

# MORE PLAIN GARDENING

## The Shape of Spring to Come

AUTUMN for some gardeners is a lovely season, a time for lyricism over crisp, cool air, falling leaves and bird songs. It is nothing to these enthusiasts to be up at first light pottering in the garden, breathing so heartily in and out that their flowers and vegetables are almost obscured by steam. This is not for the Plain Man, however, whose mornings are usually geared to the quickest and least painful transition from bed to breakfast, from kitchen to warm office. It is only when he comes home that he takes in the garden a stroll mercifully shortened by the dusk. For as those keen gardeners The Lotos Eaters realised "there is confusion worse than death"—and what is worse confusion than the plain man's garden at season's end?

Look at that herbaceous border—dense enough to support a regiment of peeping Toms; those boxes, stakes, clippings and stones with their riotous populations of slugs, slaters, snails and earwigs. From every leaf of the runner beans the looping caterpillars loop, and the corn-ear worm (an old cobbler, so to speak) flourishes on those last cobs you meant to eat but forgot.

After a long look at this depressing picture, the Plain Gardener's first thought is where to start, usually followed by a strong desire to just sit down and contemplate again. This, of course, it not because he has given up hope, but because he sees the need for a plan. And what better approach than this? After five week nights of just looking at the garden and planning, a weekend of scientific and determined work by the plain man will convince even the daily potterer that he knows what he wants. And what does he want? Interested as a matter of course in a subject so keenly debated as garden planning and work, *The Listener* found a few experts recently, and in gardeners' jargon "dug up the drill" on what could—and even perhaps should—be done at this time of year.

If you are starting off and don't know what to plant, visit—surreptitiously, if necessary—any prize garden in the vicinity, or throw yourself in your ignorance on the local nurseryman or seedsman. The advantage of the first course is that you will get an idea what the finished product looks like—though not necessarily in your untutored hands. If you take the second course the need to make decisions is shifted from you to the specialist, and so long as you have the cash you can follow your fancy in the plants that do best in your district.

Even before this, however, it's a good idea to look around and see where you would grow things—to find, in fact, the places to fit the plants. Suppress that anarchic impulse that lands you home saying, "Look at this beautiful little

Being further hints for the Plain Gardener, this time on how to avoid making the same mistakes as he made last autumn

*koelreuteria paniculata*—now where can we put it?" The answer may be the dustbin.

Most gardeners agree that there should be in every garden some ornamental trees as well as shrubs. Their height gives an effect of spaciousness. Don't let this idea run away with you, though, for large trees in some gardens give the same effect as brussels sprouts in a window-box. Remember also when you plant them that they grow up. Otherwise that kawaka may have to be trimmed to the shape of a tuning fork after a few years to allow for the power lines.

When choosing trees don't forget that some keep their leaves in autumn while others lose them. Those that lose them are best placed near the house, where they will give shade in summer but won't block out the sun in winter. The evergreens, regardless of their name, often have coloured leaves, and a couple of these brighten up the place in winter. Choose a permanent home for your trees—they like it that way. This "see how it looks here—I'll shift it if you don't like it" attitude can develop into an arboreal tragedy with the tree giving up the unequal struggle and the garden looking forever like a ploughed field.

If you want to plant shrubs a combination of exotics and natives makes a good border. As in the geographical equivalent, the foreigners provide the splashes of colour while the natives set them off with their more subtle differences. This is because few native shrubs excel in showy flowers but get their effect rather from their variety of foliage. For the same reason some kinds of native shrubs make good hedges—they relieve the monotony of green that's so often found. But since nurserymen don't always carry large stocks of the more uncommon natives you shouldn't waste time if you have any big plans in mind.

On a new section you may be inclined to follow the weeds and go wild. Every day is Arbor Day, and you soon reach a point where you have to be a pretty good hurdler to get to the clothes line, and children at the crawling age are found only by peering, worm's eye view fashion, through the shrubbery. Once again, a plan on paper of what you hope ultimately to do is the answer. This should guide you in the types of trees and shrubs you will need to buy.

It's not much use telling you exactly what

you should buy, for local conditions must always be reckoned with. And it's a question not only of what will grow in your district but of what is available when you want it. Local botanical gardens and horticultural societies and some of the books in your local library should help you here.

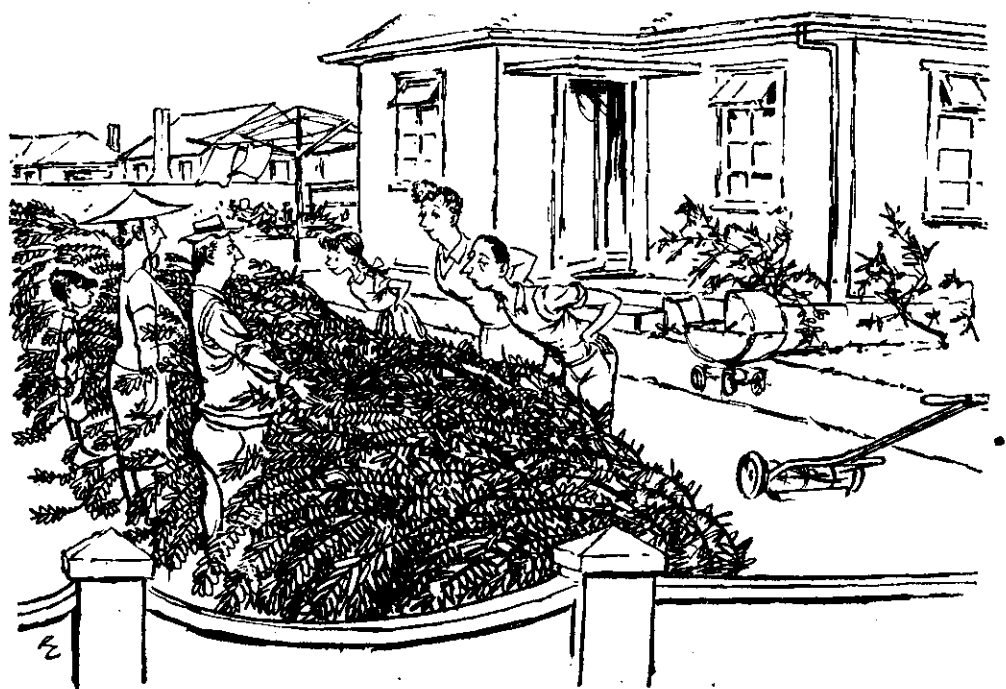
Once the trees and shrubs are ordered preparations can begin—that is, if the garden isn't ankle-deep in mud. First dig and dig and dig. This is particularly necessary if you're going to plant a hedge. Uneven cultivation will mean uneven growth and a hedge that looks like the battlements of a castle. Once the digging is finished, work some organic matter into the soil—compost, good animal manure, blood and bone or general fertiliser. When the plants arrive their roots will probably be wrapped in scrim. Leave this on until you're ready to plant, otherwise the soil on the roots will drop off and the roots dry out. Now dig a hole of reasonable size so that the plant will be set in at the same depth as in the nursery. You can tell this by the soil mark on the stem. If you're in a windy area and don't want your shrubs or what have you to develop a lean or blow away, now is the time to put a stake in, too—while the hole is open. Then tread the soil back firmly as you fill the hole and the job is almost finished.

If you're planting a hedge, especially on a new section in an exposed position, you must give some protection against the wind—that is, if you want it to grow quickly and upright, or at all. Sacking can be used, or brushwood interlaced in strands of wire.

When everything is planted, level the soil off and give the plants a good pick-me-up in the form of a light dressing of blood and bone. Then sprinkle sawdust over the bare areas to keep down the weeds. This shouldn't be sawdust from treated timber—that is, timber treated with wood preservative—because it won't rot and certainly won't preserve your plants.

Escallonia, Ionicera, olearia and other evergreen hedges should have been trimmed last month. This is a bit late with advice, you might say, but here we want not merely to say you've missed the bus, but to warn you against running after it. For if the job hasn't been done it's best to leave it till after the winter. Cutting evergreen plants in the winter—or even earlier when there are cold winds and frost—is like putting your gravel-rash in the ice-box. Wounds don't like cold, and every snip, snip of the shears makes wounds galore. So if you're wise go easy on the knife from now on and preserve the health of your hedge. This doesn't apply, of course, to deciduous plants which lose interest in life when the weather turns cold and stay indifferent till they get that spring feeling in the sap.

Like Pancho Villa at midnight, now is the time to be panting over the border. Most herbaceous and many bedding plants finish flowering in May, and when the flowers disappear you'll find the scruffy residue a bit depressing. As top growth is also finished in most cases for the winter, you can be almost as tidy as you like about it. Cut back strongly. Do have just a little restraint,



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