

# NOTES FROM MY GARDEN

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Lawns, lawns, lawns, they have dominated my life this month. With over two acres to maintain they form a major portion of the work schedule of the garden this month. I live with them in my mind, asleep and awake, they are there, haunting me, alternatively screaming at me or softly whispering to me in that seductive way that a wheedling child uses when it really wants something. At this time of the year, they assume an importance, in the mind, far greater than the actuality

During the winter, a major proportion of the lawns cannot be mowed because of the nature of the ground, be it too steep or too wet, however now those factors don't apply, the wet has gone and the steep while still there is not so much of an issue because it is dry and manageable with care. However the long winter rest has to be paid for by mowing not once but at least four times and raked in between each mowing to bring them back under control. With the area and contours of the lawns, this is not only backbreaking but very time consuming.

I am, as Madam so succinctly puts it, my own worst enemy; because I have a fetish for smooth well kept lawns it becomes a matter of pride that when she arrives for her annual sojourn they will be in perfect condition. I can guarantee her reaction, a smile will hover around her lips as she surveys her domain and casually remarks: "I see you have been cutting the lawns to within an inch of their lives again Neil" I know then that all is well, God is in her heaven and Madam is back where she belongs the Queen of all she surveys and the lawns look good.

## The month in the garden

As you can imagine, my work this month has been dominated by the forthcoming garden safari, concentrating on the kitchen garden and surrounding area, trying to pull everything together, so that we present the best possible face to the world on the day. Never having been a seriously organized person, I find it a new experience to have to prioritise (what a dreadful word) my labours, the planting, and other garden tasks. It is difficult to balance the need to have the garden looking fruitful and abundant and having an oversupply of produce prior to the family's arrival in mid December, which after all is the *raison d'être* of the kitchen garden.

An example is the cabbages, they look fantastic now and will last until the great day, however I would love to pick one and take advantage of their sweetness and perfection, but the removal of even one would spoil the look of the bed, this conundrum is repeated all over the garden. The one exception is the asparagus bed. Nothing will stop me from enjoying the fruits of this bed and none will know how much I have picked.

## The kitchen garden

If asked, 'what is my favourite part of the garden', I would find it very hard to answer, however I must admit however that while the kitchen garden is not top of the list, it is way ahead of whatever comes second. I love the order and control one can achieve. Flowers are fine, but at this time of the year I'm besotted with the new crops of fruit and vegetables displayed in the kitchen garden. I love the ability to wander around the kitchen garden at the end of the day with a bucket to collect things for supper. It should not be a bucket of course; it should be my trug, lined with grape leaves and fresh herbs as I collect my offering to the main house kitchen or just simply for my own supper. Somehow, I always seem to forget the trug and load up the nearest receptacle in the joy of gathering in the harvest.

This month we are starting to enjoy the fruits of our labours. The asparagus bed is producing at a great rate, soft succulent stems, which seem to spring up overnight, renewing the garden after the previous nights lightening raids to satisfy my addiction. Yesterday I repaid their fecundity with a good dressing of fowl manure from the floor of the hen house. Apart from their eggs, which by the way marry so well in so many ways with asparagus, the product of the girls

cogitations provides fantastic growth stimulants to the asparagus beds and to so many of the other permanent beds in the kitchen and rose garden.

The task of cleaning out the hen house and nesting boxes was one that I have been deferring for some considerable time, so suitably attired in mask and goggles I was able to cross off another job from my list. The girls once again have a warm snug house lined with lovely dry grass raked from the lawns weeks ago and dried on the floor of the potting shed, and selected beds have been well fed.

An interesting observation; a few weeks ago I watered the potted fruit trees with a liquid solution of blood and bone, the visible growth and development, in a short period of time has been phenomenal, in particular the Apricot which is now sporting a good crop of young fruit and healthy leaf growth. I use blood and bone in the garden, along with sheep pellets (or any other animal manure) as my main manure application and has always proved to be efficacious but this is the first time that I have tried a liquid form of blood and bone, I shall be looking seriously at its use in the future. I had purchased a 500ml pottle of the concentrated mixture from the 'Warehouse' for a reasonable \$5.95 (their house brand) and this watered down as directed proved to be very economical.

All my tomato plants are in and have established themselves, putting on good growth in a short time. As I said in an earlier note I am trying a new method of growing tomatoes this season. Each plant is planted in a bottomless plastic pot, about 200cm tall. When the stem is tall enough I will add compost and blood and bone mixed with a few sheep pellets to the pot. Roots will develop on the buried stems which will feed the tomato. I have buried bottomless soft drink bottles, top end in, next to the pots as a deep watering aid, so I can control the water going to each plant and ensure it gets to where it is needed.

My first crop of sweet corn is well established behind their pukeko defences of manuka brush, but this will have to be reviewed as they reach their full height. My big problem here is that the Pukekoes love the corn as much as Madam does, and frankly I fear Madam more than the Pukeko.

Lettuce, beetroot, celery, dwarf and climbing beans, silver beet and spinach are also hiding behind netting and manuka defences and progressing, but it sure is time consuming to have to remove these defences to weed and till the soil and then replace once again when finished. You get some idea of the task when I say that we have thirty five individual beds in the kitchen garden, and this fuels my hatred (a strong, ugly, but expressive word) for the Pukeko.

Talking of these abominations, my Ilam Hardy potato bed was thriving, strong healthy plants, promising a goodly supply of tubers for the table, but no longer; now this bed is a scene of devastation, nothing left but a few tubers in a bed 2 metres long and a metre wide planted originally with 36 plants. I had already 'tickled' a few samples to try; however, there are two Pukekoes who have decided that I was becoming too smug and complacent, and that they would teach me a lesson. Each day they remove a plant, working down the rows, and no matter how early I get up in the morning or how long I watch over the garden during the day, they wait in the wings for me to turn my back and then they strike. For me, madness is in the shape of a pukeko.

An amusing little aside on my defences, numerous first time visitors question why I am trying to grow manuka from cuttings, and it does not look as though they have taken!

### **The decorative garden**

The decorative garden has been rather neglected this month in the struggle to bring the kitchen, cutting and rose gardens up to scratch. I try to devote at least a couple of hours a day to these gardens, but as the term decorative garden covers a major part of the estate they have been not receiving the attention they deserve. The decorative garden as such is not included in the garden safari so the planning is more orientated towards Madam's arrival in December, when hopefully they will be nearing their peak. The mixed borders I established last season have started to strut their stuff and as the summer planting moves in to fill in the empty spaces, and show off their colours, there promises to be a clash worthy of a second glance and then a long pause to enjoy, in ones perambulations around the garden.

## The cutting garden

The answer to the hypothetical question: What is your favourite garden' would prove my fickleness, because when I am involved in this garden, it is the best place in the world. I love its lack of order and total chaos, I love the clashing of the colours, what I love is the complete antithesis of the kitchen garden.

The giant stocks and cornflowers are about to do battle, colour wise with the dahlias and acihilea, joined in the border by the flamboyant cannas. The Queen Anne's lace has reached its full regal height and is about to burst forth in a froth of white. The soon to be fabulous delphiniums have recovered from the initial onslaught of slug and snail to recover and burgeon forth with new growth. I am excited by the thought of these majestic spires soaring to the heavens giving height and emphasis to the garden, fighting for dominance with the aforesaid Queen Anne's lace.

The cutting garden is also the repository for all sort of plants that I have been given over the past two and a half years, plants that I had to 'heel in' temporarily until I found a more permanent home for them. Alas they were always forgotten, and now provide me with great pleasure, discovering emerging treasures, that with their hues will add to the ongoing battle of the colours or in some cases calm it down with their subdued tones and natural beauty. Most days exploring the cutting garden is a voyage of discovery, and this is something with which I reward myself when the going gets tough, because my garden is also a great healer.

Now Madam has suggested that I pass on to you the following tip for cleaning the inside of cloudy vases, and she thought the best place for it would be in the notes on the cutting garden, because where else do the house flowers go, but in vases.

Use three to four tablets of Polident (yes, the denture cleaner) dissolved in water – for a large vase, say two tablets for a small vase. Leave water in the vase for several hours, remove and rinse.

Sounds good to me, I had better go and order the Polident, I can take a hint!

## The rose garden

Now if I was to try and curry favour with Madam, this is where I would concentrate my efforts, because Roses are her great weakness. It is fortunate that roses are also my passion, so any time spent in this garden, or should I say gardens is not a sentence to the treadmill. The reason I corrected myself then to gardens, was that I have managed to sneak in plantings of roses in some of the most unlikely of places around the estate, so that we have the pleasure, at this time of the year, of being visually and nasally stunned when least expected.

The early season feeding of blood and bone and sheep pellets has given the bushes the boost they needed, rewarding us with lush healthy growth and many flower buds. The early flowers show great promise and some that did not do well last year, their first year, are excelling themselves now. The unfortunate thing is that many rose plants were rescued from an unloved garden and are therefore unnamed, but that does not diminish their beauty or the joy that they give. In many ways it is a blessing, because they are enjoyed for themselves with out being prejudged by name or history.

One rose, a shrivelled stump for two years now, but cared for hopefully, has rewarded us with strong new growth and this week with the most spectacular deep majestic velvety red, enormous bloom and promises many more. For me it was a lesson in faith and patience, both attributes I did not know I had, but something kept me from digging out this ugly stump and replacing it with another rose.

The collection of ancient roses, chosen for their age, being that of the main house, or earlier, are starting to come into their own, and again where they were weak and strained to flower last season have undone their corsets and let rip. Growth is healthy and prolific and the flower buds promise a firework display to rival any Bastille Day celebration. Particularly Mme Legras de St Germain, Paul Neyron, and the Baronne de Prevoste promise a grand ball which I wish you were all, who read these notes, able to attend.

In one of the rose beds there is a thick carpet of aquilegia seedlings that I do not have the heart to destroy. Each of these new seedlings could be a marvel, a new cross, for some extraordinary aquilegias have popped up ever since I first planted a few plants in this bed to fill in some empty spaces. Aquilegia is as promiscuous plant as you could wish for.

Promiscuity generally has a bad name, but there is a great deal to be said for it in the garden. You never know what is going on behind your back until you see the elegant progeny of some illicit coupling waving at you between the weeds. After all some of the most treasured old and new plants are a result of a furtive meeting behind the bicycle shed, so to speak, that has been allowed to grow and develop, and we soon draw a thin veil over its dubious ancestry and heap praise and adoration on the newcomer.

## **The greenhouse**

I thought that the greenhouse was starting to empty out, but no, the seed rays are starting to fill up again for summer and autumn planting, plus cuttings that I take when working around the gardens end up here, many in pots of water where I place them in my rush to empty the bucket at the end of a session in a particular area. It is an stricture that I place on my self that when I bring cuttings into the greenhouse I deal with them immediately, do the preparation work and tuck them into their new pots, before moving on to something else. This is why I have another rule that every week I clean the greenhouse and check that I have not left some poor plant sitting in a jar of water. Why is it that I have such a clutter on the greenhouse benches, a clutter of dried up cuttings and jars of unidentifiable plants waiting in a graveyard of good ideas and exciting thoughts? Why is it that I never follow my own rules? I think I have always been an awkward cuss who has considered rules a bore and always for other people, but insist on making them.

Last year I collected the seeds from my Lilly bed, for once I actually followed through with my good intentions and sowed some of the seeds in a seed tray, and promptly forgot about them, tucked away as they were on the floor of the greenhouse under the bench in a distant corner. I mentioned my great joy of their discovery in an earlier epistle, I watered them regularly for a few weeks and then as usual was sidetracked by more pressing matters. This morning with a few idle moments to spare I was poking around – low and behold in the corner there was what appeared to be a rather overgrown lawn? No? It was the lilies, healthy, strong and thriving on my neglect. Rather humbled I delicately removed the crumbling seed tray to a more advantageous position and purred over these robust juveniles. After several minutes of this rather self indulgent behaviour I was brought down to earth with the realisation that parental responsibility does include providing the correct care and protection and to provide the necessities of life, as they say in the courts. I have been lucky up to this moment and 'got away with it' but now it did require some work from me. I am rather daunted by the thought of pricking out several thousand small grass like plants into growing pots – ah well, a chair, the wireless tuned into the concert programme and maybe a glass of red wine could turn it into a pleasurable experience (but substitute tea for the wine!)

## **Recipes**

The first recipe this month was a direct result of the assault on the potato bed by my nemesis the pukeko. I have a plethora of very small new potatoes and was looking for a way to serve them; some research came up with this idea. Research into food and its preparation is a delightful way to spend time, my expanding waistline is testimony to the diligent effort I put into this on your behalf!

### Caramelised potatoes

This is a traditional Danish way of cooking potatoes, and is usually made with very small new potatoes.

25g sugar  
700g small potatoes, cleaned  
50g butter, preferably unsalted  
Sea salt

Melt the sugar gently in a heavy saucepan until it just turns brown and then stir on the butter. Add the clean, unpeeled potatoes and cook very gently over a lowish heat, turning the potatoes frequently so they get coated in the caramel. Sprinkle with sea salt and serve. Serves 4

The second takes into account my love of a good soup and my recent re-discovery and burgeoning love affair with the broad bean.

### Fresh Herb Soup with Green and Broad Beans

750ml semi-skimmed milk	2 bay leaves, 2 cloves
1 leek (white part only), sliced	2 onions, sliced
2 potatoes, peeled and chopped	2 sticks celery, sliced
2 garlic cloves	1 bunch basil
2 tbsp low-fat fromage frais	20 green beans, blanched and finely sliced
60 broad beans, blanched and peeled	6 tbsp finely chopped chives, chervil and parsley

Put the milk, bay leaves and cloves in a saucepan and warm without boiling for about 20 minutes. Remove the bay leaves and cloves and add the leek, onions, potatoes, celery and garlic. Cover and simmer for 20-30 minutes, until the vegetables are soft. Add the basil and liquidise, then strain the soup through a sieve. Whisk in the fromage frais, stir in the green beans, broad beans and herbs and season. *Serves 4*

### **Random thoughts**

The Pukekoes as usual are testing my patience and stress levels to the maximum; their latest gambit has really made me wonder. I have two very old and rather weather beaten garden gnomes sitting on the edge of the middle pond. Alf and 'Arfa have resided on an old tree trunk for nearly two years, without incident, but recently they have mysteriously ended up in the pond on more than one occasion. It was always a rather complicated procedure to retrieve the two old boys from the grips of the black smelly mud. While working in the upper orchard last week I discovered how they managed to take an unscheduled swim, particularly as 'Arfa with only half a body, lost in an argument with a mower early in his life, is not keen on swimming. A Pukeko has taken a violent dislike to this harmless duo, and while I watched the avian bully repeatedly flew and kicked at them until they disappeared into the murky waters. When this unfortunate episode was over the bully flicked his tail, squawked and nonchalantly strode off to wreck havoc elsewhere. Alf and 'Arfa are now firmly attached to their tree trunk and can no longer go skinny dipping..

This morning, Monday of labour weekend, it was 6am, I was lying in bed trying to stay there to get some much needed rest, when I heard the strangest of noises, it was like a chattering group of children. Up out of bed and there walking up the drive heading straight for the garden was a squadron of Pukekoes. I stood and watched firstly with horror then with amusement, for they looked all the world like a group of young adolescents heading off to an evenings entertainment, all chattering together in excitement, sharing with whomever would listen, and not caring if anyone did, what they were going to do and with whom. My fascination lasted for a few moments then I realised that their intended entertainment venue was my garden. The window was flung wide, a string of invective was hurled at the miscreants, they stopped, looked up in horror, squawked and flew in all directions, leaving me on one side highly amused and on the other shaking with anger and fear for my garden.

Now I know what you are all saying, the old fellow is becoming obsessed with these Pukekoes, to you they are cute, rather attractive harmless birds, just going about their business, however to me they are the devil incarnate sent by some malevolent power to slowly send me mad. THEY ARE SUCCEEDING.

In **The Green house** I talked about my joy in the discovery of the Lilly seedlings. This and similar experiences are part of my daily life in the kitchen and the larger gardens of the estate. I make it a rule (another one) to walk the estate each and every day, poking around, stopping to smell the flowers and pay homage to some of the great and ancient trees that we are blessed with. I am not a 'tree hugger' but I am a tree lover and do live in awe of some of Mother Natures greatest creations and can spend many hours happy in the company of the trees. Also one has to spend time with your head angled towards the earth on a voyage of discovery with every step. This is time of the year is when I indulge myself in my favourite game of 'Shrinking' where I shrink myself to the size of a kewpie doll and wander around marvelling at wonders that normal size people miss. Tiny flowers, insects, fruits and nuts, it is a busy world, teeming with colour and life, and most of the time we miss out on this glory, because we are too busy to take time to see what is around us and are too bound up with being 'big' people.