

In the Confessional

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I was honoured that someone introduced me as a gardener the other day, for I'm no gardener at all. It might have been better if they'd said something along the lines of: 'Mary, meet Emma, she's a *destructive* gardener,' for I'm certainly that. I'm excellent at ripping out things and good with a stick: swish-swish I go at the bracken that creeps up into places that I don't want it to; swishing too at the numpty who ran off with my child's bike or the publisher who didn't understand my poetry, or whatever. I'm good with secateurs – when I was a child my dad taught me how to prune pear trees – and I'm not bad with a garden fork, except when I put it through my foot.

My unsuitability for gardening is irrefutable. In the first place, I don't have the brains for it. I can't recall any plant names and when I do I get in a right old muddle about what it is I'm recalling. When I arrive at my local garden centre, all the staff scoot off to the hard-to-find bamboo section terrified that I might engage them in some rambling chat. Second, I haven't the time: during the day, I'm busy writing. Plus, I have a husband, children and a dog – Merlo, the Labrador – all of which demand my attention. Third, I have no patience, and for gardening you really do need the patience of Job. The moment you do something you are reasonably proud of and want to show it off, along comes a storm and all your hard work is undone.

What I do like to do is to buy plants and sometimes I'll take cuttings of things from friends' gardens, but I'm having to learn that just because something looks pretty in a catalogue or in someone else's garden you can't expect it to grow like a champion. It's all very different from writing, where you can make things go exactly as you want and create great passages of flowery prose, or write something short and succinct, or pen some absurd piece of poetry *à la* Lear. If only it were so simple in a garden. There's the weather for one thing. Today, for example, it's raining relentlessly

which is frustrating because all the succulents I planted yesterday will probably be swept off down the hill now. Next week, most likely, there'll be a drought, which will take something else out.

Then there is the wilfulness of inanimate objects. The shears that you drop on your foot when the dog barks unexpectedly at a foxglove; or the sharp little branch that nearly takes your eye out. And don't get me started on the hose. I'll never forget the time the damn thing whipped out of my hands and slapped me in the face like a very angry slippery eel. I've had the odd run in with a flowerpot over the years and just last week I stepped on a rake and it rose up and hit me in the face like a tall snake. I'm very lucky it didn't break my nose. I don't allow myself near the electric hedge-trimmer or lawnmower because I know I won't get out of the garden alive.

All the same, I don't understand why anyone would want to uproot a garden and replace it with decking or that fake plastic lawn stuff. There's a chap I know who is going to build a house in his garden and when he proudly showed me the architect's drawings, I felt quite sick. Nothing of the garden remained. I suspect it's because my heart has forever been rooted in the countryside and if I can't see some green from my bedroom window, I sink into a depression.

And I am lucky with the three-acre garden that I do have. It's wonderfully sited. The garden looks south down a wooded V-shaped valley to a river and has been nicely laid out by the previous owners. It is set out as a series of terraces that tumble down to the water, all higgledy-piggledy and packed to bursting with shrubs, trees and lots of little lovelies such as primroses, violets and wild strawberries, which is just how I like it. There are some splendid camellias and rhododendrons dotted about – some I'm told, very rare indeed.

Friends who are real gardeners are terribly kind. They give me things and tell me where to put them so they won't die. When we moved in, I was gifted a red climbing rose, which flourishes; it has a lovely scent, is very early flowering and goes on giving colour until Christmas. Someone else gave me a Japanese weeping cherry. *Prunus kiku* something-or-other? (I much prefer the English names

to Latin which really shows what a non-gardener I am.) That too does well and makes a big impact in spring when it is covered in its pink blooms.

I had no luck with the pieris which my beloved Pa gave me. I can't have put it in the right place. It died at around the same time he did, which was the worst thing that could have happened. Just when you want it to be taking off. So you can look at it and know he lives on in plant form. No matter, the white clematis he gave me is coming along great guns.

Oh, I could go on for hours about the garden. Sometimes when I've spent an afternoon bending and stooping, pulling and dragging, chopping and mulching, when I can't see out of my glasses for grime, and my trousers are falling down and my clothes are filthy, and all the perennials I planted last year are looking blooming fabulous, I do feel that I deserve an elevation of rank from that of destructive gardener to gardener. But then, what d'you know, some beastly caterpillars arrive – that I really should have known about – and chew everything up, and I'm reminded that I really am very incompetent after all.