

In My Garden – August

"I trust in Nature for the stable laws of beauty and utility. Spring shall plant and Autumn garner to the ends of time."

Robert Browning

There is an awareness on the 1st of September, a consciousness or a sense of something different that was absent on the 31st of August. It is as if the arrival of crane-flies (even after 28 years they still remind me of going back to school), the high gloss French polish smoothness of conkers or picking blackberries has bridged some unseen divide, as if all of a sudden an invisible hand has begun to pull us along the road into autumn.

I order bulbs in September. I have a real yearning, a powerful urge and a strong desire for them, as many as possible. From the initial arousal as the provocative new catalogue arrives and I avidly leaf through the titillating pages to the lust and hunger of the actual ordering; the stimulating fervour of red tulips, the wanton passion of pink hyacinths, the raunchy wickedness of a blue iris and an alluring sensual rich purple crocus. Then there is next month's foreplay of planting that will hold me in a state of anticipation until the climax next spring when I am totally satisfied and all my garden's erogenous zones have been fully gratified with a new season's shapes and colours. So, why only have shades of grey when a whole rainbow of excitement awaits.

Ever since at the age of 14 when I grafted a tomato onto a potato have been fascinated by the craft. Last year I successfully grafted a particularly strongly pink flowered hawthorn growing in a field below the village hall onto a rootstock of the common white flowered variety. I used a type of graft called budding where you cut a T shape into the stem of the rootstock then carefully peel back the bark and insert a bud sliced off from your chosen scion. It is then bound up tightly with tape, and if the union is successful will sprout and grow the following spring. Plants can sometimes produce sports. These are random shoots that have different flowers or leaves or growth habit to the original parent plant. One of my pale pink Queen Elizabeth roses has produced a sport with smaller dark mauve flowers, and I have just budded it onto some wild rose rootstocks in the hope I might raise my own rose variety, we shall see.

I was just preparing to set about a large patch of willow herb with strimmer and spray when what I thought were those ubiquitous and wickedly evil brown slugs climbing over stem and leaf actually turned out to be caterpillars from the Elephant Hawk Moth. The caterpillars start of bright pea green but then they turn brown ready to camouflage themselves with the soil as they prepare to pupate. The adult moths are the same fuschia pink and green as the willow herb plants themselves. This moth gets its name from the elephantine behaviour of the caterpillars, who when relaxed extend their heads out, but when attacked retract into a more threatening knob shape which is then waved in an aggressive side-to-side posture, highlighting prominent eye-shaped markings in the hope of deterring a predator.

Along the lane near my cottage orpine is flowering. It is a species of Sedum similar to and resembling closely our familiar garden ice plant. It has some strange common names; frog's stomach, harping Johnny and witches' money bags! Actually I see that the name Sedum no longer exists, the botanists have decided that the name from now on is changed to Hylotelephium, so that is another one to relearn. The rosy crimson flowers in flattened umbel-shaped heads are an important late nectar source for bees and butterflies.

September is the time when we are harvesting though it is nature's time to sow as seeds and fruits ripen and disperse themselves. It is the season when we hoard the excesses of summer; bags of frozen produce start filling our freezers and jars of preserves begin appearing on pantry shelves, loads of wood have been ordered too and thoughts turn to colder seasons as we prepare for winter.

Andrew the Gardener