concept in itself) including activities against the clock. In reality even the fittest of us would be exhausted after an hour working at this rate, needing a lie down in a cosy potting shed with a large glass of something medicinal.

It is true that gardening is not rocket science: give a plant what it wants and it will undoubtedly perform. But there’s the rub – what does it want, what is it telling you? Gardens are not natural environments for most of the plants we try to grow. It can be a battle to provide what a plant from Drakensberg, South Africa requires (cold, dry winters; hot, wet summers) in North Devon (wet, sometimes cold, winters; wet, sometimes warm, summers). *Moraea huttonii* and *Scabiosa drakensbergensis* have thrived here, and, although the watsonias look a bit ropey after the winter, they have all survived. But for every gain there is invariably a loss, and the moment an inkling of complacency trickles into your consciousness disaster is inevitable.

People do not become gardening experts by reading the Sunday supplements or even by studying scientific tomes late into the night. People become good gardeners by gardening. It is the end result that is paramount, and of course you are only as good as your last season. It is



Fig. 7 *Corydalis cheilanthisfolia*, a useful self-seeder.

immaterial that your CV includes tending the Hanging Gardens of Babylon – if in East Grinstead your roses get aphid and your lettuce eaten, this is what you will be judged on.

There is nothing to do in winter

I sit writing this with the wind beating against the window. We have had three extreme winters in a row, the coldest December in 100 years/living memory/ever (take your pick) and I truly believe that winter is the most important season of the year for the gardener (fig. 8). It is also the hardest both physically and mentally, and it is during this time that all the ground work, the foundations for the coming season, is undertaken. In *The Garden in Winter*, Rosemary Verey writes ‘Fair-weather gardeners are to gardens what interior decorators are to buildings – they only know half the story’.

It is a season fraught with frustration, when inclement weather means many planned jobs have to be postponed, sometimes repeatedly. Amongst other things, we prune, make new borders, protect and care for tenders, dig out brambles, order seed, weed, clean, tidy and mulch. It would be great to leave cutting back herbaceous borders until spring, as recommended, but we simply do not have the time then. In our garden it has to be done throughout winter whenever weather permits.

Most winter work is done blind, with only good thermals and better optimism to keep the gardener going. It is a time for planning for the next year, following a grand scheme which is sometimes written or drawn, but mostly stored in the imagination (pics before and after). It can be a time of great optimism but also of great despair.

Mistakes don’t matter, you start afresh each year

There is an element of truth in this, naturally. But it doesn’t always happen and the incessant passing of the months repeats in a groundhog-year way, again and again.

- January – Will this winter ever end? Is it too early to sow my tomatoes?
- February – Will this winter ever end? I wish I hadn’t sown the tomatoes so early.
- March – Will this winter ever end? The tomatoes are very leggy.
- April – Why isn’t anything growing? Must stake everything.
- May – Mmm, maybe things aren’t so bad, put away the longjohns.
- June – Hey, pretty good.
- July – Tomatoes are yummy. Not bad but maybe a few changes for next year.
- August – Surely winter’s not here already. The garden is a mess, why didn’t I stake more?
- September – The whole garden has to be redesigned for next year.
- October – Dust off the longjohns.
- November – Wet Gloom.
- December – Cold wet gloom.

One morning recently I woke up and thought, do you know what, I don't think I want to be a gardener any more. To be honest, what's the point. Everyone thinks its easy. Year after year, Canute like, I weed, prune and wage guerrilla warfare on molluscs, I'm never going to win, its never going to be finished. I'm well aware that if I were to stop for a short time it would be as if I had never been there. Who else would undertake a career that was so demoralisingly, unflinchingly, tediously, un-completeable!



Fig. 8 Winter is the most important season of the year for the gardener.

The forgiving nature of gardening does, however, mean that we have the opportunity to learn from our mistakes and correct them for the following year: you can wipe the slate clean and start, if not quite again, then almost.

I just wander about gazing at things

It is extremely important to be able to spot things both wrong and right in the garden promptly. Sometimes they can be extremely subtle changes, perhaps of colour, or change in habit, or just an inkling that further investigation is needed. This is what a former tutor of mine called “green eyes”, which are far more important than green fingers. Early recognition is imperative for effective pest and disease control, or to detect that a plant is failing in its growing conditions. It is certainly not an easy thing to do, and it is integral to maintaining a healthy and therefore productive and beautiful garden. This, of course, in turn, makes life easier for the gardener.

For lifting the spirit, there can be nothing better than spotting the first buds swelling in early spring such as



Fig. 9 *Clematis arandii* buds lift the spirits.

Clematis armandii (fig. 9) or the first time a plant flowers for you as our *Daphne bholua* ‘Jacqueline Postill’ did this year (fig. 10).

It can’t be a serious job if you are enjoying yourself

Some would say that any job which is a pleasure isn’t really a serious occupation. But surely one doesn’t exclude the other. Maxim Gorky wrote ‘When work is a pleasure, life is a joy! When work is a duty, life is slavery’¹. I cannot say that I skip joyously around the garden every day of the week – occasionally a little slavery is involved, but on the whole it is a pleasure. How many people have the good fortune to say that? So I suppose my job is easy in this respect: fundamentally, easy because I enjoy it.

I believe that gardening is a noble profession, good for both body and soul. I realise it is often considered a non-essential frippery, decadent and sometimes brutish. My work involves science, art, economics, public relations, marketing, nursing and a little clairvoyance. I am often cold, wet and tired, at a loss to know why it all seems to be going wrong. At the back of my mind I know that, as Bogey said,

Fig. 10 The very first flowers on *Daphne bholua* ‘Jacqueline Postill’.

“Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon” the sun will come out, the plants will blossom and again there’ll be cartwheels on the lawn.

So what conclusions have been reached? Like most things in life, many aspects of gardening are easy when you know how. It is easier with experience and knowledge, enthusiasm and dedication. Horticultural excellence has been achieved in many different spheres of society, from Leyhill Prison to Highgrove House. I am certainly not going to say which is the greater success, having become quite fond of my head in recent years. What is certain is that both were achieved through hard work and commitment. Satisfaction is achieved by facing challenges, and by definition this is not easy. Which leads us to the final question – would we really want to do it if it were easy? 🐛

Gill Heavens is a professional gardener at Cliffe Gardens in North Devon and an amateur cartwheeler at the same location.

¹ Maxim Gorky, *The Lower Depths* 1903

