## THIS AND THAT

### Watercress – Triffids?

I grow a wide range of vegetables, but not all. For years I had longed to grow watercress. All the received wisdom was that watercress required running water and there is little of that in the Chilterns, never mind on my allotment or in the garden. So I was a frustrated non-grower of watercress. Then by chance in a friend's greenhouse I spotted watercress. I enquired and was told that if it was watered regularly it would grow. Bingo! I searched and found some watercress seed and sowed them in compost in March 2007. When they germinated I potted them on into 8 x 5 = 40 cells (individual plastic trays of the kind where one can ease the young plants out with a ball of soil when they are big enough). I watered them whenever I could remember, which was not often, and generally neglected them because of other priorities. They became overgrown in the tiny amount of compost round their roots. Much to my surprise they all survived so I realised they were tough little plants.

In mid-May 2007 I planted my tomato plants in the greenhouse and set the automatic watering system going so that each tomato plant had a water outlet just near its root (the water comes on for only 5 minutes per day). I decided to plant out my watercress plants at the same time and grouped them round the roots of the tomatoes so that they also could benefit from the automatic watering system. I then neglected them again and left them to their own devices. I went away on holiday.

When I came back from holiday I was absolutely amazed. The watercress had taken over the greenhouse. They have a trailing habit and had put down roots as they advanced across the soil. They kept growing and eventually formed a mat covering the entire tomato bed – and about one foot deep! Talk about triffids! We cropped them often and they were delicious. They continued to grow throughout the winter. There was far more than we could eat. Since I had too many and to show them who was boss I uprooted and put in the compost heap about three quarters of them. I felt that, in competing with the tomatoes, they were partly responsible for my poor tomato crop in 2007. I had never had a poor tomato crop before but another reason could have been the much reduced amount of sunshine in June/July 2007.

By mid-May 2008 the watercress were continuing to grow. They provided a welcome addition to winter salads. We cropped them throughout the winter and, with the warmer weather, they put on a spurt of growth. They put down roots as they went, so they appeared to be everlasting (rather than just perennial). And they had not been watered for 7 months – so much for their needing running water. And seedlings were growing everywhere - the triffids were back!

In conclusion, one can easily grow watercress without running water. The plants are very tough, grow rapidly and will take over the place if allowed to. They taste delicious and are a very worthwhile crop.

### Organic?

Farmers in the UK have access to a total of 447 pesticides for their crops and use a total of 31,000 tons of them. This is chemical farming on a massive scale – and further chemicals are used as herbicides and fertilisers. Many of the 447 pesticides can be highly toxic to the environment. The Government's Pesticide Review Committee found in 2006 that 44% of non-organic fruit and vegetable samples contained pesticides. AND PEOPLE EAT THEM!! Dietary exposure to pesticides used in non-organic farming, including long-term exposure and multiple residues, are linked to human health risks. UK citizens have, on average, traces of over 30 man-made chemicals in their bodies.

So let's all buy "organic" fruit and vegetables from the supermarket. That will enable us to avoid the horrible chemicals won't it? Unfortunately, no. There are no fewer than nine certification bodies in the UK which, separately, authorise growers to label their produce as organic. However, eight pesticides can be applied to crops in the UK and these crops are still permitted to be marketed as "organic". The eight pesticides are: copper compounds, sulphur, rotenone, fatty acid potassium salt,

pyrethroids, iron (III) orthophosphate, paraffin oil and pyrethrum. Where the supermarkets in the UK are selling food from other countries in the EU then their "organic" pesticides include azadirachtin, quassia, lime sulphur, lecithin and plant oils. The supermarkets don't tell you that, do they! To be fair, the eight pesticides authorised in the UK have been chosen to minimise the residues in the crops and to minimise the impact on human health, but pesticides are still used and the whole labelling of produce as "organic" is a con, in that the impression is conveyed that "organic" vegetables and fruit are grown naturally with no artificial chemicals at all. To be fair again, most "organic" vegetables and fruit are probably free of pesticide residues, but that cannot be, and is not, guaranteed. Even so, in 2005 only 3.9% of agricultural land in the EU was farmed organically. And what about genetically-modified organisms (GMOs)? To be classified as organic, food must contain at least 95% organic ingredients but can contain up to 0.9% GMOs (with effect from 1st January 2009). So your "organic" food from the supermarket may contain 0.9% GMOs. It will not be labelled as such!

So let's grow our own, not use any pesticides at all, and accept that the insects, fungi, bacteria etc will take a proportion of the crop. That will ensure that the food we eat will not harm us and will provide us with all the nutrients our bodies need, won't it? Well, unfortunately, no. Even if vegetables and fruit are truly organic you could be missing out on vital nutrients and trace elements. If your soil is deficient in trace elements the crops may also be deficient, even though they appear to be growing well. What can be done? The Good Gardeners' Association has a new slogan – MOVING BEYOND ORGANIC. With organic crops the emphasis is on excluding poisonous chemicals. The Good Gardeners' Association goes one step further and puts the emphasis on including the vital trace elements, vitamins and proteins our bodies need. This is achieved by a combination of the application of manure and compost, the complete absence of man-made chemicals - and the no-dig method of cultivation so that the essential mycorrhizal fungi in the soil can flourish and play their part in bringing trace elements, etc to the roots of the crops. That may seem like Utopia, or even nirvana, but YOU can achieve it if you grow your own.

## Five a Day

We are constantly reminded that we should eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables per day. But what does that mean? It means at least 400 grams per day – and that's nearly one pound in real money. It's quite a lot, so a visit to a posh restaurant where you are served gourmet food consisting of one pea and a minuscule carrot will not count. No, 400 grams is a serious amount, and that means after the vegetables have been peeled, the apples cored etc. And no potatoes – they do not count! The average consumption in the UK, after all the propaganda, is less than three portions a day. What is yours?

## 2007 Vegetables

We had strange weather in 2007, with a hot dry April then torrential rain leading to flooding in June and July (with much reduced sunshine). It was generally cooler than normal. I was into my seventh year of no-dig gardening and could, despite the difficult weather, report record crops for some varieties of vegetables. I had a carrot weighing 3 lb 0.9 oz, a turnip at 2 lb 7 oz, an outdoor cucumber at 6 lb, a swede at 3 lb 7 oz and a parsnip at 2 lb 9 oz. There was no sign of the no-dig method reducing the quantity and quality of my crops, quite the contrary.

Good gardening!

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