

forget, for reasons of libel, who it was told me of an old Chinese proverb that went something sexist like this: 'If you want happiness for 10 minutes make love to a woman; if for a day read a book; but for a lifetime's happiness make a garden.' Being a sucker for maxims and needing an excuse to move from our semi in Cambridge, I jumped at the advice and bought a hideous house designed by a Person of Restricted Growth with a mania for concrete for no better reason than that it had a garden of one and a half acres and I thought I could remake it. Six and a half years later I know better. But to begin with I tried. And singlehandedly.

In those days my own mania was for roses. I had already indulged it in Cambridge, shoving them in like bedding plants each autumn and dragging them out in disgust the next. (I remember the particular horror of 'Meggido', a whole dozen blazing like fluorescent geraniums through the summer of '76.) Ignoring the hideous house I hurled myself at the one and a half acres and began digging. Not simple, sensible digging, you understand, but the old-fashioned sort demanded by owners of stately homes with numerous house guests needing to dispose of tons of 'night soil'. In other words I dug three spits deep and dumped barrow loads of manure into the trenches – a household of five doesn't produce enough 'night soil' and anyway my family refused to contribute.

I started with the lower lawn first. It used to be the playing field for a small prep school and being river valley loam for the first 18in didn't need any dung at all. All the same the six rectangular rose beds got it. After that I hit the vegetable garden. I had decided that the Deep Bed Method and extremely close planting to create a microclimate was the answer to higher yields and less weeding. So I made little pathways and then larded my five-foot beds with enough manure and whatever compost I could lay my hands on to raise them another foot above ground. By the winter of 1978 the vegetable garden looked as though it contained 14 mass graves. Then, since it was too late to plant anything, I turned my attention to fruit.

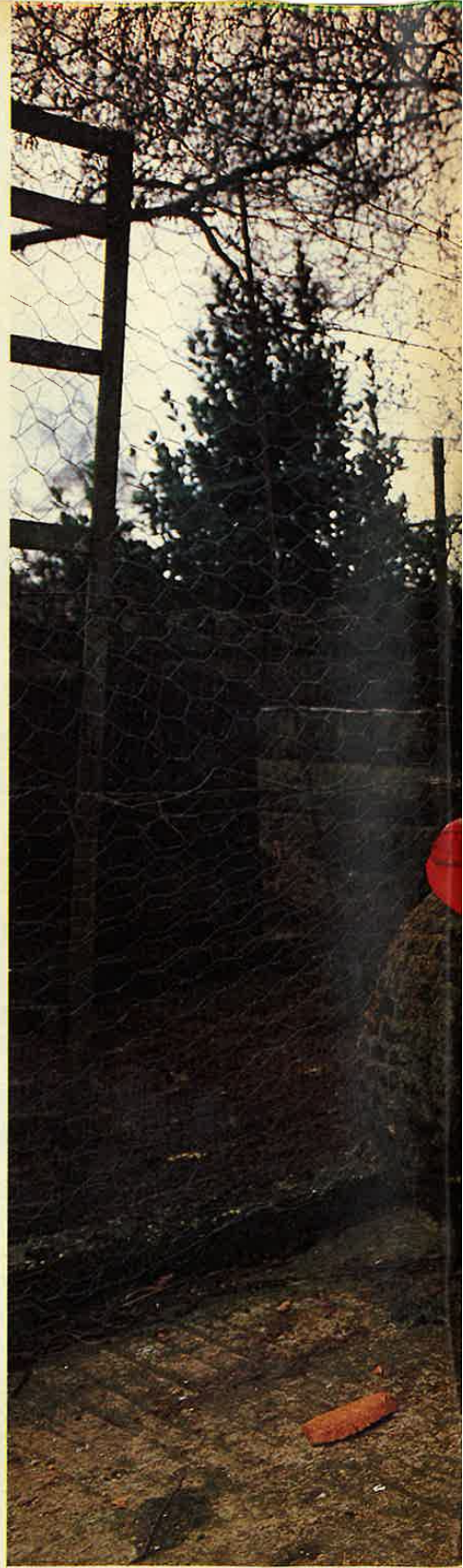
Now one of the advantages of living in the West Country is that it's ideal for apples and pears. There's also Scotts Nurseries at Merriott which specialises in the older varieties of fruit. By Christmas 1978 I had planted five pears, four plums, 15 apple trees, two crab apples, a mulberry and a medlar and had staked them all as recommended by the RHS handbook 'The Fruit Garden Displayed'. Looking back on it I can see there was no real need to go to these lengths. The 12 old apple trees I'd inherited are still going strong and the two pears have since taken on a new lease of life. Aesthetically, I can see now that those straight lines of new trees were a terrible mistake. I also learnt that even a frost pocket has a perverse fecundity. Every year we've been inundated with apples which end up rotting in the cellar.

It's the same with the fruit cage. Whoever wrote that section in 'The Fruit Garden Displayed' must have had Blenheim Palace in its heyday in mind. Five of everything, he said, and five of everything we planted. Five gooseberries, five redcurrants,

five black . . . yes five of everything. Well, the gooseberries didn't do too well the first year because rather sensibly I'd planted them too deep. But I rectified that in '79, like a fool, and they hit back by producing a bumper crop we couldn't possibly eat and didn't want to pick. The blackcurrants did the same, urged on by kilos of dried blood and a heavy mulch. With the Deep Bed Method one naturally combines a detestation of fungicides, pesticides and anything remotely chemical.

So back to the mass graves in the vegetable garden and the seeds I'd sown under the Growlux tubes in first one greenhouse then another and finally a third, this last equipped with a mist-propagator. Through the winter evenings when I wasn't reading about the health-giving properties of unpolluted vegetables, I was sowing and pricking out and dreaming of the glorious meals to come. So presumably were the slugs. I don't know where they came from, though I suspect the tons of manure I'd provided for nesting purposes, but they came. In droves. And after them came the whitefly and the caterpillars and instead of a vegetable garden we found ourselves with a nature reserve for the lower forms of insects and invertebrates. Only the curly kale survived unmolested. Apparently slugs dislike it as much as the children. But things did grow in spite of everything. The Brussels sprouts positively shot out of the ground and finding no support assumed strange U-bends in their competition for light. I know I shouldn't have planted them one foot apart but the Deep Bed Method said. . . Then the carrots forked and came out looking like vegetable manikins or orange ginseng. Ah, but we did have some successes. The climbing French beans practically pulled the bamboo frame down and the courgettes turned into marrows before we could eat them. Even the Swiss chard managed to grow faster than the slugs could munch their way through it. And the leeks shrugged off everything and just grew.

And at least I still had my roses. I suppose, though I've never counted them, that I have over a thousand and I certainly planted many more. At first I could escort visitors proudly round the garden and point to a 'Mme Plantier' here and a 'Boule de Neige' there and even distinguish between 'Cecile Brunner' and 'Bloomfield Abundance'. I doubt if I could now. Somewhere in a filing cabinet there is a plan and somewhere deep under the mulch there may still be labels carefully inscribed with names, but the joy has gone out of it. Now of a summer's evening you may find me pacing among the survivors of the Great Black Spot Battle and the Annual Rust Invasion like some faintly victorious general consoling the walking wounded. I don't know what the annual cost is and I dare not take it into account. But I do know it takes 15 gallons of Nimrod T and Plantvax sprayed every fortnight from April to October to combat those dread diseases. Not that I do the spraying. Mr Amps does, with a diligence I could never match. But then three years ago Mr Amps took over the garden and in a mere two days a week keeps it tidier and healthier than I ever did. He even oils the stainless steel spade. But then again Mr Amps is a true gardener and any writer who thinks he can write and manage one and a half acres at the same time has to be a farceur. □



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