

In My Garden, February

“The gardener digs in another time, without past or future, beginning or end. A time that does not cleave the day with rush hours, lynch breaks, the last bus home. As you walk in the garden you pass into this time – the moment of entering can never be remembered. Around you the landscape lies transfigured. Here is the Amen beyond the prayer”.

DEREK JARMEN

Winter’s insipid pallidness is gradually ebbing away; a bitter day in February remains unmistakably winter, a warm and sunny one though does now feel like spring isn’t far away. Even birds sing at half past six, dimpsy light even on an overcast morning illuminates the sky just enough, no brighter than beams from half a moon, but adequate to start them off. The songs are still modest compared to April’s hearty crescendo but another sap rising nudges along springtime’s verdure path. There is a discernable period of afternoon as well; the days just long enough to have a proper midday-afternoon-evening instead of changing directly from lunch-time into dusk as they do around Christmas when at two o’clock the sun already begins to set.

Because of the early season daffodils are flowering, singletons planted a few seasons ago now flower in clumps of threes and fours. I like to grow each variety in patches or drifts. “Mixed daffs” planted haphazardly more often look too random or indiscriminate to give a comprehensive show. As if anticipating this early season Lent is untimely to boot as well, together with Lenten lilies, lenten roses, the Hellebores, have queened it in the garden since Christmas when normally they would just be starting now. Backalong you’d pay good money for selected varieties obtainable only from specialist growers. Nowadays, myriads of types and colours can be bought almost anywhere for a couple of pounds. I like to choose well shaped rounded flowers, good clear colours, big and boldly spotted. Last year’s leaves, trimmed away, show off their beauty and freshness; grouped with few snowdrops and cyclamen gives an impressive late winter display.

The unforeseen delight this year was a concerted effort to get the garden into order and executing some long thought about ideas. And it never looked better! Last year due to illness I did virtually nothing. My garden became over-baring, weeds proliferated, lawns burgeoned into meadows. The simplest task could become a major trauma, new plants, unwatered and neglected, died before my eyes. Weeks and months passed without me venturing beyond the close environs of the house. The garden became sinister and forboding, often somewhere I could not feel welcomed or able to visit; at my worst, even just to view it from a window was too distressing. Gradually as my strength returned my curiosity and concern increased as well, the garden bought back under my influence once more.

My neighbours cut down two very dominant trees in the far eastern corner as part of their ongoing restoration projects. This changes my perspective considerably, flooding parts of the garden with morning sunlight as never before. A whole section once densely overhung with foliage and shaded on three sides has now become a very desirable planting ground. Sheltered and south-west facing it is one of the warmest parts of the garden with all the exciting opportunities of growing something slightly tender that entails. The rest of my land gets frosts throughout the year so only bone hardy stuff grows in all the other places. It is steadily being filled with plants, and a massive patch of brambles removed, now that my garden and I have fallen back in love with each other once again.