

AN AUSTRIAN SCYTHE

Monica Meenehan

When my husband, Tom, was a boy he spent his holidays in County Mayo, Ireland with his farming relatives. Naturally, he was drawn into some of the farm activities and it was there that he learnt how to scythe. When he got his allotment a few years ago, the plot was very rough, full of weeds, and the soil levels were uneven. His mind ran back to the days when he learnt to scythe and he thought such a tool would be useful but, for the time being, he made do with a small hook that we had in the shed. It was better than nothing, but not quite the same as a proper scythe. He has now got the plots into reasonable order, although even if he keeps the allotment for more than the traditionally seven years that weeds are expected to grow on a neglected site, I can't imagine he will have much success in eradicating the thousands that he has inherited.

After many months of heavy rain in the last year or two, it had become clear that he needed a more substantial tool for keeping the paths tidy, so when an expert on *Gardener's Question Time* recommended an Austrian scythe in answer to a query about rough grass, Tom took the suggestion on board, and found just the tool he needed on the internet. When the package arrived in June, we were having exceptionally heavy rain every day, so we contented ourselves with examining the tool indoors. Without removing the guard from the blade (so our carpet was quite safe), Tom demonstrated the technique and we had a photo session.



Monica demonstrates how to hold the Austrian scythe. A note of caution - wearing open-toed sandals is not recommended when engaging in scythe-related activities

The joy of the Austrian scythe is that it is lightweight, has razor-thin, beautifully hand-curved, sharp blades and adjustable positions to fit the user's body size. There is a choice of blades suitable for use in different situations. In comparison, the traditional English scythes are heavy and not so finely crafted.

The term 'mowing' was used for scything until the introduction of lawn mowers, when the term was adopted for cutting the grass with this new kind of machinery. As a result, cutting grass with a scythe gradually became referred to as scything.

I remember reading Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, in which haymaking was described in detail, and scythes were used for mowing the fields. I've forgotten the detail in the book but I remember there were descriptions of a young man's first attempts at mowing. Initially he found it difficult and exhausting, but as he became more skilled he was able to work at speed with the best of the men for long hours throughout the day, even taking part in the competitions that were held.

Courses are held in different parts of the country today to train people to develop the skill safely, with competitions and festivities. Many people regard scythes as dangerous tools. They can be, if not handled correctly, especially when sharpening the blade and adjusting the handles. People also think they are very hard work, but when used with skill they are effortless. Tom came back from his first session glorying in the rhythm of working with it, and how easy it was.

When beginning to learn how to work with a scythe, it is wise to go on a course to be trained to use it safely and learn how to sharpen the blades. When working with the scythe, the blade needs to be kept in contact with the ground at all times and, moving from the hips, gently slid in a semi-circle, backwards and forwards.

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