



The Roaming Pen writes with green ink Roger Wheeler

The current buzz words of sustainability, environment, re-cycling, food miles and organic, although very fashionable are hardly new. For decades the government has been encouraging us to grow our own food, the many hours spent in the company of Alan Titchmarsh, Monty Don and now chefs Raymond Blanc and Nigel Slater are extolling the virtues of home grown veg on their television programmes. The BBC even has a website called Dig In, everything must be 'green' we even have Green councillors in Brighton.

OK we get the message, gardening must be the new sex.

It has been 35 years since Richard Briars as Tom Good gave up his job that he was no longer able to take seriously, so he and his wife Barbara, Felicity Kendal, made the decision to live a sustainable, simple and self-sufficient lifestyle. In pursuit of the "good life", they dug up the front and back gardens of their home and converted them into allotments, growing soft fruit and vegetables. Well not many of us can or even want to go quite that far, so about three years ago we put our names on the council allotment waiting list

Recently, they, Brighton & Hove City Council realised that the waiting list for allotments was getting rather long and so they decided to clear a

large tract of unused land up on Whitehawk Hill and offer it to the eager beavers who were chomping at the bit to get stuck in.

So in search of this illusive 'good life' we took an allotment way up on the windswept heights of the Hill. We are not exactly Tom and Barbara and there is certainly no sight of Margot and Jerry as far as we can see, although it is early days. OK so just one week after receiving the keys to this new life I managed to break my wrist which meant for the next four months I would be purely decorative and in charge of overall design, not a particularly exhausting role but, in my opinion, a vital one.

My long suffering partner has spent many hours labouring over a red hot spade digging the soil, what there is of it, up on the top of the South Downs. Now we are the proud parents of about 15 rows of potatoes, carrots, rhubarb, cabbage, broad beans, in fact the list of veggies is huge and still the end is not in sight. Our new neighbours are an interesting bunch, we've identified Dan and Doris Archer, but there's no sign of Charlie Dimmock yet. In my personal role as design and planning consultant I am thinking ahead for the summer parties and barbecues, the views are stunning, right across the Downs to Seaford Head and the walk home is all downhill! We are fast becoming the allotment bores, regaling



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our patient friends with our tales of couch grass, pesticides (an absolute no no) propagating, thinning, planting out, I could go on but I won't. But there will be more to follow in the months ahead, I promise you.

If you read my rant last month about the state of the Marine Parade railings, you might have noted that our esteemed City Council have decided to spend £600,000 of our money on refurbishing the seafront, great you may think. Wrong, the seafront in question is along at the Lagoon, but that's in Hove. Madeira Drive's railings need millions spending on them, money of course we haven't got, so now they are becoming dangerous, what is to be done, no one knows.

The recent news that our local bus company made £4.5m profit last year is good for us as they have decided not to raise fares in the 'foreseeable' future, phew that's a relief. Our bus fares are among the highest in the country but that's not stopped them before. Maybe they have had a reality check and realised that they should keep fares at the present level for a while so when they do raise them they can shout from the rooftops that they have not increased for years, well since 2008 anyway.

Take it easy and keep it green.

Growing your own Cathy Robinson

For the last year, I've been trying to do my bit for the war effort. The war against climate change, of course and, for good measure, the war against the recession. Oh, and also the war against slugs.

In an effort to reduce my no doubt great big stomping carbon footprint, I've been growing my own vegetables; or at least trying to.

Full of enthusiasm and armed with my trusty 'vegetable growing through the year' paperback, I bought enough packets of seed to keep an entire Dorset village self-sufficient for at least a decade. I formulated a planting rota. I bought a raised vegetable bed - oh, how this season! I heaved bags and bags of compost from the garden centre. I bought organic plant food. I spent a small fortune.

Planting started in earnest in April, with trays of meticulously sown seeds. I awaited the arrival of my baby plants with much anticipation. I waited, and diligently watered. Nothing happened. I sowed some more, in May, reasoning that the weather may have been a touch too cold for my infant plants. Again, a distinct lack of tiny seedlings. Then it occurred to me. Telltale silvery trails were appearing ominously overnight on my lovely seed trays. Slugs! My poor baby plants were being gobbled up before they had barely seen the light of day and definitely before they had ever seen me.

It was time to call in reinforcements. Organic slug pellets. Glue-like jelly that oozed over the rims of containers, apparently repulsive to slugs. Copper tape, applied around pots and copper rings to encircle tender seedlings were supposed to give a discouraging electric shock. Beer traps, so the slugs died bloated but happy. Gravel, eggshells and coffee grounds, all meant to be too dry and scratchy for a delicate slug to cross. Piles of salt strategically positioned to suck away their life-giving moisture. Ha, that would see to them.

Not so the slugs in my garden. These super-slugs vaulted the electrically-charged copper rings, oozed over the jelly

and presumably used this to lubricate their way over the wall of gravel, eggshells and coffee grounds. They spat out the slugs pellets. They weaved delicately around the piles of salt. As a final gesture, after gorging on my delicate seedlings, they supped from the beer traps - through a straw, presumably, and left to tell their friends of the banquet that awaited.

Slightly daunted, I resorted to bringing my precious plants indoors overnight, cossetting them like a delicate infant. This appeared to work as the seedlings grew bigger and stronger by the day, although twenty-five seed trays did get in the way of daily life. Incredibly, one or two slugs, having obviously perfected the art of transporting themselves through brick walls, did manage to break into the house for a midnight feast, but by and large the plants survived. After a month or so I was confident enough for my plants to enter the big wide world of the garden. After all my living room now resembled Kew Gardens and the stalks of my courgette plants were at least an inch across. Next day, I crept out early, expecting to see a one or two chewed leaves, collateral damage only, totally unprepared for the apocalyptic sight which greeted me. It was as if a plague of locusts had passed through overnight. Everything had vanished. Just a few dejected stalks remained. Dejected, I wondered why I hadn't just sent my packets of seeds to that village, who'd surely have done a better job with them than I.

The few plants that survived I guarded like the crown jewels. I would creep out each evening to pick the slugs off my plants, hurling them as far as I could in a satisfying arc (sorry neighbours). Sometimes I could even hear the little devils munching, like some alien invading horde. After one summer evening shower they were dining so enthusiastically on my one remaining courgette plant I panicked and grabbed the salt cellar, sprinkling it liberally around in something of a frenzy. I would not advise this as a strategy. Whilst the slugs did fizz satisfyingly, it didn't do the plants much good, as I discovered next morning

when said courgette plant had turned as brown and crispy as if it had been caught in the middle of a drought. To be fair, despite those super-slugs my lettuces did quite well after I resorted to growing them in hanging baskets only the most daredevil slugs could reach. I had plenty of potatoes; my tomatoes were small but tasty. Small seemed to be the order of the day. I managed miniature garlic, and some stunted shallots. My carrots were ludicrously tiny, my parsnip a perfect scaled-down specimen of the real thing. They all resembled the ingredients of a Lilliputian dinner party.

While those slugs have been feasting, growing, reproducing and morphing into even more fearless superslugs, I've been wasting away due to my stunted vegetables. But this year I'll be ready for them. War has been declared. Undaunted gardener vs the garden slug!



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