

My cottage garden

Sue McLachlan

An astute friend once remarked that I wasn't so much a gardener as a plant person, and she had a point. Many of my plants I know individually and treat them as such. I have an art background, so shape, texture, pattern and colour are very important to me. All my garden knowledge, gathered over the last forty years or so, has been from observation, experience, friends and of course reference books. This way of learning appeals to me hugely because it is so direct and personal - totally unhindered by 'You must' or 'You must not'. I do not always carry out procedures at the correct time - I am aware of the risks but, having an impatient streak, often take them anyway.

Several plants have travelled around within the garden as I see how a visual improvement could be made. An ungainly, wayward shrub may suddenly lose one or two branches. A plant whose flower colour turns out to be at odds with what I expected may move to somewhere more artistically suitable, whilst giving consideration to the requirements of the particular plant. I much prefer to let ideas evolve rather than plan precisely. And I love the fact that a garden is never static or 'finished'.

The garden of my cottage covers about 500 sq. yards and is surrounded by stone walls. When I first moved here three years ago, I was delighted with the prospect of a south facing garden, superb (if stony) soil and the challenge and excitement of a totally impenetrable 5ft high tangle of undergrowth. I am still just as delighted. Several of the mahonias have gone, and others are annually decapitated. Now, the *Berberis darwinii* is tiny compared to its former self, as are the spirea and the



weigela. A *Prunus triloba*, an exochorda and a *Rosa sericea pteracantha* (winged thorn rose) have been identified - the latter with great pleasure because I have always wanted one.

The first spring I was here, a large stand of *Veratrum album* erupted, at astonishing speed - again, something I had always wanted. Every year since, it has given me great joy. Aconites grow well here and self seed freely. The nettles and alkanet have almost been eliminated and the Welsh poppies severely curtailed. Foxgloves are left in strategic places as stopgaps.

The biggest problem I have is the ever-increasing rabbit population. The style of dry stone walling in this area is such that the local rabbits have learned to climb them or on occasions can clear them in a single bound. I was speechless the first few times I saw it happen, but it is well known around here. The walls are usually about 4ft high but because of projecting stone 'paw-holds' they present no problems to rabbits. Baby ones can squeeze through very small spaces between the stones.

With unlimited resources, a rabbit-proof fence would be the solution. However, my finances are severely restricted, so other defences must be found. Partial success has been achieved by putting small mesh wire netting up, over and down the wall in vulnerable spots. Shiny, noisy bird-scarer tape cut in lengths and stapled to dangle from elastic stretched tightly between canes on top of the walls has also helped.

Another strategy has been to salvage and employ abandoned field drain pipes. These are terracotta, probably 70 years old, in differing diameters and about 2ft in length, often broken at least at one end.

I put these vertically in the garden beds, in groups of three or five to support each other, with the biggest in the centre. Then, by putting a bigger flowerpot in or on the central pipe, a modern sculptural 'urn' is



made, with the extra benefit of a removable pot, so that a tender plant can be moved elsewhere for over-wintering. I could never have planned these and each construction is different depending on the finds. Problem-solving, unique, recycled and free - what could be better. What do other gardeners do who are troubled by rabbits?

Sue gardens in Dumfries and Galloway.