

The Notice Board

What's On Locally

Hergest Croft gardens, near Kington, have now reopened for the 2011 season. They are open in March on Saturdays & Sundays, from 12 noon – 5.30pm

A Garden Market will be held in Leominster, at the Corn Square on Tuesday 15th March, 9am to 3pm

South West Shropshire Gardening Club are holding their next meeting on the 23rd March, at 7.30pm at Lydbury North Village Hall. "Summer Garden Delights" is the talk, by Vere Cattermole

Raffle, Refreshments.
Visitors £2

Book review
The thoughtful Gardener
by Robin Lane-Fox

Published by Particular Books in 2010

The serious-minded Robin (he is an ancient history fellow and tutor at New College, Oxford as well as Garden Master and garden writer) has collected together some of his writings for the Financial Times into this interesting and occasionally challenging book. A good book to dip into from the bedside, as each chapter is quite short and addresses different plants or garden ideas. An example of his prose would include the following statement about grasses, written, presumably, slightly tongue in cheek: "she is still hoping for a sharp frost over Christmas to make it (a bed of grasses) look like the glistening photographs in her colour books of garden design".

He covers many different shrubs and plants, and there is a useful index at the back in case you are in search of information on a particular item. All in all, a good read even if the "thoughtful" of the title is the subject of slightly too many puns.

Marilyn Tippett



All Nature seems at work. Slugs leave their lair
The bees are stirring, birds are on the wing,
And Winter slumbering in the open air,
Wears on his smiling face a dream of spring.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge



February meeting report



As Mick Westrip told members in his February talk on The Trials of Market Gardening, it's all very well gaining experience of growing whilst working for others but sooner or later, you're itching to start your own business; and this is exactly what Mick has been doing for the last three years nearly nine hundred feet up at Rhos -y-Meirch. He grows about 45 different vegetables, using polytunnels before planting out in 'the big field,' and sells all his produce within a radius of six miles, except for the vegetables taken by a shop in Ludlow.

Mick has drained, limed, rabbit-wired and 'green-manured' the land – every inch of which he uses for sequential sowing and 'under-sowing', the latter so that when a crop is finished, he has clover, mustard and rye coming up to enrich the exhausted soil by fixing the nitrogen and warding off disease by fumigating it. Mick's wife, Alice, prepares bunches of flowers and the pair are hoping to have eggs for sale in the near future. Mick makes compost between straw bales and though he uses some farm muck currently, he is intending eventually to rely solely on compost, thus keeping to a closed system to ensure the quality of the produce and the purity of the organic enterprise.

Just as important to Mick are the open days, when he has a chance to persuade others, especially the younger generation, of the importance and the long-term benefits of growing your own food and 'going organic.' He is involved in the Community Supported Agriculture scheme so popular in Germany and America and just beginning to take off in Britain; and when I buy vegetables from Mick's market stall in Knighton car park every Thursday, I see some customers in the queue brandishing the vouchers issued in little books, their commitment a sure sign that Mick's hard work and enthusiasm are paying off!

Mary Comer

Following on from Mick's talk in February, here is a little more information on Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) for those of you interested in the idea.

Community supported agriculture is a partnership between farmers and the local community, providing mutual benefits and reconnecting people to the land where their food is grown. It began in the early 1960s in Germany, Switzerland and Japan as a response to concerns about food safety and the urbanisation of agricultural land. In Europe, many of the CSA style farms were inspired by the economic ideas of Rudolf Steiner and experiments with community agriculture took place on farms using biodynamic agriculture (emphasising balancing the holistic development and interrelationship of the soil, plants, animals as a self-nourishing system without external input). CSAs generally focus on the production of high quality foods for a local community, often using organic or biodynamic farming methods, and a shared risk membership–marketing structure. The core design includes developing a cohesive consumer group that is willing to fund a whole season's budget in order to get quality foods. CSA theory says that the more a farm embraces whole-farm, whole-budget support, the more it can focus on quality and reduce the risk of food waste or financial loss. This latter element is particularly important given the small size of most CSA initiatives.

ON GROWING MINT

I enjoy growing herbs. Some, such as hyssop, I grow just for the pleasure of attracting bees to their flowers. Of course if herbs are grown for the kitchen then they should be cut back before they flower to keep them in an edible state. Well, that's the convention, but when was I restricted to being a follower of the conventions?

In particular I like having lots of mint to choose from. The new growth gives added flavour to young peas and new potatoes in the cooking. Freshly made mint sauce, I find to be one of the pleasures when eating roast lamb. Sprinkle a little sugar onto the leaves before chopping finely. Add a little vinegar and you have mint sauce in a few minutes. Look at the packets of herbal teas available for those wanting caffeine-free drinks and one of the most popular is peppermint tea. Look how often mint is used in other products, especially spearmint, though I doubt if I could make my own toothpaste.

Some time ago I bought one of those glass teapots inside which is suspended a metal sieve. The box called it an infuser teapot. It can be used with home-grown freshly picked herbs and I have tried it with lemon balm and of course with mint. So far I grow spearmint, ginger mint, apple mint, pepper mint, eau-de-cologne mint and eastern mint. Each is grown in its own tub and with a label, though these tend to disappear or become illegible over time. Distinguishing amongst so many no longer labelled can be a problem. The apple mint is distinctive with a furry leaf and the ginger mint has an attractively variegated leaf. I also have water mint growing in one of my pools, not that I should want to eat that.

I have a problem though. Mint is a hungry feeder so the compost in which it grows needs regular changing. Its roots like to be kept cool. That rules out using plastic troughs. Now I use wooden tubs or large ceramic pots. When I empty a tub of mint I find that the roots are travelling in circles around the inner edges of the container. Are they telling me it is trying to get out? I am beginning to think that it would much prefer to grow in the open garden.

I have really good soil here at Myrtle Cottage. It has been gardened over many years and is in good heart. I have always feared, from past experience, that if I grow a rampant plant in my garden in a short time it will take over. This has happened so often I should know better than to try it now. However, I am about to take the plunge and devote most of one bed to growing mints. So, one more mistake to all the others I have made over the years, is about to take place.

I read in Jekka McVicar's book "Jekka's Complete Herb Book" that the way to prevent mint from rampaging all round the garden is to dig up the plants every few years and divide them. Care must be taken as each bit of root left in the soil will generate a new plant. (Sounds like the couch grass and ground elder I already grow- unwilling of course)

She also says one may wish to construct a bottomless container set into the soil to a depth of 12 inches to keep the roots under control. Perhaps I should try this, particularly as, she says, that different mints should not be grown close to one another as they risk losing their individual flavours and scents.

Mint can be dried or frozen for use over the winter. I have tried dropping finely chopped herbs into water in the ice-making sections of the freezer. These can then be used later in soups etc. However, I then forget that they are there. You may perhaps be better organised than that.

I should welcome readers' experience of growing mint in the open garden.

Rosemary Naylor



The March garden: tasks and ideas

At least the soil has started to dry out, and we can begin the Spring tasks that we have been putting off for some time. The soil is more able to bear our weight without compacting, although in very wet situations it is still best to use a board to garden from.

When tidying up your clumps of herbaceous perennials, don't forget that some need dividing every other year, whilst others will wait for up to 5 years before they show signs of needing dividing. Use the outside of the clumps to replant, and if you have too many pieces left over, bring them along to the plant stall at the Club and share your treasures with other gardeners.

Snowdrops are beginning to die down now and some people think that this is the best time to move them, I am not of that persuasion, and nor are many experts. Leave them to the summer

when they are dormant, (assuming you can remember where they are!) and they will establish much better - you don't move daffodils in March, now do you?

In the vegetable garden, you will already have planted your garlic and hopefully be seeing signs of it sprouting. Shallots and onion sets can now go in; you may need to net them to avoid the blackbirds pulling them out as soon as you put them in. You can also risk some broad beans on sheltered areas or in raised beds, especially if you cover them with fleece or enviromesh.

Indoors, now is the time to divide your houseplants just as they start to grow. You can even take cuttings now, as long as you don't over-water them, and cover them with a plastic bag to keep them in a humid condition.

Marilyn Tippett

Houseplant wisdom

- the best light for houseplants is good indirect light from an east window or set back slightly from south or west windows
 - the best time for taking cuttings is in the Spring or late Summer
 - most house plants are more tolerant of running dry than too wet
 - spider plants are very good for "mopping up" chemicals in the home and office
 - not all plants need repotting regularly-some will last 10 years or more in the same pot if fed and watered
 - begonias are the most popular houseplants in the world!
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Plant Profile: Celandine (*Ranunculus ficaria*)

Why would anyone want to profile this pest of our gardens, I hear you asking yourselves? Well, quite apart from being a native wildflower, there are some very pretty hybrids which certainly merit a place in the garden.

Lesser Celandine is one of the first flowering plants to appear at the end of the winter, being thus very welcome. The plant itself is small (5-30cm tall) with dark, heart-shaped leaves. The flowers, which appear on a short stalk, form a carpet of yellow stars in woodland, under hedgerows, in ditches and along streams. It is found on damp soils in the pH range of 4 to 8, but is more commonly found in pHs of 6 to 6.5. Lesser Celandine is an important early nectar source but, in wet and windy weather, the petals close. Lesser Celandine is a perennial plant. The tops of the plants die back after flowering, but the roots continue to live and grow under the ground.

These are actually bulbs or tubers, which store the plant's energy until the next year. Celandines will also seed about of course, so must be sited carefully in the cultivated garden.

If you think the celandine a weed, have a look at *Ranunculus ficaria* ssp *chrysocephalus* 'Pencarn', which has silvery backs to its leaves, "Brazen Hussy", which has very dark brown/maroon leaves, or perhaps Whiskey Double Yellow, which is just as the name suggests.

Celandine grow very well in our damp soil so why not give the cultivars a try?