

GARDENING ON MY OWN

Yvonne Morecroft

Many of us garden alone on a regular basis, of course, even if we are just weeding at the opposite end of the plot to the 'head gardener' or 'under gardener', depending on the dynamics of the relationship. But when that person is suddenly not there at all, what then? What happens when coffee or afternoon tea break comes around and no one urges us to stop and admire the view? When there's no one with whom to discuss the plan for the new project in the garden? No heated discussion over the border or climbers for the pergola? All the real planning seemed to happen during those pauses in a busy day, whether we were contemplating our patch in the sunshine or poring over catalogues in front of a warm fire - debating, arguing and occasionally agreeing. No one to do nothing with. No one to praise our efforts, after doing so for forty years, adding an extra dimension to our reasons for gardening and accustoming us to their approval.

Not that his view of gardening was particularly serious, formal or reverential - it was frequently (in my opinion) a source of very silly jokes. The carefully tended bowl of bulbs placed on the desk of an annoying colleague turned out to be onions. One cold April he quietly announced to all in the pub that he had runner beans in flower. Having enjoyed the incredulity and ensuing argument for half an hour, he then calmly placed a matchbox on the bar, containing flour and a few runner bean seeds.

The first anniversary of even commonplace events in the garden after losing someone you love is bittersweet. The first snowdrops and crocus, anemones, tree blossom, frogspawn in the wildlife pond. The first gardening day in short sleeves. The rituals: seed sowing, putting up the bean sticks and planting out sweet peas. The first new potatoes and tomatoes, and even a dish of fresh raspberries. All eagerly anticipated but now unvoiced. With the second year comes a gradual realisation that this is not a one-off acknowledgement of treasured memories. This is how things are. This is it. Full stop.

Ironically it was the summer months that brought lethargy and the question in my mind; would I recover the energy or interest and my passion to garden? Maintaining a garden during retirement years becomes more difficult anyway, increasingly requiring strategy and knowledge over physical strength and energy. Indeed it is for all of us a part of accepting the natural progress of time. At some point it may become almost impossible, but most irksome of all is if we start asking ourselves 'why bother?' As gardeners we are well versed in the emotional benefits of having our hands in the soil, and realise what a healing process this can be. Our plots provide us with an awareness of the infinite circle of life, not just of decay but of renewal; with the changing seasons comes a cyclical awareness of death, decay and rebirth.

I was interested to read Monty Don musing on whether male and female gardeners have a different approach. It was certainly true that my partner had a picture in his mind of the garden being a place of structure and order, and that I adopted a more laissez-faire attitude. Always pleading vehemently for the self-seeders being allowed to remain, I now see his point in having an almost zero-tolerance approach to the poppies, fennel, evening primrose, foxgloves and *Verbena bonariensis* by which I seem to have been engulfed over the last few months. Nicandra, however, hasn't dared to show her face since he died, so his eradication programme must have been a success! However I am currently reading Margery Fish, and I believe our discussions were a two-way exchange of opinions, whereas she constantly refers to being instructed, warned or 'allowed to'. I'll decide if Walter Fish was a real bully when I get to the end of the book.

Phil and I had different skills. He was good at pruning and training: the box hedges, shrubs and fruit trees have certainly lost their well-cared for appearance. At a foot and a half taller than me, nature had definitely given him some natural advantages! I mowed the lawn, maintained the borders and did most of the weeding. He was good at cutting a curve and laying a path. He did a lot of thinking.

Moving on, therefore, has to include developing new skills, or deciding which parts of the garden eventually have to adapt or disappear. Like disposing of the deceased's effects, this always takes longer than we anticipate and it is still very much a work in progress, as is any garden - even more so when we take big life changes into consideration. I still have his rhododendrons, azaleas, Japanese anemones and hardy fuchsias - none of which I would have chosen to plant but to which I have sentimental attachments. Two gravel areas have been added in the past year, and a shady border alongside the front driveway has yet to be developed. There is still a patch of lawn near the field which seems to serve no useful or ornamental purpose, so there are projects in the pipeline. The hens have stopped laying and, when they reach the end of their life, will leave another area under the old apple tree.

So, where am I now or, more importantly, what is the state of my garden? It's currently, at the time of writing, a riot of autumn colour; late summer herbaceous perennials in full flow, overlapping the rapid leaf colouration, fruit and established bright berries of autumn. It is also overgrown, wayward, weedy and unpruned. In the borrowed landscape beyond, ploughing has begun. The sun is shining, so it's time to get out there and prove I'm still a gardener.

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