

NOTES FROM MY GARDEN

Issue Number 10
AUGUST 2006

Published by: Neil Stephenson. Woodside Cottage, Woodside Bay, RD1, Waiheke Island, 1972, New Zealand
Telephone: 09 372 7954 mobile: 027 484 7954 Email: neilwoodsidehouse@xtra.co.nz

Will it work?

I ask myself each day, as I plan to put into effect another crazy scheme dreamed up in the night watch hours.

I don't know.

I have spent many of the winter weeks surrounded by books and catalogues and sheets of paper, planning madly - as one does. Then, later when I went out into the garden to put these plans into practice, the garden just said "No, do something different".

Making garden plans is a very useful exercise: it keeps you busy in the dark months and you learn an awful lot. But my gardens really only happen on the ground and in their own time, when I am finally there with the spade and the plants. Only then can I decide how to arrange things, and how I want them to be.

But the joy of gardening is not to take any of it too seriously, instead, perhaps we should let ideas work like yeast rising to the surface of the mind with wild evocations of spectacular beauty, and with a sense of buoyant madness which takes us hither and thither.

Disasters proliferate of course, and I have many without count, but usually out of these 'not so successful endeavours' usually emerges, or mutates, another more simple idea, which is successful beyond any earlier dream. This is how I have lived my life, lurching from one dream to another, building on each one, creating a kaleidoscope of experiences with the satisfaction of knowing that it rarely has been dull or boring.

That, I hope, is my garden also, or at least how I want it to be.

The wonderful thing about a garden is that mistakes can be forgiven, covered up, or erased, you can start all over again. Not so with life unfortunately. But I shall never stop dreaming, and I hope that they continue to be wild and in technicolour.

The month in the garden

A promising start to the month, weather wise. I have achieved much, nearly completing the infrastructure. That sounds too grand and poncy, but really what I mean is that I have drawn the outlines in black and white and now I can start to colour it in.

All the beds in the kitchen garden are now in place, and there are now no more "no go" areas, that visitors always homed in on and asked the most pointed questions about. Paths are just about finished and now it is a case of finding homes for all the bits and pieces that I have moved to clear the spaces I want to plant.

In the families' private garden new beds are in place and the new fences completed. Work and planning was proceeding in the sea front garden and should have been finished in a couple of days, however Mother Nature stepped in and decided I had had enough fun, and was becoming too confident.

She sent the rain again and it was into 'Poppies Cottage', my garden shed, which was badly in need of a sort out and creation of new tool racks and work benches. I then discovered that the eastern front of Poppies Cottage is a wonderful place to put an old cane chair. It is a happy place to cogitate and plan the days work in the morning sun. My only problem is that I have to learn to use this space, it is that old ingrained "Protestant work ethic" forcibly instilled as a child and now hard to put aside, that prevents me from enjoying this space to its full extent.

A general clear out - or just an old fashioned 'spring clean' is called for. Madam will be delighted, she gently mocks my need to keep things, *just in case*.

I have so much "stuff" both plant and other material hoarded, just in case I may need it some time or find a use for. I mean you never know when you may need.....

In the kitchen garden

As I said above, all the beds are in position, and there are no more "no go areas", These were spaces from which I

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gently averted my eyes as from an offending sight as I hurried past, not 'seeing' them, pretending that they were not there. What a sense of relief and achievement to have finally despatched these overgrown and untidy areas to the bad memory department and I can now get on with planting.

The first planting of seed potatoes, "Ilham Hardy" are above ground and have been mounded up and mulched with lawn clippings to encourage further growth. The kumeras are in the hot box just starting to sprout, lettuces are almost ready in the cold frame. The second bed of silver beet is flourishing, (until the hens discover this free restaurant) and I am going into the garden this afternoon to plant out a couple of rows of leeks and to prepare the ground for the first planting of peas and dwarf beans.

The cabbages have had a light dressing of *sulphate of ammonia* as a growth booster. This is a tip from my favourite garden book 'A year in my Garden' by Jonathan Spade', for years the garden writer for the NZ Herald. A man who's writing is full of gentle humour and sensible and down to earth advice.

The asparagus and globe artichoke beds have been mulched and fed with barnyard manure and lawn clippings.

I am busy planning other spring/summer plantings to ensure a regular supply of vegetables and fruit to the main house kitchen. I am really excited about this growing season, because for the past two years there has been no continuity of supply or work in the garden due to my broken leg, but hey, that is past now, it is onwards and upwards, the sky is the limit, and here's to full baskets of beautiful produce.

The tomato beds have been dug over and preparation is well under way to receive the new seasons plants as soon as the soil is warm enough. I am determined to have my tomatoes ready early this year to give them a good start before the hot weather sets in. I have been doing a fair amount of research and reading in an attempt to improve my tomato crop this season.

While reading back copies of that excellent English gardening magazine "Gardens Illustrated" I came across an article about Simpson's Seeds in Wiltshire, U.K. They talked about growing tomatoes and what they said rang all sorts of bells for me. After experimenting with different ways of growing their tomatoes, they have settled on a system that acknowledges that tomatoes have what might be called a root system of two parts. Deep spreading roots go in search of water, while a finer secondary system develops near the surface, through which the plant takes in nutrition. They have devised a system which I am going to adapt. The idea is to provide two distinct environments for the two different sets of roots. The plants will be planted as normal, but I will put in place a bottomless pot around the plant above ground. This will be filled with good quality compost, as they grow, and the stem roots can take advantage of the compost, as well, I will feed the plants once a week with a liquid feed, when the first fruit is set. I will provide a watering system for each plant direct to the deep roots by way of upturned plastic drink bottles, buried in the soil on planting. This system, not as sophisticated as the Simpson's and time consuming at the start but will be easy to manage on a day to day basis, making watering easier and more economical on our precious summer water too. It has a touch of the #8 fencing wire culture about it which appeals to me. I will keep you posted on the progress of this experiment.

One of the interesting results of reading old and venerable garden publications is the quirky and sometime effective eco-friendly pest control methods that one comes across. The latest for slugs is one that I am going to try:

Pour $\frac{3}{4}$ quart (3 cups) water $\frac{1}{4}$ quart (1 cup) of white wine or cider vinegar into a one gallon hand sprayer. Mix well and spray, taking care to get down into the crowns, on plants affected by those rampaging gastropods. It was recommended for hostas but I am going to try it on other plants such as my lettuces. This remedy came from the USA, I'm sure that slugs are slugs are slugs, no matter where they come from.

I am going to limit my climbing beans to one variety this year, the 'Shiny Fardenlosa', which proved to be a winner in the tenderness and stringless stakes last season. My experience with 'Scarlet Runner' has not been good for a few seasons now, they seem to go tough and stringy very quickly. Now this could be something related to my garden or the growing conditions that I provided. Anyhow they will be absent from the kitchen trug.

I have had two blueberry plants for going on three years and nary a berry. I am giving them one more chance, (for the third time). I do feel sorry for them, they are probably developing wheels, they have been moved so many times in an attempt to find a space that suits them. I have tenderly discussed their future prospects with them and explained my

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ever diminishing patience, they have been well fed and watered and placed in a position that all the good parenting books say they will respond to, we will wait and see.....

The decorative garden

The development of the Family's private garden continues apace, a few more dry weeks and the basic ground work will be finished and I can concentrate on preparing for the garden safari.

When we took over the property there was a very large, old and rather disgusting Acmena tree growing in the middle of the west lawn. I consider myself a tree lover, but the Acmena has so many bad habits that I tend to not treat them with the respect they probably deserve. My main dislike is totally irrational, they are a favoured haunt of the Weta, and these survivors of the stone age engender a fear that will send me into a catatonic state and will make me feel severely discombobulated. Anyhow Madam and I discussed this matter, with much exaggeration on my part, and the tree was felled. As it happens this was timely, as Jenny and Graeme Rogers who cut it down for us, explained that it was long past its use by date and was in fact seven trees that had all grown together and was slowly rotting from the inside, and would most likely have fallen on the house in the next severe blow. Well, after the timber was removed and all the rubbish cleared away I was left with a great hulking tree stump in the middle of a planned vista. Change of plans, vista goes by the board, but what do I put in its place, to remove the stump at this stage would be prohibitive and I was reduced to glaring at it when ever I passed. Now, after listening to the garden, the problem has been solved, I have dug a bed around the stump, building up the garden level and I then raided the greenhouse and my 'plant bank', and hopefully by the time Madam arrives it will be disguised as a colourful, round, herbaceous border. I found a very large glazed pot at the local garden centre, much reduced in price, and this has been placed on top of the stump and filled with plants, which will give extra colour and height. Fingers crossed.

The cutting garden

I mentioned in an earlier letter my disappointment in the quality of the bulbs supplied this year by Taupaki Bulbs. This disappointment has increased as the season passes. Pots of Earlicheer turned out to be a mixed bag of other varieties, Many bulbs have not flowered, I planted tubs of daffodils, a variety to each tub with the result of only one flower per tub, the list goes on. My disappointment always tempered by the joy of seeing a bloom when it does appear. Cie la vie.

The Ranunculas and Anemones have been a great disappointment in that only about 50% of the corms developed. However, those that did grow are starting to provide an late winter early spring show and gives much pleasure. The rich jewel box colours appeal and at this time of the year give a foretaste of the richness of summer just round the corner.

Like all other areas of the garden, planning and thought for the garden safari is an ever present and trying to balance the needs to provide colour for the safari and to ensure that the garden will be at its peak during Madam's visit requires the planning skills of Machiavelli, which surprise, surprise I am not. With me it is a case of blundering forward with fingers crossed firmly behind my back.

The rose garden

Now there is now doubt that I love my roses, I also try very hard not to be a 'fundamentalist' and believe that they are the only flowers in the garden and they have no faults and must never be questioned. I suppose its rather like bringing up children there will always be one who is favoured, but a wise parent curbs these tendencies and treats all without fear or favour. The roses when in flower are spectacular, and I visibly purr when they are in their ascendancy, however, and sadly to say for a great part of the year the rose garden can at best be described as uninspiring.

Betty Tatt who was here yesterday for the fundraising lunch presented me with the solution to this problem. She gave me a copy of the "Wildflower World" catalogue. I am going to order a wild flower seed mix and sow them among the rose bushes to grow and provide colour, scent and interest and I think they will only high light the beauty of the roses rather than detract. Thank you Betty for such a thoughtful gift, but I can feel all sorts of other applications for these glorious seed mixes coming on.....

The growth on the roses shows great promise, and I am delighted to see that a family of wax eyes has decided to take up residence and they spend many happy hours going over the bushes looking for the aphids and other grubs and

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insects who have wrongly thought they could move in on my patch.

Miss Poo will have to be fed on a more regular basis to keep her in the somnambulant state she enjoys and to keep her attention away from the busy avian bug patrol, I don't have to worry about Col Fitzroy, he is far to grand to bother with catching his own food, preferring it to be served on a silver salver, cut up and served at room temperature with a side dish of biscuits.

In the greenhouse

The spinach is pricked out and coming along well, and ready to go out into the cold frame for hardening off. I have sown the tomato seeds. This year going for only two varieties- *Amish paste* for sauces and paste making and *Oxheart* for eating. The seed coming from Kings Seeds in KatiKati are heirloom varieties that I have not grown before, but I wanted a change this year and preferred to go for the older tomatoes, which to me provide the taste and meatiness I require in a tomato.

This week I have to start sowing seed for late summer flowering to ensure an ongoing display.

The greenhouse really does keep me out of mischief and on my toes, and as my Grand Mother said to me about an earlier passion- It keeps you off the streets and doesn't frighten the horses.

The ponds

They are a bit of a conundrum at the moment, parts of the estate are so wet and squelch underfoot, one has to wear flippers to get around safely, but the pond levels are low and they look a turgid brown mess. Although there has been lots of rain, it has been in heavy brief showers, that don't do much to contribute to their storage level. Plus there is a great amount of debris from the last gales that need to be removed. Out with the grappling iron and drag the ponds, it is a job that has to be done, but I keep on finding seemingly more important jobs that need to be done??.

I have planted reeds, a gift from Doreen Waters, and some *Restiva* around the upper pond, but they look far from attractive at the moment, with their attendant wire netting pukeko and duck defences, which are so necessary against these avian terrorists, who consider any plantings made by me fair game for destruction.

Recipe of the month

Leek Soup

450g leeks
450g onions
50g butter
2 tablespoons flour
3 cups chicken stock, heated.
1 glass white wine
Salt and pepper
250ml cream

Melt the butter in a pan, add the finely chopped and rinsed leeks and onions, simmer gently to soften, without browning, for 15 minutes.. Add the flour gradually and stir with a wooden spoon. Slowly add the stock, stirring all the time to prevent lumps forming. Add the wine and season to taste. Simmer for about 30 minutes, then add in the cream and cook gently for about five minutes.

Serve with croutons or crisply fried cubes of bacon.

I have a working lunch here at the cottage this Sunday for the fundraising group for the Omiha (Rocky Bay) Welfare and Recreation Society. Now this committee is a discerning bunch of gourmands and it is always a challenge to come up with something new and taste titillating. I will be serving this soup for the first time for their delectation, along with an old favourite of mine the classic country lamb, barley and vegetable soup as a second choice. As well as the soups there will be the usual choices of tasty morsels to share. These lunches are always looked forward to by the committee members, and in spite of the quantity of food eaten an enormous amount of work is achieved.

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(It is now Monday morning and I can report that the leek soup received a unanimous thumbs up and can be recommended)

Random thoughts

I am constantly astounded by the feedback and support that is given to this newsletter. It is so heart warming and encouraging. The fact that there are people out there who enjoy my ramblings and mutterings and not only that they actively encourage me to continue is beyond the understanding of this grumpy old curmudgeon.

The newsletter has brought me in touch and created friendships with such a diverse and interesting group of people. Many I would not in the general course of things have the pleasure of meeting let alone get to know and call friends. I like to believe that it is nothing to do with me, I only record what happens here in the garden and my enjoyment in being given the chance to work in such a unique environment and for such a supportive and special family. It is the magic of the place that is somehow communicated through my pen that enslaves all who come in contact with Woodside Bay either by visiting or through the word.?

There are friends that I particularly wish to single out this month, Helen and David Gunson and "Great Aunt" Doreen Waters. Your kindness and thoughtfulness means so much, you both have the knack of coming up with a thought or action that arrives when it is most needed. How did you know? Is it the magic of the garden working again.

THANK YOU

GA Doreen has visited the garden before and I look forward to greeting her here again soon, along with her shadow the glorious Miss Muriel, and yes Muriel there is still some whiskey in the bottle!
Helen and David, I have only met once, very briefly, years ago at a lecture by Neil Ross, and I look forward to their visit to the garden as soon as the weather improves.

I have had a bit of fun lately gathering useful tid bits and I thought that I would include in random thoughts a few of these each month, even if they don't work the imagination that has gone into creating them should be acknowledged and applauded..

Molasses spray deters cabbage white butterflies and other pests on Brassica's. Mix 1 tablespoon of molasses with a litre of hot water until it is the colour of weak tea. Stir in a teaspoon of detergent to help it stick

- Sprigs of rosemary scattered around will repel slugs.
- Food colouring can be added to your weedkiller solution to easily identify which weeds you have sprayed.
- Whiteflies are attracted to yellow. Cut some yellow card, smear with petroleum jelly, attach to a stick and plant among your vegetables.