

July In My Garden

. . . . Blue-necked wheat sways yellow to the sheaf,
Green-yellow bursts from the copse the laughing yaffle;
Sharp as a sickle is the edge of shade and shine.
Earth in her heart laughs, looking at the heavens,
Thinking of the harvest, I look and think of mine.

FRANCIS THOMPSON

The garden should have a sense of luxuriance at this time of year, with annuals and bedding plants reaching their climax, roses over-blown with blooms. It's the strawberry, currant and gooseberry picking season, with apples, pears and other fruits swelling and colouring, giving promise of more abundance to come. As the year matures into high summer we cross our fingers hoping for warm evenings and long, hot, lazy days. Sadly we are often disappointed.

I have two large pans full of mesembryanthemums in full flower. Only opening when the sun shines, they have a rather cheap, plastic appearance and you need to be vigilant, constantly dead heading. The instant you neglect them they immediately stop flowering and run to seed. However, on a sunny day their bright cheerfulness lifts your heart and makes you want to smile back at them.

Thistles grow all over the garden in the grass between the shrubs and trees. I welcome them. Called Dashels locally these tall, spiny plants with purple flowers attract many butterflies, bees and hoverflies as well as being stately and architectural in their own way. Finches and other seed-eating birds visit the garden each autumn, feasting upon their seeds. I have seen flocks of 100 goldfinches passing through.

Evening primroses, *Oenithera biennis*, can be rather a harsh yellow during the daytime before the midday sun shrivels up any open blooms. But in the dimpsy light of a July evening as "the moon walks the night in her silver shoon" new flowers open and take on a delicately soft primrose colour. They are biennial, making just a rosette of leaves in their first season, then the following year growing up to 5 ft. tall, flowering and dying. Seeds for my plants were originally collected by a lake up in the Fragaras Mountains of Romania, on a blessed day fishing for carp and drinking wine.

Buff Tip moths are attracted to the outside light. This grey, brown and cream moth looks very conspicuous against the white walls of my cottage, but it is perfectly camouflaged on a lichen-covered oak branch, one of the main food plants for its caterpillars. Other moths come too, masses of Yellow Underwings, chestnut coloured Oak Eggars and russet and fawn Poplar Hawk Moths.

Spiraea japonica "Anthony Waterer" makes a pretty little shrub when correctly pruned about 18 inches high. The flattened heads of tiny flowers are a sort of rose madder colour, being neither quite dark pink nor light red. It has a curious habit of sending up occasional variegated or even sometimes pure white growths that I have often tried to propagate from, but they always revert back to the same colour of the parent plant. A light clipping over at the end of the month as the blooms fade usually induces a further flowering in October.

This is the time of year when the garden is best viewed in the cool of the evening or freshness of early morning. At the height of a July day, with very short shadows, the brightness of the light drains the colours giving a rather unflattering look. July is the month when we rest on our laurels (metaphorically), admiring the hard work of previous seasons. Already in the back of our minds thoughts turn toward autumn.