

# Gardening and me *Ralph Gray*

I have been a member of The Cottage Garden Society for a number of years now and look forward to reading the quarterly magazine. Taking further participation never really occurred to me until I read that unless some of the silent majority take a more active role in contributing to the magazine it may cease to be published through lack of material... that would be unthinkable.

I was born in the early thirties, my introduction to gardening was designed to put any sports mad ten year old off for life but, with the Second World War going badly for us, the instruction was to 'dig for victory', our merchant fleet was being decimated by U-boats in the Atlantic and food was getting in short supply, there was a real danger that we could well be starved into submission.

My family lived in a semi-detached house in Hertfordshire; it had a small front garden complete with a privet hedge and a square of grass that was always referred to as the lawn. The plot was long and narrow, there was a chicken house and run at the bottom, the rest being given over to vegetables. In addition to this my grandparents had an allotment which my grandfather had grown too old to keep in good order. It was agreed that he would continue to pay the rent and my father would cultivate it, the resultant produce was shared. My father wasn't called upon for active service, he was in a reserved occupation building wings for the de Havilland Mosquito fighter/bomber. In addition to his six-day week in the factory he was a member of the Home Guard and an aircraft spotter at night.

As the war progressed favourably, and even post war for several years, most commodities were in short supply and some were rationed. I was expected to play my part as a somewhat reluctant labourer. I didn't mind the sowing or the reaping, it was the bit in between that I could never really get to grips with or summon up much enthusiasm for. But I was pressed into service, taught how to use a hoe between the rows of vegetables and allowed to thin out the root crops under strict supervision...plants to be four inches or a hand's breadth apart.

*Illustration / Tom Boulton*

Eventually things improved in the post war years and I was busy qualifying for a professional life, gardening was then something to reminisce over. Marriage brought the purchase of a home complete with garden, which I managed to keep looking tidy, as well as persuing my passion for soccer in the winter and cricket in the summer. I remember being well and truly reprimanded in the first



spring for spending almost £8 on bedding plants, which left a sizeable hole in the family budget. Gradually I came to view gardening as a pleasant occupation, my interest was kindled - I was growing up!

In the mid 70s we relocated from the home counties to the south west and bought a bungalow with a half-acre garden - we are still in occupation. When we moved in, the garden was mainly grass with several mature silver birches and a magnificent Monterey pine fronting the lane. The three remaining sides had a 2m hedge of beech for privacy, several deciduous azaleas dotted around and a rectangular bed full of dahlias at the rear. The previous owners said they were not gardeners but didn't mind grass cutting, so it was a blank canvas. The soil is on the acidic side and very fertile. I was delighted when I realised the range of plants that this enabled me to grow and, not only that, I had the room to accommodate them! My enthusiasm soared and as my sporting days were coming to an end, it gave me the time to devote to keeping all in reasonable order. With so many National Trust gardens in close proximity, I could see plants in their maturity and I decided on a woodland setting at the front with borders, beds and the like at the sides and at the rear. Today the garden has matured and I have grown old, but aside from weeding, deadheading, pruning and scattering handfuls of 6X around everything in the dormant season, the garden remains manageable.

In the early days I was criticised for planting shrubs and trees too close together but then, in 1989, I purchased a book entitled 'A Gentle Plea for Chaos' by Mirabel Osler, it seemed to vindicate all that I had been trying to achieve. It is best summed up in Chapter 4, in which she writes:

'The pollution of the countryside is not only a matter of nitrates and silage effluent, of urban sprawl and brightly lit petrol stations, a far more subtle contamination comes from tidiness. The obsessive and contagious mania for suburban conformity reaches out into rural habitats. Mown verges, white chains and swinging name-boards are seeping down the lanes. Plants acquired by the carload from the invidious garden-centre, are placed with the precision of pieces on a chessboard.

What people seek in the countryside, for its serenity and its unchanging visual allure among the innocence of cow parsley, is being eroded before our eyes, and it is done by the very people who have come to live amongst it'.

I could go on, but you get the idea.

But here, as I sit writing in the dining room which overlooks the garden at the rear, goldfinches are tucking into the nyger seed, tits and a greenfinch are doing likewise with the sunflower seeds and the blackbirds and a robin are feasting on mealworms. I must be doing something right I tell myself - it's a bit late to change anyway. *Ralph gardens in Devon, and wins this issue's Garden Gift Token for 'taking further participation' with this lovely piece.*