

## THIS AND THAT – 3

### WINNERS

For many years I have not succeeded with outdoor tomatoes. I have tried several varieties which said, on the packet, that they were wonderful – except that I could not find success with them. I gave up several times and did not even try for a few years. Then, at last, I found a real winner. In 2015 and 2016 I have had very good crops from **OUTDOOR GIRL**. This variety is a bush tomato, so one does not have to de-sideshoot. It develops about 10 stems each of height 30 inches. It has a profusion of smallish bright red fruit measuring 1 to 1.5 inches diameter. I put in a stout stake near to the root and then pass string round the 10 stems to prevent any of them falling to the ground. That is all the maintenance that is required, apart from weeding. As with all outdoor tomatoes, as well as potatoes, when the potato blight strikes in late summer the tomato plants will wither and die and the fruit become mottled and unusable. But that is the case with all outdoor tomatoes, so one cannot criticise Outdoor Girl on that count. The main trick, therefore, is to start them off early, plant them out as soon as the danger from frost is over (and perhaps covering them with fleece for a period), in order that the harvest will be long and plentiful before the dreaded potato blight strikes, as it seems to do every year. The variety is not F1, so I shall be keeping some seeds for using in future years. The proof of the pudding is in the eating and I can say, with absolute conviction, that the taste is simply wonderful.

Another real winner is the strawberry **EMILY**. Again, I have tried various varieties of strawberry over the years, usually growing three varieties simultaneously to see which was the best for my soil. The out and out winner is Emily, which has very large fruit of excellent colour and fantastic taste. Each plant gives a large crop. I grow them on the allotment and in the garden in landscape material with a hole cut for plants grown about 18 inches apart each way. The landscape material keeps away the weeds, keeps moisture in and stops the strawberries sitting on the soil. I put fleece over the ones on the allotment at the end of February to bring the crop on early (usually about 6 weeks early) and to keep the birds off. In the garden I put fine-mesh plastic netting over to keep the birds off – and to ensure they crop after the ones on the allotment so that all my strawberries do not come at once.

### SILENT SUMMER

One of the joys of summer is dealing with the insects which have impaled themselves onto the front of my car. After a few days' hot sun they are well and truly baked on and difficult to remove. Once, with a hot pressure wash I removed the paint as well as the insects – a costly error. However, in 2015 and 2016, when driving in France and the UK, there were no insects stuck to the front of my car. None. Have the farmers finally won and virtually exterminated all insects with their insecticides?? It seems that way, so how are the farmers' crops going to be pollinated? I know that for some crops, especially fruit, the farmers hire beehives to ensure good pollination, but what about vast fields of wheat, maize, barley and other crops? They all need pollinating by insects. And what about the birds which feed on insects? Are they dying out also? In her famous book "Silent Spring" of 1962, Rachel Carson drew the World's attention to the destruction caused by intensive farming. Now we have perhaps the culmination of the destruction of nature – "Silent Summer".

What does that mean for our gardens and allotments? They are havens for wildlife where insects and birds can live happily, away from the fields drenched with insecticides. However, I have the feeling that there have been fewer insects in my garden and on my allotment in 2015 and 2016 – and **certainly** far fewer birds. In winter, working on my allotment, I used to have a robin which came right up to me, and sometimes hopped between my feet, picking up insects which had been revealed by my slight disturbance of the soil. Also, there was a blackbird which, after clucking furiously at my arrival on **its** territory, again came within a foot or two of me eagerly seeking insects I had exposed. No more; I cannot remember my robin and blackbird appearing in 2015 or 2016. As for pollination of my fruit and vegetables those past two years, it is hard to say whether it has been bad. There were no honey bees in 2015 (but there were in 2016) and there were some bumble bees. There have been a few wasps and the rare sighting of a hoverfly, and some crops, especially apples, had poor crops, but it

is hard to be definite since there are usually seasonal variations. All the same, if insects are being wiped out on farmers' fields that can only be bad for amateur gardeners in the long run.

## RODENTS

I have suffered from mice digging up sprouting broad bean seeds and glis glis eating dwarf French beans which were just ripe for picking. I saw a wild rabbit on my allotment once, but have not suffered damage from bunnies. I suffer from squirrels in the garden but not on the allotment. I often have rats setting up home in my compost heaps but, whilst it is distasteful to have them around I am not aware of them damaging my crops. Some gardeners suffer from Coypu (a large South American rat which escaped from zoos). So, for those who suffer in various ways from various rodents, is there a solution?

Yes there is: dog pee. Apparently, if you pour dog pee round the perimeter of your garden or allotment plot it will deter rodents, which cannot stand dogs. Thus you will have to train Fido to pee into your watering can. Rather than chastise Fido for peeing elsewhere, a reward system is recommended where a little treat is given every time Fido has success. Fido will soon cotton on and will pee enthusiastically to gain his treat. Of course there is a quantity problem since you will require a lot of pee to go round a plot, and after heavy rain you might have to repeat the dose. So that calls for a second reward system: give Fido a bowl of water and give him a reward every time he drinks it dry. Fido will soon cotton on and become an avid waterholic, making repeated visits to the watering can to gain extra treats. This means that you have to be present a lot of the time to hand out treats to Fido doing his bit to help with rodent protection. Since some dogs suffer from arthritis as they get old it may be wise to avoid tap water in hard-water areas since that is thought to be very bad for osteoarthritis. So water from a water butt, or, failing that, bottled water may be best for Fido. Of course, the larger the dog the better, so, after the public have read this article there may be a long-term migration from chihuahuas to Great Danes. Therefore, when Fido has gone to that great kennel in the sky, upgrade to a larger model!

Good gardening!

MIKE MASON