

## EARLY DAYS IN GARDENING

It is hard to remember one's first experience of gardening, especially where it is as far back as the 1940s. I was aged 10 months when my father, knowing war was inevitable, joined the army as a territorial soldier in April 1939. He became a full-time soldier three months later and we saw very little of him for nearly 7 years (he was out of the UK for over 4 years, and hundreds of miles from where we lived when he was in the UK). My mother had had to give up her job when she married in September 1936, as was the convention until the Second World War. So there she was in 1939, not allowed to work, with a baby to look after (and another in 1942), hardly ever seeing her husband and not knowing whether he would ever come back. The Germans had mounted a sea blockade to stop our imports of food - they tried to starve us out. Food was rationed so there was every incentive to "grow your own". My mother grew vegetables in the back garden. My grandfather, who died before I was born, had had an allotment and I believe my mother acquired her skills from him – and passed some of them on to me. I like to think I have "allotment genes"!

As one might expect, as a youngster I was an enthusiastic helper in growing vegetables. I cannot now remember all that we grew, but I do remember potatoes and peas. I was very curious, wanting to experiment. I wondered what would be the result if I crossed a potato with a pea. So I made a hole right to the centre of a potato, popped a pea inside, and planted the potato. Both vegetables grew, firstly the pea, then the potato. Soon the potato swamped the pea and my experiment was over. I had failed to hybridise the potato and the pea. I don't recall how old I was at the time, maybe 6 or 7. But I do remember one crucial thing in those very early days when food was short – the concept of free food. I feel sure that one of the reasons for those growing their own fruit and vegetables today must be the concept of free food. As I grew up I continued to help my mother grow vegetables until I left home.

My next experience of growing vegetables was in Norfolk, where my wife and I lived in a caravan in an orchard with no neighbours – somewhat idyllic. The owner of the orchard had kept free-range hens in the orchard for years so the soil was very rich. The nettles were up to 8 feet high. I cleared the nettles and planted potatoes, many potatoes. I knew that potatoes were the best to clear the soil of weeds. The crop was simply massive. As soon as the crop was harvested we had to move to Lincolnshire.

After 9 months in Lincolnshire we moved to Singapore. Most days there the temperature was 95°F, the relative humidity was 95% and the heavens opened at about 4.0 pm each afternoon for about 20 minutes. I thought, what an ideal climate for rapid growth! I cleared a small patch of lawn for an experiment. I sowed French beans and cauliflowers. Within 5 days the beans were a foot high and about to flower. The cauliflowers also had very rapid growth. Then, disaster. As soon as the beans flowered the plants collapsed and died. A similar fate befell the cauliflowers. They just could not take the climate. I had thought that since the seeds were on sale locally they would grow locally – Neat, Plausible, and Wrong!

A subsequent gardening experience was in the suburbs of Paris, where we had a small garden. For a few years I successfully grew outdoor tomatoes (variety Marmande). I also contacted the main nurseryman in France for asparagus, Le Blevenec, and bought several plants. They were of the variety "asperge d'Argenteuil" – a real winner. They grew very well in our garden in Paris. A few years later we moved to Norfolk in the depths of winter and I took my asparagus plants with me. They were huge monsters – imagine giant spiders a yard or so across each with a hundred legs. I planted them in the sandy soil of Norfolk where they grew very well indeed for a few years. Having more space in Norfolk I also grew a range of the more common vegetables. Then came a move to Buckinghamshire in August. I took my precious asparagus plants but.....they all died. They did not take kindly to being transplanted in August. That was in 1973, when we acquired our present house and I acquired my allotment. The latter had been left derelict for at least 10 years, chock-full of couch grass, with nettles and brambles to keep the couch grass company. I scythed down the weeds, raked them up into 10 huge piles and put a match to them. It was August, everything was extremely dry and I thought the

gigantic flames would result in little smoke. However, I had not reckoned with some moisture still being in the straw, and vast clouds of water vapour and smoke enveloped that part of the village. For several hours I was not very popular.....

I then tried to dig my allotment, to turn over the soil to a spade's depth to bury the couch grass roots. Even jumping on the spade with all my weight I could make no impression on the earth, which was a mat of couch grass roots in soil hardened by an August drought. So I hired a large commercial rotovator and went up and down for 12 hours. Even with that mechanical aid I penetrated the soil only to a depth of 2 inches, but that was enough to get me through the couch grass roots, then I could dig. It took me 3 years to dig the whole plot, growing crops progressively as I cleared the ground. The soil was excellent – a foot of clay loam on top of clay. I have always been completely organic, using no chemicals whatsoever, so my allotment soil has been completely organic since at least 1963.

In the year 2000 I was introduced to no-dig gardening by the Good Gardeners' Association ([www.goodgardeners.org.uk](http://www.goodgardeners.org.uk)) and have not dug since. My crops have been better and there do not seem to be any drawbacks to the no-dig method – apart from ever-proliferating chickweed. Since acquiring my allotment in 1973 I have had sufficient land to grow all I want. I am able to experiment to my heart's content. I have even gone back to “asperge d'Argenteuil”, acquiring some seed in 1987. Most of those plants are still growing, producing large quantities of the most tasty asparagus you can imagine. I continue to experiment. Perhaps one day I will hybridise the potato and the pea!

Good gardening!

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