

Dear Reader,

How a few days of warm sunshine raise the spirits! Health-wise I have had a couple of rough weeks but I think the worst is over now and my energies are returning. That's just as well, as there is plenty of clearing up still to do and one of my 6 veggie plots is still waiting to be dug over. Many perennials have run riot and need dividing up or chopping up into smaller pieces to be sited on a fresh site. I don't usually find this a problem as some miffy or short-lived plants always fail to get through the winter. Their remains are removed together with any perennial weeds (nettles, dandelions, couch-grass / juolavehnä and, worst of all ground-elder / vuohenputki) and well-rotted compost forked into the vacated place to give the replacement divisions a good start.

The last-mentioned weed, ground-elder, is particularly vicious. Really, one should get rid of it altogether before it takes any kind of hold. In practice, this isn't always feasible if you have peonies, oriental poppies and other species that take umbrage after any kind of serious disturbance. Then all you can do is keep nagging at the ground-elder by forking out as many roots as possible and keep defoliating the beast as often as you can. You can eat the leaves, too, but except when these are very young and tender, most people (including me) don't find them very palatable. Youngish leaves go well enough in a salad.

The giant drumstick onion / pallosipuli is a fine ornamental, The leaves start up early in spring – typically in early April in S. Finland, and can tolerate any amount of bad weather. The metre tall stems carry large globes of small lilac, starry flowers in June. A most impressive plant. There are also darker-coloured forms and a fine white, 'Mount Everest'. More of these below. The plant goes by the general name of *Allium x Hollandicum*.

Let's say the basic 'wild' forms of this plant are good *in the right place*. A mixed border is definitely not the right place – not mine, anyway. I try to remove all the flowered heads before they set seed (it's tempting to delay this as long as possible as the flowered heads remain attractive) but a few always seem to escape my surveillance. Now they have seeded themselves everywhere and into everything! Another drawback is that the stems are rather weak and floppy, and a storm during flowering will wreak havoc and makes it all the harder to find all the flowered heads!

These drawbacks are largely mitigated if you take the trouble to search out the superior selected forms such as 'Mount Everest' and intense purple 'Purple Sensation', 'Purple Splendour' or 'Ambassador'. These also have stronger stems so are more likely to stay upright. I think they are less likely to seed themselves all over the place.

The last two days I have attempted a blitz on nearly all the bulbs of this onion I can locate; I may win this battle but have already lost the war. Another drawback to this plant is that the abundant foliage starts to yellow just when the flower-buds are starting to open, and when flowering is over the leaves are an unsightly mess. In the meantime, the leaves will have swamped late-emerging perennials and set them back seriously. This plant is best fitted to a semi-wild patch where it can mug it out with other attractive thugs.

We are amply compensated for the general messy state of our garden by all the spring flowers popping up everywhere. Snowdrops have finished and the scilla + chionodoxas are starting to fade, but are followed by hepaticas / sinivuokko, wood anemones / valkovuokko, daffodils, Roman hyacinths and grape hyacinths / helmihyasintit. Now *Corydalis solida* / kiurunkannus has started flowering in many shades of lilac, dark purple, pink, even pillar-box red and everything in between. If the warm weather continues, these last will fade away within a week or so. They are the epitome of fleeting beauty. The leaves wither away soon after flowering and the plants don't compete seriously with later plants.

Now I'll break off from the horticultural to continue some childhood reminiscences.

Two doors down the road from Ole Ma G lived an Austrian countess (so we understood) whom we knew as Mrs Faithfull. On the rare occasions we saw her, she was always civil and even smiled at us, but she kept herself very much to herself. I think her best friend and confidante was Nancy Heywood, a dear old soul who lived with her husband Brian in a flat above the Caddys. Old? I guess the Heywoods would have been in their 60's, but they seemed ancient to us. We loved them both, and so did the Caddys. In fact the Heywoods, the Caddys and we were all very close. Jeremy's dad Cyril, Brian Heywood and my dad used to get together to listen to and discuss the latest recordings of Haydn's or Beethoven's music, which I hadn't yet come to love. Nancy (Auntie Nancy, we had to call her) was a keen gardener with green fingers but she was too frail, arthritic and shapeless to prevail against the relentless invasion of couch grass and other pernicious weeds. So I used to help her out with the worst of the weeding. In return she gave me more bits and pieces of her treasures for mum and me to try out. She also regaled me with copies of the Journal of the Royal Horticultural Journal to which she subscribed and which I devoured avidly. And she looked the other way when we boys used to have scrumping raids on her old greengage trees.

Jeremy had an elder brother, Christopher, a studious, rabbit-toothed young man who always seemed to stay indoors practising Beethoven and Chopin piano sonatas; he never joined in our larks. The youngest Caddy was Ingrid, a cheerful, chubby, curly-haired blonde who often played with us. I mostly tolerated her. Her best friend was little Linda Rappleigh, a slender dark-haired waif I was sweet on. The Rappleighs lived in a house between OMG and Mrs Faithfull. Linda was a sickly child and I fear she didn't survive into adulthood.

Brian H was something of a wit with a gentle, dry humour. When I used to play ball with the Heywoods' Jack Russell Buster, a canine ball of fire on steroid overdrive, Brian heard me calling the dog by the new name I had bestowed upon him: Ginity. Brian enquired: What's his first name then, Vir? The penny didn't drop with me until years afterwards.

An epiphany came over me one day towards the end of the memorably hot summer of 1959 when my dad proposed a musical get-together including the Heywoods, Cyril and Christopher Caddy and our family to listen to Schubert's 9th symphony, the Great. I don't remember if this performance was part of the Proms or from a gramophone record. Anyway, it was a mind-blowing experience for me and Schubert's magic still moves me profoundly.

Mrs Faithfull's ethereally beautiful, fair-haired daughter Marianne attended a local convent school. I admired her mostly from a distance. Once I plucked up courage and dared to accompany her to her convent but both of us remained tongue-tied during the walk. A few years later Mick Jagger came along and her life must have been shaken to its foundations. I understand Marianne Faithfull still survives and I sincerely hope she has found peace.

The 50's were good times for kids to grow up in. The limits and codes of behaviour still expected of children could be stifling at times: "Granny, why do I have to do this?" to which she replied "Because I say so!". Woe betide a child rash enough (like me!) to answer back: "That's no reason!". Nonetheless, the limitations helped to guide the child's development and provide security in a way that has been badly eroded today.

There was plenty of optimism in the air, too. People picked themselves up as well as they could after the Hitler war and were determined that wars should never hit us again. If only! A firm belief in scientific progress prevailed, and my parents often quoted the phrase: "It's all in the Cause of Science!" perhaps with the faintest hint of irony. If the roses or broad beans were infested with aphids, Science had the answer: dust or spray them with chemicals designed to dispose of the pests. Dad powdered infested bean-shoots with Gamexane (chemically related to DDT) which quickly

cleaned up the plants. Roses were sprayed with Parathion or Malathion, derivatives of nerve-poisons developed by the Nazis.

The schools provided brilliant tuition in "the sciences" chemistry, physics, biology and maths. My school did, anyway. Our chemistry master, Mr MacBride, was especially enlightened and about 30 years ahead of his time. He explained to us, eg, how scandalous it is to add tetraethyl lead to petrol for smoother engine running and outlined to us the dark history of organophosphates such as parathion.

Socialism was very much in the air, too. Although Dad earned a good salary as a chartered accountant, he had socialist sympathies and, like our maths master, took trouble to explain and justify to us progressive taxation. At this time, people still had enough faith in political system to believe that tax revenues would be substantially channeled into social welfare, particularly health and education, particularly for the least privileged. Dad was impressed on reading Rachel Carlson's 'Silent Spring' and thereafter stopped using chlorinated hydrocarbons like DDT for pest control.

There were still very few cars around, so it was quite safe for us to play ball games on the street. And, of course, there were no internet or digital devices for kids to get hooked on. We spent far more time than our modern counterparts playing outside, climbing trees or going for quite long bike-rides. It was still reasonably safe for me to bike the 3 miles to school – and back again – every day.

Ah yes, the countryside, our glorious countryside. I had, and still have vivid (though probably distorted) memories of my first six years well out in the small Berkshire hamlet of Sulhamstead Abbots. After me moved into the outskirts of Reading, I continued to hanker for what seemed to me something like a lost paradise. The English – possibly all Brits? – have a special nostalgic and romanticised relationship with their countryside; my feelings were especially intense as I felt I had been personally torn away from it. There was one consolation: my own bedroom's window commanded an unobstructed and lovely view south-westwards over as yet unspoilt countryside, towards the hamlet we had left! The distant sound of steam-trains puffing along the Newbury line and the clang-clang-clang-clang of goods-train wagons in a shunting yard soothed rather than disturbed my nights. And come weekends there was nothing to stop us taking to our bikes to explore the easily accessible countryside.

I remember one glorious walk with my parents – I must have been 7 or 8 - one early summer's day in the meadows visible from my window. We followed a stream past the so-called Wire Mills buildings. What the mill had to do with wire I never thought to ask. This is the sort of country that still comes to mind when I listen to George Butterworth's evocative 'Banks of Green Willow'. Several times I asked my parents: "Can't we go for another walk to the Wire Mills?" but my parents always replied "Not now, dear, perhaps next week". But that was to be my first and last walk to the enchanted region.

Alas! Now Progress has intervened and the whole area that enchanted me has become a vast industrial estate. Likewise I have decided never again to revisit the country surrounding Sulhamstead Abbots, as much of it has been consumed by suburbia. The consolation is that building and construction companies have no way of erasing my childhood memories.

Blessings,

Peter J