

### Cottage Gardening is not for the faint-hearted.

One of the many convenient features of a Cottage Garden is that you don't actually need your own cottage before you begin.

History alleges that cottage gardening was the result of the working classes stealing ideas from the larger estates of Europe, scaling them down to keep the budget realistic, and randomly adding their favourite herbs and vegetables. They made such a good job of it that the upper classes promptly stole the style back, scaled it up, and the next thing you know – NZ Flower and Garden Show.

Not only do you not need a cottage to begin gardening, you needn't even have much of a clue about what you're doing to achieve relative success. In my garden, see-sawing seasonal drought and deluge culminate every summer with searing humidity. Compost and water aren't free, but rain is, so there is time and cost to consider. In these hostile conditions, practical limitations and questionable historical facts give me some comfort, while carefully considered plant choices teeter between survival and the descent into botanical custard.

My home has all the picturesque grace and style that you'd expect from a 1990's relocated PreFab, but I did not let that curb my gardening ambitions. In the beginning, the idea of starting a new garden was practical: the lowest corner of the lawn flooded – I couldn't stand on it when it was wet, let alone mow it – so why not plant something thirsty to soak up the water? Then, realising that an isolated planting would look like an isolated planting, why not start ten metres back from the point of concern, and let it graduate toward the issue? And from there, wouldn't delphiniums be the perfect Old World suggestion leading away from the yet-to-be sprays of flower heads and buzzing insects? Memories of favourite gardens past, both wild and cultivated, waved their reddish brown stems and wild carrot tops. Images of Monet's gardens at Giverny splashed dabs of pinks, apricots and greens. There would be a meadow of wild flowers, courageously withstanding the elements. Yes, it would be epic, and I would be famous!

Immediately I put to researching the plants required. They wouldn't be cheap, or usual, but could they be grown from seed? They could? They could, and it'd be easy!

But legally supplied seeds weren't enough for my enthusiasm. Holding to tradition, I seized the opportunity to liberate seed pods from architecturally designed gardens and traffic islands. Such is the contagious nature of revolution, even a previously civilised well-wisher brought me plants, cuttings and seeds from who knows where. In neither looking a gift-plant in the seed-husk, questioning the source, nor discouraging the practice, I had fallen for the oldest trick in the gardening book. Germinating and growing plants simply out of curiosity, only much later did I think, "Hmmm, where am I going to put this thing?" By then it was too late. My once simple seed greed had blossomed into a full-scale foliar habit. Would new areas have to be sacrificed to the ever-growing future garden?

The main body of garden took shape both too slowly, and then faster than expected. Onto a back-middle ground of perennials, I threw complimentary annuals as necessary. The perennials suited the heavy-but-marginally-amended clay soil common to most suburban wastelands; the annuals I hoped would naturally scatter, adding a "deliberately random" blending effect. Plants such as *Perovskia*, *Knautia*, *Achillea*, *Agastache*, *Scabiosa* and *Guara* tolerate full sun and dryness; and just a few metres away in the standing water, well-known but lesser used bog-dwellers: Michaelmas daisies, Marshmallow, *Lysimachia atropurpurea*, and the delightful "Herrin des Moores" – *Lobelia x speciosa*.

Gardening underwater demanded new knowledge. Flicking through my page of prior experience couldn't help: shade under trees; on concrete paving stones; exposed hillside solid clay; cold southerly wind that never stops; seasons that don't arrive. No, only ignorance and hope could help me now. With the best plant options overseas, of potentially dubious ecological intent, or just too expensive, I read possibility into every phrase in every aged and yellowing gardening book. Sadly, even reassuring Afrikaans accents and shameless optimism couldn't save *Leonorus leonotis*. Perhaps it was for the best. In my neighbourhood, if word ever got out, the pests might take on human proportions. Could the saturated soil be amended? Impossible. This wasn't soil, it was badly made gravy. Spade struggled against mud where paddle would have done better. In winter rain

and gathering winds beleaguered tools were thrown aside, potting mix dumped on top the jelly, seedlings planted and let be, while gravity and water drew everything down to Hades.

Sometimes, under pressure of schedule, confused by decision-making impasse, and with my deck fast disappearing beneath seedling pots, more than once I scattered seeds wherever chance prevailed. What could be easier? I was getting the hang of this now. Soon, remembering when, where, what or why, faded into pleasant surprise as unexpected seedlings emerged. Of those that survived, these easy germinators had no trouble with the less than ideal terrain. It was a reminder of nature's wisdom, too easily dismissed by my burgeoning human vanity. Beneath a canopy of tansy, poppies, meadow foam and alyssum, communities of insects would dance, feast, play sport or go to the Opera – whatever it was that insects do for fun. This understory of insectial joy would be the foundation of a self-adjusting ecosystem, where nothing further would need doing other than to bask in the harmonic perfection of Nature!

But as the good Lord Himself must have discovered, things quickly got out of hand. My nights were filled with doubts: Was this *Anagallis*, or was it *Lysimachia monelli*? Could cross pollination permanently muddy my prized heirloom aquilegias? Is *Scabiosa atropurpurea* *really* a perennial? How cold is frost anyway? Will this rain ever stop! I don't care what the neighbours think, delphiniums will grow in clay! I just need some rain! Who put this garden sculpture in the vege patch? And what is that plant, is it even legal? Plants with no indication of prior hostility began bitter arguments and trial separations. Hydrangeas were first stripped and then buried by a freak hailstorm. Initially humane negotiations with slugs, snails and caterpillars broke down – chemical and biological strikes were called in. My insectial communities were revolting. The smell of sheep manure and potting mix was suffocating. Only a holiday would ease the strain, or a relaxing hobby.

A year and a half later, no more famous than when they started, a worry-wrecked gardener shuffles out to see the botanical beasts engulfing the fence line. Which romantic young fool had started this tiny and obscure garden, they wonder? They must have been out of their mind.

Be warned, friends, cottage gardening has attracted a sedate and relaxed reputation it does not deserve. "He's on Gardening Leave", they'll say, sniggering at an imagined life of stress-free serenity. Once you've managed the unpredictability of a small garden, a career as a Captain of Industry mightn't seem so challenging. But take heart, it's not all adrenaline, fear and sweat. I think it's unlikely that cottage gardening was solely a response to a cultural era. Few gardens adhere to plans. They become whatever the environment will allow, spreading or reverting despite the social status of their minder, until balance is achieved. Attempts to incorporate elements of guerrilla gardening quickly turn to gorilla gardening as weather, terrain and nature conspire; and the kind of resentment that gardens is short lived. When we're young, the approach of spring is more than the combined scent of plant oils and pollens. It is the anticipation of new beginnings, another chance, and people worth knowing we have not met. By middle age, that scent is entirely gone. But sometimes, on a warm cloudy morning – between the times it takes for the sun to encourage birds to leave their quiet activity, and a thunderstorm rolls through – you could get a glimpse of something truer than history.