

The gardening revolution

Mary E. Jones

My childhood was spent in a mining village in North Wales. The social revolution of the 30s moved the miners from their 'two up two down' with pigeons in the backyard, to modern council houses with gardens back and front. The millers found that their black soot-encrusted fingers were also green, and before long the gardens were cultivated, but they all ran to the same pattern.

In the sunniest far corner of our back garden grew huge clumps of rhubarb, Rosy Red or Strawberry King were the favourites. No holey galvanised buckets were ever thrown away; soon after Christmas a couple of them would be placed over clumps just peeping through the frosty earth forcing enough long slender pink stalks for a pie on Valentines' day. In the other far corner was the compost heap made up of lawn cuttings, all vegetable peelings and, if we were there first, the deposits left by the milkman's horse. Herbs - parsley, mint, sage and thyme - grew along one side of the path which ran the full length of the garden. The clothes line too ran the full length of the path; gardening on washing day was out of the question. The rest of the back garden supplied the vegetable needs for the family for the whole year. It had to - this was still the time of large families and poor wages, and hunger was never far away.

Without fail, room would be found for a row of sweet peas (Mam's favourites) and a row of chrysanthemums for the graves and to grace the chapel. The front gardens all had square lawns edged by borders. Cottage garden flowers - sedum, Canterbury bells, lupins, golden rod and marigolds bloomed in profusion in everyones' borders, we all had an Aunt living next door or across the road who passed cuttings and clumps of this and that freely around. Circles of sweet-smelling pinks edged the path to the front door. There, sweet william, chierianthus and snapdragons scented the air. Bearded iris fanned untidily under the bay window, while in the corner rockery white rock and mauve nemesia sprawled. Where did

we play? Why, in the road and the woods and meadows that surrounded us! There were no cars and nobody troubled us. As long as we were home for supper, no-one seemed to worry about us.

The Second World War changed everything. Almost immediately, platoons of soldiers moved into Nissen huts in our woods, now out of bounds for us. 'Dig for Victory' posters meant our front lawn was dug up and rows of spuds planted instead. The grass sods from the lawn were used to camouflage the corrugated tin roof of the air raid shelter which had been dug out in the back garden. I recall stumbling, half asleep, down the path to the shelter with Mam carrying the



baby and all our gas-masks, urging us to hurry. The midnight sky was criss-crossed with searchlights hoping to spot the German bombers so the Ack-Ack guns could get them before they reached their destination - the Liverpool Docks. By the red glow in the sky over Liverpool it seemed that the whole of the city was on fire. Our air raid shelter always had a couple of inches of rainwater sloshing around the floor and it reeked of cats. We climbed up on planks of wood and huddled together to keep warm. Eventually, we'd hear the bombers overhead chugging their way home - we knew the sounds of all the planes, especially the German ones. This was when we were in the greatest danger. If a plane had not managed to get rid of all its bombs, it would jettison them anywhere on its way home to attain height and avoid the radar trap. We held our breath. Then, the wonderful sound of the 'all clear'. Back to bed for a few hours before going to school. At last the war ended. We had won, but sadly we had grown up while it was on, and things would never be the same again.

In the late 50s, the little corner hardware store that had grudgingly stocked a few garden products suddenly sprouted growbags on the pavement outside and began calling itself a 'Garden Centre'. By the early 60s the bedding plant era had arrived. Lawns had squares, half moons or oblongs cut out of them in the centre and geraniums were planted using a tape measure. Allysum, lobelia, tagetes and salvias surrounded the geraniums. What fools we were to conform to this time and water-consuming pattern! The bedding plants never really came into their own, especially if it was a dry year, until late August or early September. Then, out went the bedding plants to bloom in profusion on the compost heap until the first frosts. We were busy planting daffodil bulbs and wallflowers, I could weep when I think of the money wasted. Soon it wasn't worth growing vegetables because supermarkets had sprung up on the edge of town selling everything, in and out of season. It seemed only sensible while there to do the rest of the shopping. Parking was free and there was no fear of a traffic warden popping up with a ticket. Our little corner shops disappeared, one by one. The 70s and 80s saw garden design take off, our bit of concrete by the back door - the hopscotch patch, was now called a patio and the wooden French windows were replaced by metal patio doors. Even our clothes line had a makeover and became a whirlygig model. Flower clubs flourished and arrangers began taking their 'City and Guilds' and going to the 'Nationals'. Grecian urns (courtesy of plastic) filled with begonias graced our steps.

Garden centres had to diversify in the 90s to accommodate garden furniture and everyone wanted a water feature. Barbeque fumes mingled with car fumes on warm summer evenings. As a new century dawned, decking seemed to be the latest whim of the television gardening pundits. Out went traditional shades of browns and greens for fencing. Trellis, arches and decking, all painted in bright blue, burnt orange or vivid red, contrasted sharply with the leafy plants and trees. Cost does not seem to enter into it and neither does safety. No-one seems to mention that decking can be lethal when wet. And the pundits now think that they have invented the cottage garden style. So, the flowers of my childhood, lupins, sedums, marigolds, golden rod, and Canterbury bells are back in fashion - we have come full circle!

Mary E Jones gardens in Denbigh, North Wales