

Earwig ecstasy *Victoria Baillon*

Behold the humble earwig, so primeval and unloved. With their rather odd and prehistoric appearance, earwigs are associated with the myth that they crawl up into the ears of an unsuspecting sleeper and infest the brain of the unwary victim, driving them insane. Despite their undesirable reputation, earwigs do have their uses in the garden, feeding on decaying plant matter and other insects. Emerging at night, they have a penchant for patio plants and, as I soon discovered, a particular passion for chrysanthemums.

I had never been particularly attracted to chrysanthemums or 'mums' as they are popularly known. They were just too fluffy and fussy for my liking, but as I had recently won a couple of old cottage garden varieties in the tombola at our local fete, I decided to give them a go.

By coincidence, a guest speaker at our garden club had waxed lyrical on the wonderful form and colour that chrysanthemums brought to a garden, giving a spectacular cascade of differing hues and tints, especially when other plants are past their prime. With the added bonus that they were a useful insect repellent as well; perhaps I had been wrong to dismiss chrysanthemums after all. However, no sooner had I planted them out, they seemed to have disappeared almost overnight, to be replaced by a series of frayed, tattered leaves and threadbare spikes as if they had been subjected to a giant electric shock.

A quick browse through the horticultural dictionary confirmed the worst, chrysanthemums equals earwig ecstasy. It was as if an earwig community club had been in full swing, merrily munching their way in their nocturnal nibbling through the entire flower bed.

Finding the nest was the main problem; stealth and surprise was of the essence, as any sudden noise or movement would alert the earwigs and send them scattering for their hiding places. Once found, I resolved to go out and Hoover up the lot and pick the remaining ones off any flower or



shrub I could find. I even turned to the ever resourceful Victorians, who had a number of inventive and time consuming ways to combat the earwig problem, including hollowing out pieces of stem four to six inches long and placing them horizontally so that the unsuspecting earwigs would then congregate in them, then shaking them into boiling water. Alternatively, tying up pieces of linen rags and hanging them up in the lower branches of trees so that the earwigs would take refuge in them; a sort of earwig hammock, or finding the odd old shoe or wellington boot, filling it with straw and placing it sideways, so that our friends would simply creep along into it. Even if I had the energy and resolve for all of that, it would have been a pointless exercise this summer anyway, as the wet weather has been a godsend to any number of pests, all gorging themselves on the plants in the garden.

So at all the above I failed miserably and the determined little beasts are still with me. Perhaps there is something to the myth after all. Earwigs do not have to crawl into your brain to drive you mad, and you do not have to be asleep either! *Victoria gardens in Somerset.*