

THE SEEDS OF LIFE

Gill Wragg

I have always taken gardens for granted. Early memories of growing up in The Grange, a large, rented country house, after the Second World War, persist even though it now no longer stands. It still exists in a precious black and white photo, with its stone flags and double bay windows. My parents shared this house with my aunt, uncle and another couple, as well as a lady who lived with all her furniture piled up in her private room, her hat tied on with a silk scarf at all times.

My first home was shared with five other children, born in quick succession, and I was the first. Six babies brought up together; my sister and I had four boys as companions and we must have run a little wild in this large nursery. These were different times, when all my neighbours lived within those walls and the Rutland countryside lay outside.

Dark bedtimes with paraffin lamps; porridge for breakfast; a noisy scullery with gas and much clatter. The drawing room hung with glamorous purple taffeta curtains, made by my other 'Auntie' Wendy, who later ran a dance school. Photographs show these families sitting having picnics in fields with baskets and bottles of beer. All the men shared a taste for village cricket and the pub, but it would be years before I would understand the sanctuary this life was after their service in the army and the air force. With no cars or labour-saving devices, life must have been busy and difficult.

The leafy woodland protected us, and a neglected orchard became our playground as we grew. When the nettles took over, we climbed the rickety trees above, to eat the - sometimes sour - fruit. There were staddle stones, periwinkles near the swing, filberts on the wayside, and down the curved drive lay a road forbidden to us. Up Pit Lane, the local stone quarry company had laid a steam-train line to carry the rock to the nearby cement works. What a sight that was, a giant monster hissing at us on our slow walks to the village shop. On early summer mornings, we woke to pigeons cooing and sunlit explores down to a disused quarry where the alpine strawberries grew, picked and eaten before breakfast. This was Ketton, and I had been born in peacetime.

My grandparents had come to live in Lower Cottage to keep a chicken farm, where two Italian prisoners of war were billeted. My grandmother was of yeoman farming stock; she had hand-sewn shirts for her twelve brothers and sisters, and she supplied us with eggs, meat and vegetables, because gardening was something she knew about. However I learnt later that, to her, gardening was real work with a capital G.

A great change came about when we moved away to the local town: it was time to start school. Our family moved into a newly-built home where the garden had to be terraced and planted up from scratch, apart from the lovely old walls and fruit trees. I still remember the uprooting of a large tree and the burning of it. The acrid smell of any bonfire takes me back there still.

My mother adored 'Peace' roses, marigolds and snapdragons, and she planted up sempervivums in the rockery, and a plot for vegetables and fruit at the bottom of the garden. There was a visiting gardener who mowed the two lawns on which, now, three children played. In Brown's, where my mum bought bulbs, we stepped down from the street into a dimly lit cavern of a shop, where all manner of garden tools and sundries seemed very mysterious. I loved the deep, foxy smell that pervaded the boxes of fresh corms and rhizomes.

My natural impressions, watching my mother tending her first home and garden with such love and pride, gave me quiet joy. It would be forty years before I would discover my own special cottage and garden, in Wales.

Having experimented with plants and design all my life, I know that without these formative experiences gathered from every garden I ever rented, visited or owned, I would not feel so enriched as when I stroll around my garden and smallholding. In the twenty-first century, if there are new plants to find or propagate, you're one click away from the fount of all knowledge. What utter luxury!

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