

Up from Woolridge Cross

I expect I'm not the only one to miss Andrew the Gardener's beautifully written and varied monthly pieces. This isn't an attempt to carry on from where he left off, as I don't have anything like his expertise. But the Editor's request for new material set me thinking about life in this part of rural Devon, and what it means to live in – or in my case just outside – a village. It makes for a stronger sense of the seasons, of the effects of weather and the comings and goings of wildlife, than most urban dwellers experience. Having lived in cities for most of my working life, I feel fortunate to have countryside immediately on my doorstep.

The window where I work looks out on a rather untidy garden-space, once the lower portion of a farmyard with a floor of hard-packed stones. The Pickards, who farmed here from the 1940s until Frank retired in the late 70s and my mother bought the house, created a lawn by bringing in topsoil, and separated it off with a hedge of *Lonicera Nitida* from the farmyard proper, where the cows shuffled down to their shippons twice a day. I used to visit the farm as a child, and was deeply impressed that each cow knew her own stall, and her place in the cow-hierarchy – Honeysuckle, followed by her brown and white speckled daughter, and the lesser ladies in their turn: autocratic old Honeysuckle would swing her horns if one of the others dreamed of pushing past. I also remember the bellowing protests when a cow once thought she might try out a milking-stall to which she had no claim.

The fact that the old yard underlies the front garden brings its own problems. It's almost impossible to dig a hole more than a few inches deep. And any prolonged rain, such as we had for so much of last year, turns the lawn into a kind of sliding skin of turf and soil. The dog throws divots from every paw. And once the moles get in they have no "down" option: instead they track endlessly to and fro just under the surface till it hardly bears the name of "lawn" at all.

Despite the stony subsurface, my mother managed to excavate holes for a white lilac on one side of the lawn, a rugosa rose in the middle, and various other shrubs around the edges. Most of the plants I love best are ones that my mother grew, or tried to grow and failed (with much mourning) – flowers planted among the cultivated ones, like the yellow flag iris she successfully grew for years, despite not being able to provide the boggy conditions that it favours.

Unfortunately, because she never expected to live here so long, Mum put her best-loved shrubs close to the house, without considering their eventual size. A yellow scented azalea grows a mere 18 inches from the front wall, one arm of it now rising 8 feet (luckily, to the left of the window); the rest of the bush has had to be cut savagely and more or less bent double to keep it from blocking out all daylight. And a glorious philadelphus, slap in front of another downstairs window, can now only be clipped using a stepladder. In the last 3 years, since moving back here, I have had to be brutal to some of my mother's overgrown favourites. Thomas Hardy's rueful lines have often come to my mind:

I set every tree in my June-time
And now they obscure the sky.

Weather and other natural forces have helped. In the frost in my first winter the Pickards' *Lonicera* hedges – which over the decades had bulged in all directions like dark green dough – suddenly cried quits. Or nearly: months later, when I finally began cutting away their dense dead twigs, I found that some of the woody stems were springing again with glossy growth. So now the garden is bordered partly by

this (surely the most useful and most boring of hedging plants) and partly by newly-installed rose bushes, and two rose arches. And where the hedge had swelled several feet thick there is now room for a flower border.

A much more insidious natural force, the dreaded honey-fungus, is slowly claiming the two massive oak trees opposite the house (happily, just out of range of hitting it, if they fell). Some branches have a green mane of polypody ferns, rooted in a kind of trench that the rot has created all along their top surfaces. Despite much lopping by a tree-surgeon two years ago, November's gales brought down another vast limb. The tree is diminished, but the garden will regain much-needed southern light.