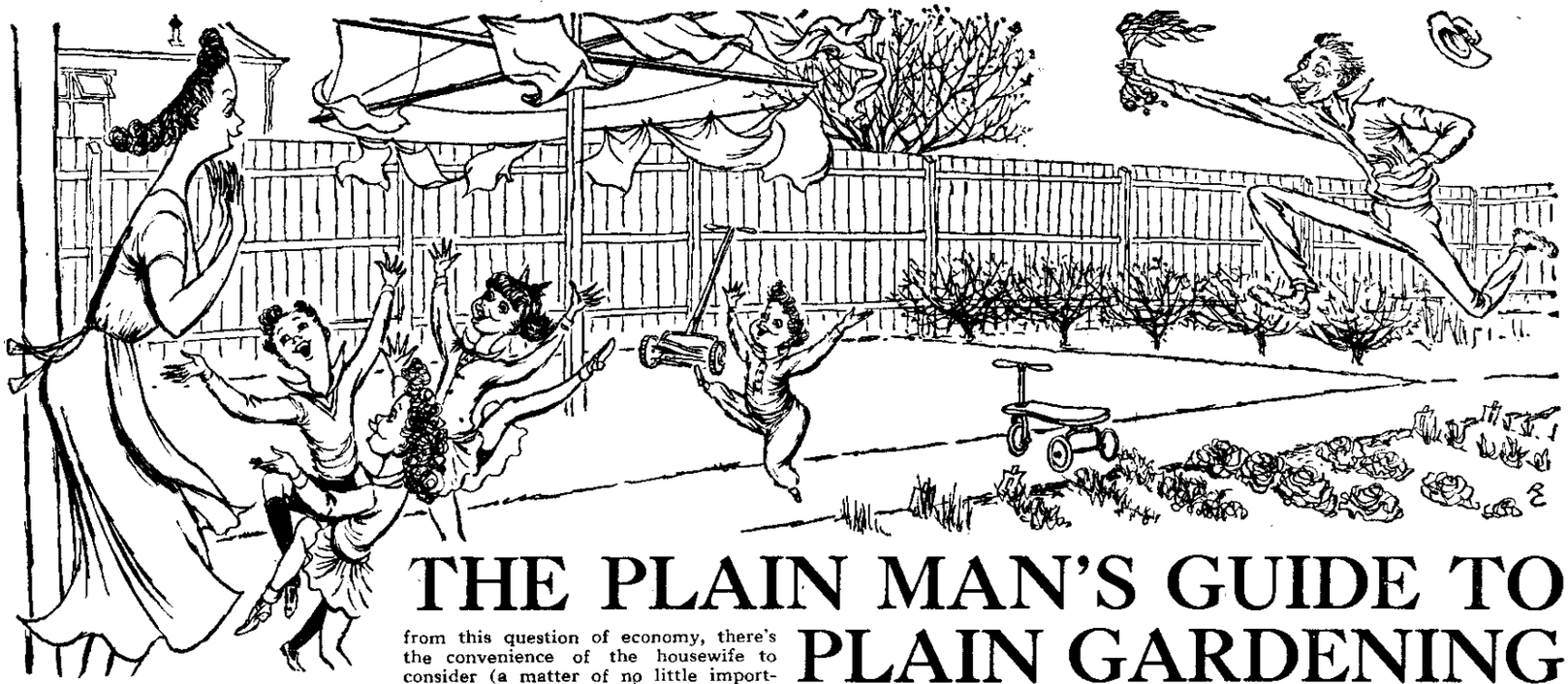

THE PLAIN MAN'S GUIDE TO PLAIN GARDENING

(or French beans without tears)

FOR the home gardener if for no one else, August—to prune and bud the poet's line—is a cruel month. With true Spring (saith the astronomers) only a month away, he looks out at his winter crop of weeds and the odd bare patches of soil heavy from Winter frost and rain and decides that, the unfinished Rugby season notwithstanding, something must certainly be done. Unless he is one of your enthusiasts who like gardening, his face grows longer with the lengthening days, and he begins to wonder, as he did (remember?) at this time last year, whether his plot of earth is really fruitful enough to justify the sacrifice of a Spring and Summer of weekends—for like many another his only real concern is to do what he can to balance the family budget. Should he make do with the old faithfuls again, a little bit of this, a little bit of that, and a forest of silver beet—enough, he hopes, to justify "one quarter of needs supplied" in his census return? Or is there some method or magic by which he can hope to emulate the garrulous old greenfingers next door, whose overgrown lettuces and smug smile displayed just above fence level father the wish that he would go smother himself in his own compost? These were the questions, as warmly argued in *The Listener* office as on the suburban perimeter, that sent our scouts out last week, eyes and ears tracking like radar scanners, in search of the answers.

For a start, we were not surprised to find that those who doubt whether home gardening is worthwhile at all are a pretty numerous tribe. Briefly their view is that by the time their crops are ready after an enormous amount of labour the shops are full and prices at bedrock. Could it be that the answer to that objection lies in a little simple planning? Another question the sceptic asks is: What, at the best of times, do we save? Well, in Holland, for example, it's estimated that 25 per cent of vegetables are grown in home gardens. In New Zealand it's not known for certain, though the recent census will no doubt say a word on the subject. Even if 25 per cent is the figure—and that may be a little low for New Zealand—the grow-your-own advocates argue reasonably enough that it's a substantial and worthwhile saving. Apart from this question of economy, there's the convenience of the housewife to consider (a matter of no little importance) and the superiority of fresh-from-the-garden vegetables — good-looking, fine in texture and flavour, and full of nutriment. Everyone knows that vegetables are much better in every way eaten soon after they're cut, plucked, pulled or dug. (Sweet corn, for example, in an average temperature of 85 degrees Fahrenheit, loses half its sugar in 24 hours.) Of course, the garden *enthusiast* doesn't rely on these arguments, but *his* "love of healthy exercise at a congenial occupation" and "opportunity to commune with nature" (weeds, worms, rain, drought, aphids, white butterflies, cats, birds, and the ever-helpful little woman) are likely to scare off the reluctant fringe altogether. If, leaving him aside, we decide that for strictly practical reasons home gardening *can* be worthwhile, where do we go from there?

First get your soil, then classify it, is the way Mrs. Beeton could have started if she had been writing about gardening instead of cooking, and she might have set about the task of classification with a game of "vegetable or mineral"? More scientific yourself, you could broadly describe your soil, or anyone else's, as either mineral or organic—that is, peaty. The obvious difference in mineral soils is in their texture, from coarse to fine—from sands through various loams to clay. Fighting the good fight against infertility, whatever soils you have should be fit for crops to live in—and they apparently, like humans, need air, liquid and an adequate and well-balanced supply of foods. Sandy soils tend to be poor suppliers of plant food, especially nitrogen and potash, and draining easily they don't hold much water. So they're "early" soils, but dry out in summer. To grow good crops in these sandy soils you must add fertilisers—potash, nitrates and phosphate—and in Summer they'll keep you as busy with the hose as a barman on Christmas Eve. Green manure crops and compost will increase the organic matter in them. In general they need less lime than, say, clay soils, and, of course, against the helping hand they do need, in other directions you balance the fact that they're no trouble at all to work.

Clay soils tend to be acid and need a lot of lime. They serve a better diet to your crops than sandy soils (though nitrogen and phosphate may be short on the menu), and while they also hold their drink better, anyone will tell you they're the very devil to work after rain. In general, they're "later" or "colder" soils. In handling them it's important to build up a good physical structure by adding organic matter, and by cultivation at the right time. Besides lime and balanced fertilisers, drainage also may be important.

Loamy soils fall between sands and clays, and the nature of any particular loamy soil depends on the proportion of sand to clay. In New Zealand, of course, the home gardener is more likely to find loamy-peats or peaty-loams than pure peats. Compared with the mineral soils, the loamy types are just bursting with organic good health, but even for these soils, lime and fertilisers (particularly phosphate and potash) and control of soil moisture are very important. Actually all peaty soils must be drained for a start, but too much of a good thing becomes a bad thing, and a peaty soil that's allowed to drain out and become dry is extremely difficult to re-wet.

Manuring the Soil

There's a school of thought which declares that compost is to the soil what porridge is to a Scot—the only thing necessary to keep it in a state of rude health. Others—porridge plus haggis advocates, you could call them—hold that compost and fertilisers should supplement each other in the home garden—the compost adding organic matter and some plant nutrients, while the fertilisers supply whatever else is needed to make a balanced diet. The experts will tell you it's not easy to generalise, but here's a recipe for a sort of all-purpose fertiliser haggis—a base dressing for the New Zealand home garden—we were given the other day:

Take 10 lb. of blood and bone, 7½ lb. of superphosphate, and 2½ lb. each of sulphate of ammonia and sulphate of potash. Mix well and apply one to four ounces to the square yard, "depending on the crop."

This mixture provides nitrogen, phosphate and potash in the ratio of 1: 2: 1, and has given good results in many parts of the country, though for best results local experience may suggest modifications.

Even those who don't believe that porridge alone makes a healthy Scot will admit that it does him a world of good, and the firmest believers in a supplementary diet for the garden all agree that well-made compost improves the physical structure of the soil—lets in the air and helps it to hold water. Depending on what you put into the compost heap and the manner of composting, it can also add substantial quantities of plant foods. However, compost heaps as made in many home gardens do attract flies, and unless a great deal of care is taken to overcome this nuisance, it is probably better to dig refuse in. An important point to remember here is that while uncomposted material is being broken down in the soil plants are liable to be short of nitrogen. So it's better to dig the refuse in with some nitrogen-producing fertiliser (such as sulphate of ammonia), in that way avoiding nitrogen starvation in plants (could it be responsible for that washed-out look?) and at the same time helping the "bugs"—more politely, bacteria—in their revolutionary ferment underground. However, if you *do* have a compost heap, and like Seth Hangnail in *Take It From Here*, keep your granny in it, tell her to spend her time throwing grass and weed seeds out. For though the heap is more than hot enough for her, in most cases it won't be hot enough to kill the seeds.

Like a Test match football crowd, the biggest part of a garden has to spend an awful lot of time in the open (the glasshouse is for the privileged minority), and a mouthful could be said about inconsiderate gardeners who lay out plots for their own convenience rather than to protect them from the wind. Fences of one kind or another—trellis, brushwood, and so on—and hedges are the two main types of windbreak. The choice of a hedge depends largely on where you happen to live, for it's generally best to grow a hedge that does well in your own district. Tree-lucerne is one of the quickest

(continued on next page)