

Half a century of dreams

Charmian Astbury

Fifty years ago, or thereabouts, when I first saw my North Devon cottage and the neglected open land beside it, I knew that the whole was destined to become my home and my garden. In those days, buying a property was straightforward. Within half a day, formalities fulfilled, all was mine, from the draughty, barely functioning sash windows facing the North Atlantic, Baggy Point and Lundy, to the considerable area of dead brambles, docks and nettles beside it. Friends, family and colleagues felt I could have done better. But I only saw what it would be, and when I potter about my garden today, dreaming, planting, harvesting, breathing its perfumed air, what it has become is a my cottage garden.

How did it all begin, what were the first steps taken? Somehow the garden had always been there in my thoughts, gently waiting to be realised. And slowly all began to take shape, the various levels sorted out, the steps and terraces, the vegetable patch, the hedge on the exposed north boundary high above the road, the all-weather shrubbery at the north-east corner to shield and shelter from the winter gales, and above all, the trees. Trees are a staple in any garden, large or small. They provide shade, shelter, height and a variety of shapes. Their foliage provides a screen from the curious, their flowers and berries provide sustenance for bees, butterflies and other insects. They are safe havens for birds. They provide us with blossom and berries in due season, the fruit to harvest if fruit bearing and so on. So, what trees to choose for my garden, where to place them, and, above all, how to ensure that whatever trees were chosen that such were planted, as far as was possible, before anything else.

Certainly there would be fruit trees. The garden was sufficiently large to take two, even three apple trees with possibly a plum and a cherry for variety. Then there would be the spring and early summer flowering smaller trees, lilac, forsythia, tamarisk. There would have to be a hawthorn with its clouds of perfumed blossom in May and dark red berries, not just for autumn colour but for the birds. And, of course, there would need to be the evergreens to provide a mix of different shades of green for the winter, the hollies, the japonicas, perhaps a small conifer or two...and not forgetting the winter flowering cherry given me as a house-warming gift. What to choose, how many to have and where to put them: what a

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delightful challenge. I was still in my late twenties, with a newly acquired property and a salary that barely fed me and the dog, so I had to do it all myself. I started with hand-me-down garden tools and worked out from the centre of my land, digging, weeding, planning, thinking of the trees I would have, dreaming of the eventual outcome. The apple trees came first, my now old Newton Wonder, with its desert apple pollinator, planted as centrally as I could judge, for I knew that the Newton Wonder, in time, would be a very large tree indeed. In a central position in the garden it would have the advantage of the sunlight all year round, thus able to maximize on the return of the sun to the garden in January. The position of my outdoor sitting area was starting to take shape on the south side of this apple tree and, in time, there would be shade there.

All the trees in my garden were planted by me in those early years, and I can scarcely believe it looking at my garden now. However, there is one exception and this is the holly tree by the front gate, partly merged into the hedge and of a height now level with the cottage ridge tiles. Not only is it self-seeded, I know how and why it came to be there. This history, the holly’s own story if you like, was brought to mind last summer. The weather had been such that the holly had bloomed profusely, its tiny fluffy blossoms abundant, gently veiling the dark and shiny leaves. However, it was the humming of a vast number of bees that first drew my attention to the blossoming holly: truly hundreds of them, numbers I had not seen in my garden since their decline of recent years. I was transfixed, standing to watch them for some considerable time. I had seen small blue

butterflies in ones and twos explore the holly blossom, I had seen a scattering of wild bees and the odd bumble bee. But this vast cloud of bees was amazing, enchanting... I was taken back to my first Christmas in the cottage, nearly fifty years ago. In the tidy up before Twelfth Night I was disposing of various bits and pieces and packing away others for next year when I was finally left with the few sprays of berried holly I had been given. I had no open fire at the time so was unable to burn them, a clean, ancient method of disposal. I would not put them in the bin to rot. After all, the holly had been part of my Christmas celebrations. So I laid them on a patch of cleared ground beside the front gate, where they could naturally dry and become dust. In due course a tiny, two leaved holly seedling grew there. This I watched over as the years passed. It thrived in spite of being subjected to winds from all points of the compass, becoming the sturdy, slow growing holly of today's garden, much favoured by the sparrows throughout the year and a bulwark against the winter storms.

The coming together of holly blossom and bees has not recurred this year, but there are other years ahead. The sparrows take care of most of the berries, leaving little to self-seed or indeed for a midwinter arrangement. But the delight in knowing how even one tree came to be, or any other plant for that matter, is what my garden really is about.

Charmian gardens in North Devon. This article wins the £10 garden gift voucher for my favourite article in this issue - with some fierce competition! Thank you, Charmian.

January *Tina Owen*

With withered leaves and dormant trees in
grey,
The stark bare earth and feeling of decay.
Skeletal seed heads, wind-blown dangle,
The spent growth of clematis a-tangle.
Honesty mirrors, prostrate in tatters torn,
And broken miscanthus, heads bowed, mourn.

Yet there are signs of life to be seen,
Bright aconites in frills of green.
And snowdrop pearls of milky-white
And then the early evening light.

At angle that transforms the scene
It catches all with lustrous sheen.

Light edges trees with sparkling ring
That makes the cornus colours sing.
The willows shining yellow dress,
Or copper tones the eyes impress.
From brightest green to vibrant red,
Dull winter for a moment shed.

The birches glow with rosy pink,
To dazzle before the sun must sink.
A flash of fire in winters depths
A moment's touch by spring's footsteps.