

In My Garden, October

*"Delicious autumn! My very soul is wedded to it,
and if I were a bird I would fly about the earth
seeking the successive autumns."*

GEORGE ELIOT

At the entrance to Halsdon Woods and opposite my cottage by the stream ash saplings are presenting the first signs of Chalara, ash die back disease. This could be as devastating to ash trees as Dutch elm disease was to elms fifty years ago.

In the 1990's I partook on several plant collecting expeditions to Romania. Back then to enable you to move plants from one country to another a visit to the relevant Ministry of Agriculture department was required. Before leaving the country of origin the plants were inspected and once they were pronounced free of any disease or pests they were given a phytosanitary certificate. On returning home you entered customs via the red channel declaring the plants and appropriate certification; any plants without correct papers were almost without exception destroyed. You were then only permitted for six weeks to grow the plants in a designated location isolated from any other related plants until the Min. of Ag. had inspected them again.

Around twenty years ago restrictions were lifted allowing plants greater freedom of movement making export and importing a far simpler process. Since that time many more pathogens and undesirable creepy crawlies have found their way onto our shores, every year new troubles are reported gaining a toe-hold here. Perhaps one good legacy of Brexit will be a return to more stringent plant hygiene and pest control.

My mother was highly intelligent and particularly artistic, able to execute any complicated tapestry or intricate knitting pattern. She was always keen to start some new project, her mind ever active in perusing new crafts; weaving, spinning, dyeing, ribbon work and sewing, as if she wanted to thwart the declining dexterity in her fingers and hands before they became as useless as the rest of her body; she had M.S.. On days out we would often collect stuff we found, sheep's wool and fir cones, maple seeds or the little furry acorn cups from *Quercus cerris*, the turkey oak for various creative projects she was planning.

On one outing to a stately home whilst walking through the magnificent stands of Weymouth pines, *Pinus strobus*, we collected cones from these trees, elongated, pale tan coloured and covered in horrid sticky resin. My mother had great plans to do something artful with them. They however stayed in their bag for years in a cupboard in my bedroom, later during a tidying up session and amidst cries of "I'm keeping those!" they migrated up into the loft. And it was here that I found them many years later buried in the clutter of thirty years habitation and storage a sad souvenir of happier times. I was clearing-out the house prior to moving away to

Devon. The cones were crushed and broken, shrivelled and useless, however at the bottom of the bag were hundreds and hundreds of rounded dark

grey seeds. I planted a handful of these seeds in a pan that was placed inside a cold frame and left for the winter. Seeds are best stored in a constantly cool atmosphere so I had not expected anything to germinate after so many roasting summers and freezing winters in the attic. But, like wheat from a Pharaoh's tomb two seedlings germinated. One was lost during the move to Dolton but the other grows very happily enjoying the cool wet summers in this part of the country and is almost five metres high now and this year for the first time it is now bearing cones of its own.

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