

NOTES FROM MY GARDEN

Issue Number 8 June 2006

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Well , what have we had this month - weather.

Weather has dominated my conscious thoughts, whether it has been thinking about the poor South Islanders marooned for days, nay weeks by snow drifts, lack of communication and having to suffer the added misery of intense cold, or listening to the poor deprived Aucklanders complaining that they had to do without their latte's for a few hours last Monday due to a power outage.

Weather is weather, it has been with us for a long time and will continue to be around for a long time after we have departed this life. I have a good moan, that always helps, then, get real, get on with it. It is frustrating when I can't do the things I planned, when I intended to, but hey, what about the other chores or pleasantries that I have been putting off for a day, a month, or a year. Take the chance offered and get on with it

That phrase - get on with it - has been my guiding mantra this month, there is so much to do, and so much I cant, but I do what I can, and enjoy it.

The weather has had a very good affect on me, I have been forced to rest, put the leg up and enjoy catching up on my reading. The spin off has been the rapid healing of my leg, caused no doubt by the lack of movement. I feel that I am now on the home straight and very soon I will be dancing the waltz of the flowers.

This month in the garden

Mother always said when we were going out, have you got a clean hanky, been to the lav etc etc, this was instilled in me so strongly that it was like a mental check list whenever I left the house, and is still there half a century later. However this month it has been replaced with a new mantra - Snorkel, goggles, flippers, and kayak. It is so wet underfoot one almost needs the foregoing equipment to venture out in this garden. Last winter was so mild and dry in comparison, it has become as quite a shock to experience a touch of reality.

Another problem I have had to face has been the rapid growth of a group of Manuka and kanuka on the northern boundary of the kitchen garden which now cuts out the sun to all but a small corner, so I have to look very seriously at the necessity of trimming some of these trees. I really do hate the idea of removing or curtailing the growth in any way of our native trees, that after all were here long before me and will, God willing be there long after I have departed. The cold in the kitchen garden is very reminiscent of gardens much further south because of the shade they cast, and I have to adjust my whole planting schedule and thinking this year. So once again that dose of reality and deal with the problem. On the other hand as much as I am loathe to cut anything down, there will be all that firewood for the "Blessed Mary" and some excellent garden supports, Oh dear, I can feel another pergola coming on.....

The recent 'big blow' caused major damage to many of the trees, and left the ground littered with debris. During this weather event I was sitting in the window seat, warm and snug, when a sudden movement outside caught my eye. It was my prize Lemon scented Tea Tree. I was inordinately fond of this tree, having nurtured it through its difficult and gangly teenage years it was turning into a rather beautiful adult. Alas it is no more, a rogue gust a wind twisted it and ripped it out of the ground depositing the carcase some 50 metres away. The space left was like a missing front tooth in the mouth of a very beautiful women - it needed something and quick. However, for once my impetuosity was curbed, I want t think this one out carefully, I can see many exciting possibilities that Mother Nature has given me, that will improve this area considerably. There is always a silver lining to every cloud, sometimes it just takes time to find it.

In the Kitchen garden

Old Mother Hubbard would feel very much at home in the kitchen garden this month, because apart from the silver

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beet and celery the cupboard is bare. The hens when they are let out for their afternoon scratch usually make a beeline for the vegetable beds and scratch around in the newly planted beds and ignoring four acres of delicious undergrowth to peck about in. At the moment they don't even bother coming into the garden they make a head straight for the bush where they know there will be better pickings. The only interlopers in the kitchen garden now are the ducks and a couple of connubial pheasants. The ducks are a real problem as they compact the soil dreadfully with those great paddles of feet. I shout and screech obscenities at them from the sidelines, but they treat me with the disdain of Duchesses confronted by a group of uncouth navvies, and carry on with their own agendas. However their days of plunder are numbered as they are not yet aware that very soon I will have total mobility and can and will deal with them in a more immediate fashion.

The silver beet is, against all odds, doing well and giving sustenance to both myself and the chooks. I have not always been a great fan of silver beet having been more fond of spinach. However, when needs must, prejudices are swept aside and shown for what they are, usually a lack of knowledge or understanding. I have found many culinary uses for this, at least in my eyes, a much underrated vegetable, and the chooks have now to share the bounty with me.

The celery bed I started some months ago is now coming into its own. This fortunate development, like many things in my garden, is a result of serendipity. I had sown seeds of celery in a tray in the greenhouse, but other events intervened and the tray was forgotten. Later, when I was back on my feet again, I discovered these poor plants struggling to survive, against all odds, under a shelf in the greenhouse. The "cavalry" arrived and saved them from oblivion, a new bed was prepared and they were planted out. Not only did they survive this neglect but they flourished and now I have a bed of very healthy, crisp and flavoursome heads. Extensive reading on the subject has resulted in me re-thinking my growing of this very useful vegetable. Apparently celery does not like hot or humid weather and grows better in cooler areas, they are gross feeders, (don't you like that phrase, conjures up visions of plants shovelling food into their mouths with their hands rather than with the usual utensils) and plenty of moisture. My summer plantings in the past have been successful, however now I look at the present crop, I realise how misguided I was in accepting such an inferior product.

I have added two soups in the recipe section, one using the celery and the other the last of the Bramley apples.

The soil is too cold and sodden at the moment to consider planting anything, it would be a waste of time, energy and only lead to disappointment. Again I return to one of the first and most important gardening lessons I learnt, no matter what the rules say, one must only follow the dictates of one's own garden, it will tell you what to do and when to plant. Every garden is different and has different requirements. Rules are generally only guidelines to give you an indication of where and when.

Maybe I can't plant this month, but it does not mean that I can sit back and relax, it is a good time to look at improving the soil. Reading back copies of the NZ Gardener, (so much more informative than today), I have discovered many articles on improving the conditions in which we expect our plants to flourish. We need to put a great deal of time into improving the soil in our gardens, and sometimes I must admit, visitors to the garden question my methods, but I have over time developed ways and means that suit my conditions. There are ways that are recommended by the experts, but what they recommend is not always available and gardening like so many other things in life, a matter of compromise. Anyone who has attempted to transform heavy clay into good garden soil will know how rewarding it is to achieve a good friable soil and what hard work it is to achieve this ideal. I sometimes feel that I am nurturing a living creature with an insatiable appetite, waiting to consume vast quantities of compost. I don't always have the ideal resources to achieve this end, and will use whatever is available that will rot down and most important does not contain any chemicals. I have three compost bins going, and several rough compost heaps, which are just heaps of garden debris, piled up in corners, waiting to rot down and be used in that particular area. I always hope that these rough heaps will achieve sufficient heat to destroy any seeds, but if it doesn't, no matter, I prefer to use the resulting 'compost' and take my chances with any weeds that may emerge. Frankly given the choice between weedy compost and hungry soil, give me weeds any time.

One of the easiest ways of getting humus into the soil is by using mulch. In mid winter, when the garden can seem a little desolate (in my case read *very desolate*) mulch looks "*like a tidy blanket tucking in the plants*". Bare earth is not a good look, and Mother Nature being the person she is abhors an empty space and will soon step in and populate it with weeds, a bit like the property developers here on Waiheke. The best time to apply mulch is in the Autumn, but as I missed my opportunity then I will do it now that time and my physical abilities are in tune. Mulch as it rots down provides the necessary humus, and the difference this makes to the condition of the soil has to be seen to be believed.

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Some of the mulches I use:

Pine needles: I have been using pine needles for years, starting by putting it around my strawberries. I then started with them on the blackberry vine and now use them whenever I can. I understand that they are acidic, but I have not seen any detrimental effects so far. I keep an eye on any plants that I know that like a sweeter soil and give them regular dressings of dolomite or lime

Rotted down leaves and detritus from the bush: very similar to pine needles, maybe not as acidic, but if available so good for the garden and the worms love it.

Sawdust: always use only sawdust from untreated timber. The problem with sawdust though is that as it rots down it robs the soil of nitrogen, so we have to provide this in the form of well rotted animal manure or blood and bone.

Mushroom compost and pea straw: the crème de la crème of mulching material, however this costs money, and if I do manage to obtain any of this 'gardeners gold' I use it sparingly and then only on my precious plants. The quantities that I need are so vast and therefore of great expense and I cannot justify it's use to myself or to Madam. Besides the mixture of a Scots and French blood in my veins precludes using something that costs money, when I can have something equally as good for free.

I have gathered a much information on mulches, and associated topics, if anyone is interested I would certainly share what I have gathered with you, just let me know.

The decorative garden

Like all the areas on the estate at Woodside Bay water logging is a problem, and here as much as anywhere else we have to face the fact that good drainage is the first consideration. so, when I can get into the garden I concentrate on removing the left overs from summer and Autumn and cutting back shrubs, mulching and soil improvement. Always taking care not to compact the soil with by big feet. Planting out has been put on hold until the soil warms up a little and is not so gluggy.

However saying this, some of the smaller raised beds have come into their own, drying out quicker and making planting of seedlings possible. The hollyhocks grown from seed saved last year have been planted next to the sweet pea frame, an inspired choice of location, the idea is to use the frame as a support for the hollyhocks as they grow tall. The colour is a deep mahogany, (if they come up true), and should look good in contrast to the bearded iris planted in front. I will consider later, if I will use this frame for sweet peas again this year, or construct another frame elsewhere, although sweet peas could look good growing among the hollyhocks, interesting thought.

The cutting garden

Could be described as a disaster area, bleak, cold and damp. Nothing like it will be in a few months time, and I have to hang on to that thought to ward off the depression that descends every time I paddle through this garden. There is nothing I can do with it at the moment, cant even remove the weeds, which seem to flourish. Pulling weeds out is accompanied by a deep and ominous sucking, slurping sound that indicates the roots have tapped into some vast underground aquifer. Best to draw the thick blanket of winter over the garden and move on.

The rose garden

Now this is at least an area that makes me smile at the moment, for once I am ahead of myself in the things to do stakes. The roses have been pruned and wire brushed to remove any scale, mulched and put to bed for the winter. This in itself is a matter of some jubilation for me because I always tend to leave this task that to the last possible moment, but more often than not is never completed.

The ponds

They have returned to their natural murky, gloomy and slightly scary state. The last few storms have deposited a large quantity of debris in the form of leaves, branches and mud, however, that is just temporary, and it will only take a few hours to transform them back into the delight they were a few short weeks ago. I am now looking at what I can plant around these areas, taking advantage of the bogs. I have read so much in the past about the 'joy' of bog gardens and their natural beauty, now I have the chance to 'have a go'. Mind you the first consideration will have to be as always when considering creating new plantings - Pukeko protection. All my Iris planted last season disappeared down the gullets of these 'Blue Thugs'. Another plant on my want list is water lilies, however I understand that eels like these too,. Madam has dropped so many hints about her love of these wondrous plants, and as the ponds have been opened up to the sun more than they previously were, I will have to do something this year or the hints could become quite painful.

The Greenhouse

My refuge at the moment from the weather, but I am finding it increasingly difficult to find a place to stand and work, as every surface is packed with seedlings and plants. The cutting garden has become the 'log jam', and as soon as I can start planting there I will have space for more trays.

The orchid collection is taking up quite a bit of space too, but I want to keep them under cover for a while longer to protect them against whatever Mother Nature may choose to throw at them. There are many flower spikes developing so we should have a goodly display this season. I spent some time a month or two back splitting up some of the overcrowded pots, and this has almost doubled the collection, and was time well spent.

Suggested planting this month

Edible garden: Broad beans, broccoli, cabbage, slow bolting carrot, winter lettuce, peas, spinach.

Get your garlic and shallots planted as soon as you can Potatoes, strawberries and rhubarb crowns can go in now.

Decorative and cutting garden: Calendula, Canterbury bells, pansies, primroses/polyanthus, violas, wallflower.

Seeds of alyssum and sweet peas stocks, Iceland poppies can be sown now.

Recipes from the kitchen at Woodside House

Celery and Cashew nut soup

One medium sized onion

1 medium sized potato

½ head celery

25g butter

Cashew nuts

750 ml Vegetable stock

425ml milk

Salt and pepper to taste

Chop the vegetables. Melt the butter (you can use oil if you prefer about 2 tablespoons) in a large saucepan and sauté the vegetables gently until the onions are transparent. Add cashew nuts broken up into small pieces and continue cooking for 5 mins, stirring frequently. Add the stock, bring to a boil, cover and simmer for 20 mins. Add milk, allow to cool slightly, then blend in liquidiser in small quantities. Reheat to serving temp and adjust seasoning to taste.

Parsnip and apple soup

25 grams butter or margarine

One medium sized onion

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Two medium sized parsnips
One medium sized cooking apple (I used Bramley but I think they were too sweet, Granny Smith would be better)
600 mls vegetable stock
Two tablespoons chopped parsley
½ teaspoon Mixed fresh herbs
568mls milk
Salt and pepper to taste

Chop the vegetables. Melt the butter in a large saucepan and sauté the vegetables and apple, stirring frequently, until the onion is transparent. Add the stock and the herbs, then bring to a boil and reduce heat. Cover and simmer for 30 minutes. Add the milk. Allow to cool slightly before blending in a liquidiser in small quantities. Reheat to serving temperature and adjust seasoning to taste.

Random thoughts

Thanks to Betty Tattersall for the gift of the dahlia tubers, they will add colour and substance to the cutting garden this coming season.

Also many thanks to Margaret Wilson for the very welcome book of stamps, this helps so much towards the cost of publishing the newsletter.

It is great fun putting together my thoughts into some sort of coherent fashion and is proving to be a great learning curve, reading, researching and checking my facts and in many cases finding that my instincts are borne out by horticultural practice, not only here in New Zealand but in many other countries. I can almost hear my forebears who were great gardeners, whispering in my ear, *we told you so! Listen to us*. But the most gratifying thing of all is that so many want to share in my gentle musings and continue to ask for more. This issue will be going to forty friends of the garden, and many tell me that they pass it on to others to read. Thank you for your support.

My nephew Hamish and his partner Kirsti are planning a new garden in a town called Red Deer in Alberta, Canada, and their winter conditions are far beyond anything that I could imagine or would want to experience. However Hamish and Kirsti are creating a garden of great beauty and it has been great fun 'talking' by email and comparing successes and failures. We swap information and discuss ways of solving the various problems we encounter. Bearing in mind the disparity between the geographical locations, there is so much in common. Gardening bridges so many gaps, generational, physical and psychological. Long may it continue.