

NOTES FROM MY GARDEN

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HAPPY NEW YEAR. May 2007 bring you all that you need, the happiness that you deserve and an overflowing cornucopia of fun and laughter.

It was the holiday season, time to take a break from the daily routine of our lives, put the feet up and survey all that we have achieved and to think about the coming year. It was the silly season and for me the quiet time. The wireless was and is still turned off. The once great National programme of Radio NZ has degenerated into mindless blatherings of a gaggle of people singularly lacking in the talent to amuse or inform. The off knob has been used with increasing frequency and ferocity to prevent my blood pressure from scaling the heights of Everest. Whereas in the past the wireless was a source of great pleasure and gentle education, always accompanying me on my forays into the herbaceous borders, now it sits forlorn unused and unwanted on the back shelf in the greenhouse, being rapidly smothered in a blanket of cobwebs. Instead I have rediscovered the pleasure of listening to Mother Natures own broadcast. The twittering, chirping and generally dulcet sounds of my avian neighbours and sometimes even the strident clackering of the territorial tuis are a joy compared to the mindless drivel that spewed forth from the wireless, the excuse they offered was that it was holiday time..... Yeah right! And it continues yet.

You will notice that this issue is numbered 16, where is 15, I hear you say. Stillborn, locked in the computer, half written, to my mind lacking in the force necessary to be brought forth into the world. The muse deserted me, the will to continue withered and after much struggling with my desire for continuity, I gave in to the need to rest, found a shady tree, and with a rug and a cushion enjoyed catching up on the many books that I had ordered from the treasure house that is Touchwood Books in Hastings. Touchwood Books is to me the equivalent of Fort Knox, a veritable treasure house of information, to be enjoyed by those who dare to enter their portals, (by way of the internet or via their informative newsletter), but be warned, once those portals are entered there is no going back and there is no cure for the addiction that ensues. Peter and Diane Arthur, who head the team at Touchwood, have led me gently down the path to insolvency, albeit willingly and with a beatific smile on my face.

I think we all need an addiction of some kind, and mine is books, I console myself with the thought that it does not affect anyone else, keeps me off the street and certainly does not frighten the horses.

In the garden this month

The garden these two months has been dominated by two beings, The Great Goddess and Madam. To be quite honest I am not sure which I fear the most, both are capable displays of extraordinary gentleness and the ferocity of a whirling Dervish (usually in the space of 10 minutes).

The great Goddess has delivered the greatest mixed bag of weather conditions that I can remember, searing heat, high humidity, lack of rain, then torrential downpours, and that is only in the space of an hour! Not ideal conditions in which to toil. The kitchen garden has suffered from a lack of breezes to stir the hot air and humid conditions, creating the perfect breeding ground for most blights known to the long suffering gardener. As the gardener ages (as opposed to getting old) the humidity takes its toll and he finds himself dragging his feet around the garden, wasting so much energy trying to raise the enthusiasm to labour, which in less trying conditions would normally be a breeze.

As February ends, the gardener is on his knees, worn to a frazzle trying to keep precious plants alive with watering in conditions that could be best described as near Saharan. We are more blessed that most here on this once green isle with a deep ever replenishing well that allows the garden to be watered, but the gardener is always conscious of the need to conserve these resources. By using the well water to assuage the gardens thirst, one is depriving the ponds of much needed refreshment and they become even more foetid in this heat. Like all things in life you have to be aware of the domino affect on any action taken.

Madam descended on the kitchen garden, most afternoons or evenings, with trug and kitchen scissors in hand scouring the beds for delectable tid bits to tempt the palates of her family and guests. It is a source of great pride that the garden has been able to satisfy these demands on all but one occasion, when the request was for more broccoli. A desperate search by the anxious gardener revealed only two tiny heads, these were apologetically laid in the trug, with head hung low, nothing being said by either party. However the gardener knew deep down, and by the smile hovering around Madam's lips, that he would not get away unscathed, maybe not right now, but this singular lack of success would be stored up and used to his disadvantage sometime in the future. He was not to be disappointed!

Madam's forays into the kitchen garden are always looked forward to, because apart from the light hearted games of one upmanship indulged in by both Madam and the gardener there is also a serious side of learning, discussion and planning for the future, which is essential if the garden is to continue to develop and grow.

Sadly Madam has now returned to the wintry blasts of New York, and Woodside Bay is poorer for her absence, depleted of a certain life force that picks you up spins you around and puts you down, sometimes not so gently, bemused, disorientated but never unhappy. The gardener misses her little 'spot checks', which are in truth an excuse to build up the fire in the stove, lay out the tea cups, bring out the cake and settle in for a good discussion on a bewildering range of subjects. These spot checks happened on a daily basis and it was not unknown for it to happen on more than one occasion during any given day. Madam's liking for a good pot of tea is almost as great as my own. A true meeting of minds.

Another task that has to take priority at this time of the year is the preserving of the gardens bounty to enjoy in the winter months.

Plums and peaches have been converted into jams, sauces and chutneys, and where time has been of the essence the fruit has been cut up and frozen ready to thaw out and metamorphose into another gustatory delight later in the year when time is not so short. Faint hope the gardener snorts!

The vegetables have been in an embarrassing abundance and the gardener has donned his other 'hat' and has been preserving what he can for the coming winter months. A great pleasure at this time of the year is to share the gardens abundant produce with those not so blessed and it must be admitted that it is easier to give away and for others to enjoy rather than spend hours slaving over a hot stove converting the fruit of our labours into a plethora of preserves.

The kitchen garden

We must indulge in a little gentle bragging. The tomatoes have been a great success, particularly those grown in the new manner as discussed in earlier newsletters. The plants have been tall, healthy and laden with a great number of large fruit. The varieties planted this year were *Oxheart* and *Amish paste*. *Oxheart* have proved to be true to description, large, with lots of wonderfully flavoured meaty flesh. The *Amish paste* while not being so large are just as good.

The preserving pans have worked over time, trying to reduce the number of tomatoes to manageable proportions. They have been converted into paste, sauces, chutneys, and ratatouille. The freezer and shelves in the pantry are loaded to the gunwales.

The beans, both dwarf and climbing have produced large quantities of produce for the kitchens. I have extolled the virtues of the *Shiny Fardenlosa* climbing beans on many occasions in the past and once again I have not been disappointed, they are about to start on their second flush, but I have also removed the *Sweet peas* from their frame and planted a second crop of *Shiny Fardenlosa* which should take us well into Autumn. The second crop of dwarf beans have also been sown and are now up and thriving, so we will be well served with beans for a while.

The sweet corn has been another successful crop this season, providing succulent cobs for the table. Second and third crops have been planted to ensure a continuing supply.

Miss Juliette, Madam's youngest daughter arrived for an extended stay on the Third of February, and corn is on her most favourite list, so hence the number of plantings. Miss Juliette is of the vegetarian persuasion and when she was here earlier in January I blotted my copybook quite severely. I presented her with several heads of young broccoli for

her supper (along with other interesting tid bits as well), extolling its virtues etc. The next morning I had to face a rather distressed young woman, the broccoli had been filled with green cabbage white caterpillars, unbeknown to me or anyone else, only discovered when cutting through the cooked heads on the plate. This is quite a problem with home grown broccoli, no matter how hard you search, the caterpillars are so well disguised, there are always some who escape this search. I have since found come across a solution to the problem. Put the broccoli heads into a bowl of cold salted water prior to cooking, this discourages the creatures and they quickly remove themselves from their hiding places.

The kumara, new cabbage and broccoli plantings, beetroot, celery, lettuce, and aubergines are progressing and are on schedule to replace the earlier crops.

The bed of potatoes that was devastated by the Pukekoes in November, was dug last week, and we did manage to get a bucket full of good sized tubers out of what the Pukekoes left behind. One can only wonder at the crop, had the avian terrorists not decided to visit.

A word about the Pukekoes. They have not visited the garden now since the middle of November. I put this down to the stringing of the yellow plastic strips across the garden. Don't ask me why or how, I just know at the moment that it works, and as long as it works I shall keep the yellow strips flying. All thanks to Betty Tatt and her finding and passing on of this information. This gardener will always be grateful.

I have a bed of leeks, that are well past their use by date, and to even consider using them for any culinary purpose would be an act of extreme folly, however I cannot bring myself to remove these plants. The plants are nearly as tall as the gardener, with the most magnificent round purplish seed heads waving in any breeze that finds its way into the garden. Such a lovely sight. The gardener just wonders how long he will keep them there, enjoying the sculptural qualities, probably until the need for the bed is of overwhelming urgency. One can't always be practical and a little bit of dreaming and fantasy is good for the soul.

The decorative garden

The decorative garden for the past two months has been in a holding pattern. Working hard to hold on to what I have got, desperately trying to keep plants alive with copious amounts of precious water. The ground is baked hard where it is exposed to the sun, reminding me constantly of my failure to follow my own exhortations to any one who would listen – Mulch, Mulch, Mulch. If there was ever needed an example of the folly of not following my own wisdom, the state of the decorative garden is an effective reminder at the moment.

Now that Madam has departed the gardener can get in and strip these gardens of the dead and dying, clean them up and prepare for new plantings as soon as the rains come. These past weeks every waking hour has been spent working in the pleasure gardens trying to bring them back to the desired state. Weeding, deadheading, cutting grass, raking, building bonfires (but not lighting yet), spraying, all good hard physical work, but in the heat, gruelling.

The cutting garden

The dahlias have proved their worth this year, providing good quality flowers for vases, however I have yet to convince Madam of their beauty, maybe a lifetimes work, but it is a challenge not to be shunned. They are a flower with infinite variety and colour, and an ease of growing that makes them a plant of great value in a garden of this size.

The Shasta daisies are all but over and are crying out for the secateurs and a day (or days) spent deadheading, again another great flower for indoors, providing a stunning simplicity to any décor.

The miniature zinnias and standard phlox in the roundel garden at the centre of the scented garden have proved their worth, providing a dazzling display with the minimum of input by the gardener, now that it what I call a success story.

Like all areas of the garden in general, the gardener awaits the arrival of the soft gentle Autumn rains before planting out, to do so before the arrival of this life giving force is a hiding to no-where and foolish in the extreme.

The rose garden

What a year for roses, I have never experienced in any garden that I have played a part in, such a display as was put on this year. Each individual bush seemed as though it was trying to outdo its neighbour in display, colour and splendour. Fair made this old heart race with joy.

I have another battle to wage here, my annual battle with *Blushing Lucy* and her attempts to take over the whole garden. A strong healthy repeat flowering rambler, with medium soft pink fully double flowers which hang down in luscious heavy clusters, a bit like cherry blossom but much nicer.

Blushing Lucy is an English bred rose with very strong New Zealand connections, being bred by Dr. AH Williams, grandson of the Rev. William Williams, first Bishop of Waiapu. The story of *Lucy* and her subsequent arrival in NZ is interesting, but that is for another time. My battle with *Lucy* as I said is an annual one, but this year I must face the reality of having to move her to a more suitable place in the garden, where she can indulge her wanton spreading behaviour and be able to show off her spectacular displays for all to enjoy. Now where did I put that bulldozer?.....

All the older varieties of roses were partially pruned after flowering, because they mostly resent the heavy pruning necessary to keep the modern roses in check. As they flower next year mainly on wood developed this season pruning after flowering encourages new growth, which has time to develop and harden before the onset of winter. A light feed would not go astray which I will do as soon as the rains come.

The Slips

This new area of the garden, is starting to develop well. Necessary to accommodate trials, overflow planting, trees in pots resting after providing displays for the main house, the new melonry and other ideas and experiments that the gardener thinks up in the long, wakeful night hours. This area has been developed outside the kitchen garden proper and is not generally open to visiting gazes. This is the gardeners 'fun' area where he can indulge himself in those horticultural fantasies and un-admittable follies.

Two serious developments in this area have been in the pipeline for some considerable time, gestation has been long and laboured, but they have finally seen the light, however they do need some work before they are launched on the unsuspecting visitor.

One is the 'fruit cage'. This is a frame a metre square built over a raised bed to house the *Blueberry* plants. The frame is covered in a small plastic mesh and is Bird proof. The gardener is determined to enjoy the fruits of his labours and after much thought the cage has been developed. The success or otherwise of this stratagem will be the subject of future bulletins. Also as *blueberries* enjoy acidic conditions, these plants can now be indulged to the fullest extent without affecting surrounding growth.

The second is the melonry, a dedicated area to the growth of melons (Water, Rock and Pie), and all other cucurbits. Again as with blueberries this family enjoy special growing conditions and much thought and experimentation is going into the development of this area.

The new kumara beds are doing well with healthy growth, however the proof of the pudding as they say will be in the eating. As this is the first time kumara have been grown by this gardener, there is a certain excitement and tension as the day for revealing the crop or otherwise approaches.

New beds have been developed in the last week also for the growing of the bearded Iris. Raised beds have been made to provide the correct growing conditions to grow on the tubers that are here in the garden already and to hopefully to grow on new varieties.

Also situated here is the home for old hens. Victoria and Fluffybottom, two of the original old girls, now live in the converted dog kennel, seeing out their days in the lap of luxury, protected from the advances of Robert the rooster and all the pressures of the main hen house.

I know you are all saying, what a silly old fool, but they have given sterling service in the interests of cake baking etc, now they deserve to enjoy their retirement.

The greenhouse

If one was to be strictly correct at the moment this should be called the hot house. It is almost unpleasant to work in here pricking out new plants and tending all the new growth that burgeons forth in such ideal conditions.

Every shelf is groaning with pots of young plants – aquilegia, passion fruit, rhubarb, lilies, strawberries, amaryllis and a collection of native trees that are being grown on for planting around the estate. Keeping everything watered and in good condition at the moment is a two hour job each day and cannot be shirked, because to do so would mean a desiccated collection of dried twigs the next day.

The time has finally been found to prick out the Christmas lily seedlings sown last year from seed collected from the lily garden. 48 new plants were pricked out before frustration, boredom and the heat drove the gardener to other cooler tasks. The other thousand seedlings ended up on the compost heap. There are only so many seedling of white Christmas lilies a man can use.

Among all the pots for outdoor planting is the collection of indoor plants that need to be kept in good condition should they be required for decoration indoors at any time.

The outdoor staging of the greenhouse has to be re-thought, a design fault on the gardener's part, not thinking of the sun's strength during the summer months. It is the plant equivalent of an oven grill. Certain death to any plant within minutes.

The ponds

I used the word foetid earlier in relation to the ponds, now if there was a stronger word it would certainly use it, with all the water that has been taken from the well to keep the garden going, the flow into the ponds has been severely limited. They are a brown stinking mess at the moment and are not to be approached without extreme caution and nose plugs. However the ducks continue to delight in using the water for their ablutions and drinking, I suppose beggars can't be choosers. The ducks seem to have learnt the lesson of the pukeko and have not bothered to try and raise any young lately, particularly after the last abortive attempt when eight ducklings were dealt to by the pukeko within the space of a couple of hours.

Recipe

I thought that the following recipe would hit the right spot at the moment. It certainly has proved popular with visitors in the past month.

Sinfully wicked, full of all those things that are bad for you, but are on top of your want list, indulge yourself just this once.

Fresh fruit ice cream

3 eggs separated	1 cup sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla extracts	300 ml cream

Beat egg yolks until creamy. Gradually add half the sugar beating continuously until mixture is thick and pale. Mix in vanilla. Beat cream to soft peaks and combine with yolk mixture. Beat egg whites to soft peaks. Gradually add remaining sugar, beating continuously until egg whites are thick and glossy. Fold 2 tablespoons of cream mixture into the whites to loosen and then gently fold in the remaining cream mixture. Gently mix through the fruit. Spoon into a covered container and freeze until firm.

Fresh fruit.: cut, slice or dice fruit of your choice, cook over a low heat until tender, add sugar to taste and allow to cool. Favourites include strawberries, blueberries, blackberries, peaches and mangoes.

Random thoughts

January and February have been difficult months, one way and another, but they are now past and one can move on with a renewed vision and sense of purpose. I was greatly buoyed by the many messages of cheer and goodwill over the holiday period which makes one realise that the garden and I have many kind and wonderful friends out there who wish us well. This support and kindness is such a precious thing. Thank you.

A great thing happened last weekend, three hives were delivered. They belong to John Laurent of Rocky Bay who has kindly agreed to place the hives here among the fruit trees in the lower orchard and adjacent to the kitchen garden. This satisfies a long held desire to have hives here and is a real positive move towards a really fully sustainable garden. Hopefully next year we may have on our pantry shelves a few jars of honey proudly bearing the label "from the garden at woodside house". More on the bees in the next letter.

I am enclosing for those within the borders of NZ a small packet of seeds collected from the sweet pea "Old spice painted lady" that I had great success with this year. It has a pale pink highly scented flower and a strong grower. This is the oldest developed sweet pea in existence and has been grown in England since 1737. These are a gift from this garden to yours as a way of saying thank you for your support.