

Gardening with my Wife

Bill Bryson

I'm going to have to be quick because it's a Sunday and the weather is glorious and Mrs Bryson has outlined a big, ambitious programme of gardening. Worse, she's wearing what I nervously call her Nike expression — the one that says 'Just do it.'

Now don't get me wrong. Mrs Bryson is a rare and delightful creature and goodness knows my life needs structure and supervision, but when she gets out a pad and pen and writes the dread words 'Things To Do' (vigorously underscored several times) you know it's going to be a Long time till Monday.

I love to garden — there is something about the combination of mindless activity and the constant unearthing of worms that suits me somehow — but frankly I am not crazy about gardening with my wife. The trouble, you see, is that she is English and thus can intimidate me. She can say things like, 'Have you heeled in the nodes on the *Dianthus chinensis*?' and 'Did you remember to check the sequestrene levels on the *Phlox subulata*?'

All British people can do this, I find, and it's awful — terrifying. Even now I remember the astonishment of listening to *Gardeners' Question Time* for the first time many years ago and realizing with quiet horror that I was in a nation of people who not only knew and understood things like powdery mildew, peach leaf curl, optimum pH levels, and the difference between *Coreopsis verticillata* and *Coreopsis grandiflora*, but cared about them — indeed, found it gratifying to engage in long and lively discussions on such matters.

I come from a background where you are considered to have a green thumb if you can grow a cactus on a windowsill, so my own approach to gardening has always been rather less scientific. My method, which actually works pretty well, is to treat as a weed anything that hasn't flowered by August and to sprinkle everything else with bone meal, slug pellets, and whatever else I find lying around the potting shed. Once or twice a summer I tip everything with a skull and crossbones on the label into a spray canister and give everything a jolly good dousing. It's an unorthodox approach and occasionally, I admit, I have to leap out of the way of an abruptly falling tree that has failed to respond to ministrations, but generally it has been a success and I have achieved some interesting and novel mutational effects. I once got a fence post to fruit, for instance.

For years, especially when the children were all small and capable of almost anything, my wife left me to the garden. Occasionally she would step out to ask what I was doing, and I would have to confess that I was dusting some weedy-looking things with an unknown powdery substance which I had found in the garage and which I was pretty confident was nitrogen or cement mix. Usually at that moment, one of the children would come out to announce that little Jimmy's hair was on fire, or something else similarly but usefully distracting, and she would fly off, leaving me to get on with my experiments in peace. It was a good arrangement and our marriage prospered.

Then the children grew large enough to attend to their own cranial blazes and we moved to America, and now I find Mrs B out there with me. Or rather I am there with her, for I seem to have acquired a subsidiary role which principally involves bringing or taking away the wheelbarrow at a trot. I used to be a keen gardener; now I'm a kind of rickshaw boy.

Anyway, gardening just isn't the same here. People don't even have gardens in America. They have yards. And they don't garden in those yards. They work in them. They actually call it 'yardwork'. Takes all the fun out of it somehow.

In Britain, nature is fecund and kindly. The whole country is a kind of garden, really. I mean to say, look at how wildflowers pop up along every roadside and dance across meadows. Farmers actually have to go out and exterminate them (well, they don't have to, but they sure like to). In America, the instinct of nature is to be a wilderness. What you get here are triffid-like weeds that come creeping in from every margin and must be continually hacked back with sabres and machetes. I am quite sure that if we left the property for a month we would come back to find that the weeds had captured the house and dragged it off to the woods to be slowly devoured.

American gardens are mostly lawn, and American lawns are mostly big. This means that you

spend your life raking. In the autumn the leaves fall together with a single great *whoomp* — a sort of vegetative mass suicide — and you spend about two months dragging them into piles, while the wind does its best to put them all back where you found them. You rake and rake, and cart the leaves off to the woods, then hang up your rake and go inside for the next seven months.

But as soon as you turn your back, the leaves begin creeping back. I don't know how they do it, but when you come out in spring, there they all are again, spread ankle deep across your lawn, choking thorny shrubs, clogging drains. So you spend weeks and weeks raking them up and carting them back to the woods. Finally, just when you get the lawn pristine, there is a great *whoomp* sound and you realize it's autumn again. It's really quite dispiriting.

And now on top of all that my dear missus has suddenly taken a commanding interest in the whole business of domestic horticulture. It's my own fault, I have to admit. Last year I filled the lawn spreader with a mixture of my own devising — essentially fertilizer, moss killer, rabbit food (initially by mistake, but then I thought, 'What the heck?' and tossed in the rest) and a dash of something lively called buprimate and triforine. Two days later the front lawn erupted in vivid orange stripes of a sufficiently arresting and persistent nature to attract sightseers from as far as northern Massachusetts. So now I find myself on a kind of permanent probation.

Speaking of which, I've got to go. I've just heard the hard, clinical snap of gardening gloves going on and the ominous sound of metal tools being taken down from their perches. It's only a matter of time before I hear the cry of 'Boy! Bring the barrow — and look sharp!' But you know the part I really hate? It's having to wear this stupid coolie hat.