

In My Garden – October

*“Listen! the wind is rising,
and the air is wild with leaves,
We have had our summer evenings,
Now for October eves!”*

Humbert Wolf

I could feel as soon as I walked out this crisp morning (Oct 7th) it was easily cold enough for frost and indeed my car was quite encrusted. Even the moon, a perfect waning half, was still brightly shining at half past seven in the morning.

I just cannot help myself from buying the pumpkins offered for sale in the village, every time I am passing a couple more are irresistible. I do find the taste rather too boring (unless I use loads of garlic and too much salt) but as a jolly autumnal decoration around the front of my cottage they enlighten the dreariest day. Their cheerful glow lasts a good six weeks until increasingly hard frosts gradually implode them like poorly cooked sponge cakes. The seeds are delicious though, scooped out, removed of pith, then slowly roasted with a pinch of salt until crispy and light brown. Just eat them whole, they are highly nutritious too.

There are many ghosts in my garden. Not the spectral apparitions that moan and rattle their chains, but the ghosts of plants and dreams. Ghost memories haunt me as I go about my work; remembrances of my beautiful Mexican pine, so strong and vigorous, lost after the winter of 2010; the expensive mimosa naively planted when I first arrived in 2006. It grew so well that long, hot summer (remember those?1), but was frosted stone dead by Christmas; “Polar Bear”, an exquisite August-flowering Rhododendron with great white scented trumpet flowers rivalling any lily, destroyed by a dog in 2009; my Chilean fire tree, *Embothrium coccineum*, that died last year and my beloved monkey puzzle tree also lost after 2010. As I go about my garden business phantom projects and schemes that never came to fruition, thwarted by time or finance, also frequent my thoughts – great ideas that shot like hot sparks from a bonfire, only to fall back down to earth as dry, cold ashes.

I would love to grow the potato vine, *Solanum crispum*. It is a vigorous climber that has pretty mauve flowers with pointed yellow centres like a flowering potato plant, but it would be hopelessly unhardy with me. Instead I grow woody nightshade, *Solanum dulcamara*. It's a native plant, so bone hardy, and the flowers, although a little smaller, are a pleasing shade of Gothic purple. Like its South American cousin, it is in bloom most of the summer. It is a sort of rambling climber, pulling itself up any support offered, then during September and October it finishes in a blaze of red fruits. These shiny red berries in hanging clusters look so obviously poisonous they give the plant a slightly witchy, sinister look. My parents started growing and collecting *Streptocarpus* nearly 40 years ago. Known as Cape Primroses they are shade loving house plants related to African Violets and Gloxinia. In those days you were limited to standard blue, pink or white. Gradually new varieties came on the market and now they come in a whole range of shapes and shades and types of bloom. Two that I inherited have survived – Lara, a small-flowered pale pink and Red rose, a larger flowered deep claret. They will thrive on a north-facing windowsill, so long as the compost is allowed to dry out in between waterings and they are never given water from above. Generous sprays of blooms appear from August right through to November, a lot of reward for not much effort.

A walk down the lane in bright sunshine just after heavy showers reveals a sparkling wonderland. The sun is much lower now but still strong and bright enough to illuminate every droplet of water, refracting prism-like as if all twigs, stems and leaves are covered in rhinestones, diamante and Swarovski. The hedgerow plants are still mostly carrying their gaudy coloured bounty of fruits and seeds. It is almost as if Mother Nature has decided to celebrate her own abundance and fertile plenty by vajazzling herself.