

Growing health and a zest for gardening

How your heart soars when you recognise the leaves of a long-awaited seedling pushing its way through the soil, or it sinks as the all too familiar ground elder pops up where it is hard to wrestle out. When young and fresh before flowering think of it as goutweed, control it with a confident flourish by adding the young green leaves to quiches, lasagne or risotto. Satisfying in all senses as well as bulking out early chard or spinach. Little did any of us realise when this title was chosen for my NGS lecture in May at Cambridge's Madingley Hall, just how drastically our wellbeing would be put into sharp focus.

Health grows alongside herbs, rich in vitamins and minerals, their many zests – the aromatics of rosemary and sage, the aniseed of French tarragon (not Russian) and chervil, the lemons of thyme, balm and basil, the Provençal scent of lavender and hyssop – transform cooking and salads into lip smacking restorative delights. Not forgetting vitamin packed parsleys, smoky dill - grow Dukat for leaves and Mammoth for seeds, or the green spiciness of coriander, Cilantro for leaves. A source of vitamins C and K, iron, calcium and potassium, salad rocket is grown for its leaves, allow it to flower, first enjoy their evening fragrance before adding them to a salad for a radishy, scented bite.

Horticultural sights and sounds are glorious, a border of flowers, topiary, leafy rustles and birdsong encapsulate the joys of gardening. A couple of years ago I went to a musical for dementia sufferers, *My New Shoes*, all the actors had supersized colourful footwear that tapped out the songs. Why shoes? Dementia sufferers rarely look up or make eye contact but the sound of the music and the bright displays at their feet connected them happily and those with them, as we sang and danced along. I am delighted that Nymans in West Sussex have used a similar interpretation for the planting of the ruined Great Hall, a tapestry of colour, shape and scent to feed the senses. Maybe a future performance venue? *When the spice of the woodbine wafts abroad* wrote Tennyson as Maud was bidden into the garden, breathing in plant scents uplifts the spirits and I defy you not to smile.

You are never alone with a clone is a way of remembering that cuttings taken of a special plant once rooted will be exact replicas. Many of us are/will have been alone and I would extend the idea to gardening, I talk enthusiastically to my plants – congratulations to self-seeders, pep talks for the sulkers and gentle encouragement to the tender. Some years ago, a New Zealand immigration lawyer attended one of my Cambridge International Summer Programmes, away from class we talked of walking and gardening. When she had to decide she walked, when she could not bear the prospect she gardened, her mind would be drawn into its solace ... with a clearer head she would return and make the life changing decision. On a domestic level in these life changing times grow, tend and enjoy with zest.