

## Ten Weeks that Shook the Garden

*Cynthia Rogerson*

Before the lockdown, I was only dimly aware I had a garden. It was a place I walked through to get to my house. I noticed when an overgrown shrub snapped into my face, or a nettle stung my arms when I reached down to pick up the dog's ball. I thought it was a statement as to how glamorous my life was. Tidy-garden people would see it and think: *Wow, she's having way more fun than me. I've got no time to have fun because I have to clip the hedge again with nail scissors.* That's how arrogant I was.

But since lockdown I've seen the light.

It began with that first week of blind panic. The world was out of control, but at least we could get rid of the twelve foot leylandii hedge. It came down in three frenzied days and I was exhausted – but I looked at the news and went straight into the garden again. I began to attack the back slope, where I'd planted shrubs years ago and forgot to weed it. My first manoeuvre was basic. I plopped myself down and began clearing an arm's length radius of stones and weeds. I didn't let myself look at the vast amount of work yet to do. I daydreamed instead, or stopped to stare at some plant or rock or bird. Even a worm was worth a gander. Every time I discovered a nursery-bought shrub, I felt like one of those Navy Seals who rescued those football boys from a Thai cave. Once I found the dried up remains of a defeated azalea, but didn't let myself get emotional. No time for that in the face of the enemy. It took three weeks, but by the end the slope was mine.

By now, six weeks into lockdown, I ached all the time. My hands were covered in small cuts and hardened and my face was sunburned. Everywhere I looked, I saw tasks needing to be done. I found some old paint in the shed and painted one fence. It looked so good, I painted all the fences. Then I used wire cutters to remove the field fence, which was beyond repair. I cleaned up all the containers containing dead plants and planted sunflower, nasturtium and marigold seeds. Then some geranium plants, just in case the seeds didn't grow. I'd no compost, but did the best I could by raking over the soil – which I discovered was clay-based - and adding rabbit poop and grass cuttings. Oh, I was the smuggest gardener on the planet by now. A born again, completely obnoxious. My husband was in the garden too, in his own version of displacement activity. He levelled some ground for a greenhouse, cleared the gravel paths of weeds, created a patio where before there'd been chaos. His most impressive achievement was a drystone wall on my slope. Every night when we got up from the sofa to go to bed, we sounded like we were dying.

I ran out of garden and began on land that wasn't mine - the strip of field by our fence. I heaped up all the branches and rubbish I'd tossed there and burned them. Noticed some self-seeded trees and shrubs, and oh look – wouldn't that be a nice place for a bench? I tore out the nettles and docks, planted foxgloves, primroses, forget me nots. Then I made a bench with a plank and stones, and a path to the bench by stomping on the grass.

All along, I'd been excavating things. A Sesame Street Ernie, driving his little red car. A Mickey Mouse watch, stopped at 3:12. A Britain's tractor, the tiny driver now headless. A single cross country ski. How did I lose a ski in a garden? That's how messy it was.

Now, when I wake up, I go out and sit on my new bench, admire the view before I start fussing over the slow-growing sunflowers, and crowing over the quick-growing nasturtiums. Sometimes a marigold seedling reveals itself as a weed. Or a dead hydrangea sends out a green shoot. Yesterday, walking past the apple trees, I was hit by a cloud of sweetness. Wait a minute, apple blossoms smell? Then I noticed a steady drone. Bees were hovering over the blossoms, settling on one, then scooting over to another. I thought of chocolates at Christmas, how I kept drifting to them and taking nibbles on and off all day, resulting in a soporific sluggish happiness.

The writer Elizabeth Taylor lived almost all her life in a small village, yet wrote with the kind of perceptiveness and worldliness one would expect of a Londoner. Which debunks the myth that urbanity necessarily leads to keen observations of human behaviour. Now I'm a gardener, it's obvious that every place is a microcosm of bigger places. If I'm quiet enough and open enough, everything can be found right here.