

MUSINGS FROM THE SHED MAY 2024



This year the Summer Olympics will be held in Paris and it is also 100 years since the Olympics were last held there. The Olympics are all about the fastest, the longest and the toughest so I will be casting an eye over some of the athletic giants of the plant world.

Take Bamboo: Bamboo is the **fastest**-growing plant on Earth. In fact, the Chinese moso bamboo can grow almost a metre in a single day.



Bamboo grows in dense forests where little light reaches the ground and there is strong evolutionary pressure to reach the sunlight as quickly as possible. Bamboo shoots are connected to their parent plant by an underground stem, called a rhizome. This means the shoot doesn't need any leaves of its own, until it reaches full height. Bamboo also grows with constant diameter. Unlike woody plants, bamboo doesn't waste energy on growth rings that progressively thicken the stalk. It's just a single stick, growing straight up.



The Chinese Bamboo garden at the 2023 Floriade in The Netherlands showcased the commercial benefits of using bamboo as both fences and features in modern gardens.



The **longest** race in the Games is the Marathon and the Greek name for fennel is *marathon* (μάραθον) or *marathos* (μάραθος) and the place of the famous battle of Marathon and the subsequent sports event Marathon (Μαραθών), literally means a plain with fennels



The Olympics are all about winning, of being first. So, in the spirit of healthy competition here is a quiz about **FIRSTS**

1. When were the first garden hoses made?
2. When did the first European garden hose appear?
3. When was the earliest record of bonsai?
4. When did the first lawns appear?
5. Who invented the first greenhouse in 1619?

6. Who discovered the concept of "microclimates"?
7. Who was the first to popularize, if not invent, flower pots?
8. What firm produced the first garden catalogue with prices?
9. When and where was the earliest western depiction of a wheelbarrow?
10. Who is believed to have been the first to invent the wheelbarrow?

Answers will be in **last place** in this month's Musings

The gardens created for the London Olympics in 2012 were designed to provide green spaces for athletes and visitors as well as showcasing sustainability and biodiversity. Many of these gardens have been integrated into the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park providing a lasting legacy for those living in that area. One of the prominent features of those London Olympic gardens were sunflowers. Chosen not only for their vibrant colours but also because they symbolically represented resilience, optimism and utility.



And befitting as something chosen to represent an event such as the Olympic games which draw together many nations, the sunflower has its own multinational history.

For a start, they are native to the **Americas** where they were cultivated as long ago as 3000 BCE. They were developed for medicines, food, dyes and oil. It was the Spanish conquistadors who introduced them to the rest of the world from 1500.

Peter the Great first saw sunflowers in the **Netherlands** and became fascinated with them and took some back to **Russia**. Their popularity in Russia grew when congregations discovered that the Russian Orthodox Church did not ban the sunflower seed oil, unlike other oils, during Lent. By the 19th century two million acres of sunflowers were planted annually in Russia.



It was then a return journey for sunflowers in the C19 when **Russian** immigrants to the US brought with them highly developed sunflower seeds that grew bigger blooms. This led in about 1946 to more and more US farmers, especially those in Missouri, producing sunflower oil. Cut to **France** where they are known as *tournesol* because the flower heads follow the sun as the earth moves during the day. A behaviour known as heliotropism.

In **Mexico** the flowers were thought to sooth chest pains. Among the Native American tribes, the Cherokee believed that an infusion of sunflower leaves could be used to treat kidneys and the Dakota thought they could help with pulmonary problems. But their travels really took off in 2012, when US Astronaut, Don Pettit took some sunflower seeds into **space**. In the International Space Station, Pettit used these seeds in several growing experiments.

Botanically, each seed head actually consists of thousands of tiny flowers; the outer flower petals are called ray florets and they cannot reproduce. It is in the disc florets in the middle of the head where the seeds develop and which have both male and female sex organs. They can either self pollinate, take wind-blown pollen or that transferred by insects.

In our own gardens, empty seed heads can be used as scrubbing pads for cleaning garden tools.

FROM SUNFLOWERS TO SUN

I think it was April 13th and 14th this year when we had a whole weekend of **SUN**. Since then, there have been brief bursts but the weather is certainly not balmy. The power of the sun has inspired several design features in gardens.

For centuries fair skin was considered a mark of beauty and wealth in Western countries. In European literature, references to the beauty of fair skin are myriad, found in tales of “fair maidens” and in the pale skin of painted beauties, including Venus in Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. Literature repeatedly scorned sun-darkened skin, as does Beatrice in Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*: “I am sunburnt; I may sit in a corner and cry heigh-ho for a husband.”

In the early C18, Battey Langley wrote that the sun was an inconvenience to being in the garden. ‘There is nothing more agreeable in a garden than good shade, and without it, a garden is nothing’. Dr Johnson did not agree with a formidable lady who informed him of the delights of a grotto on a sunny day, and replied that grottos were ‘more suited to toads’.



In the C17, shady arbours were constructed like this one in the Collector Earl's Garden in Arundle – and a similar structure can be seen in the painting by the Dutch artist Jacob Grimmer (1525 – c1590). As well as protecting strollers from the sun, these structures also protected them from prying eyes and liaisons could be enjoyed.

The small ads in *Amateur Gardening* offered shaded garden seats in the late C19



Rudyard Kipling took a more bracing view:

Our England is a garden and such gardens are not made

By singing 'Oh how beautiful and sitting in the shade.'

However, in the early C20, the benefits of sunshine to health began to be understood, when it was discovered that Vitamin D could be absorbed through the skin. To inform people of this benefit, the BBC produced a publication, ***Home, Health and Garden*** a compilation of household talks given in 1927 by Dr Caleb Saleeby called 'How to take a Sunbath'. "In the first place" he begins, "the sun must be shining".



Buzzing with Banned Stimulants?? How pollination can be helped.

Athletes have to be extremely careful which stimulants they are allowed during the games. However, scientists have discovered that bees – often described as the busiest of insects – given a jolt of caffeine are helped to stay on track and keep to the pollination of the target-scented flowers of the commercial crops they are used for and do not go AWOL and take in wild flowers. Scientists suggest that the caffeine helps their memories to always visit the correct crop. However, there is a problem due to the diminishing numbers of bees and thus their failure to act as propagators so scientists have come up with a novel alternative. Bubbles. Scientists at the Japan Advanced Institute of Science and Technology have used battery powered bubble blowers to spread pollen-bearing soap bubbles over the crops. They have discovered that bubbles are sticky enough to carry and deliver a pollen payload but are soft and flexible enough not to harm the blossom when they land and pop.

The Biggest and The Best

“We’re like athletes – the secret lives of giant-vegetable growers”



There are onions as big as babies, pumpkins that weigh more than a car even an 8-metre beetroot. What motivates gardeners to become a Giant Vegetable grower? The Canna UK National Giant Vegetables Championship is held every year. Last year 8 Guinness records were broken including: Largest Runner Bean Leaf (63.8 x 67.7) ; Heaviest Runner Bean (196g); Heaviest Cucumber (13.388 kg); Longest Broad Bean 43.1cm. The history of giant vegetables dates back centuries and there are records of giant vegetables being grown in countries round the world. The modern fascination with giant vegetables can be traced back to the C19 . One of the earliest instances of giant vegetable competitions is the Great Exhibition of 1851 where giant vegetables were displayed alongside agricultural and industrial marvels of the time. In

a letter to *Country Life* in 1938, a H Y Nutt wrote of his success in producing a pumpkin that weighed 136 lb and was 7'3" in diameter. It produced 334 seeds which were sold at 6d each.



And the fascination for growing these vegetables continues to the present day, but go and see for yourselves at the

Malvern Autumn Show

**Some of the silliest of garden design ideas - Sir George Sitwell
and his choice of Olympic gym equipment for young ladies**



Many of you will have visited Renishaw Hall in Derbyshire home of the Sitwell family. Sir George was a great admirer of the Italianate style. When he was making the gardens, he employed 4,000 men to dig out an artificial lake. But he had some extremely eccentric ideas, among these was one which involved stencilling willow pattern designs on the rumps of his herd of white cattle to 'improve their rather dull appearance'. (it wasn't a success as the cattle kept moving) Then there was the failure of the musical toothbrush and the miniature revolver for shooting wasps. His advice to his daughter, Edith Sitwell the poet, as a young girl was, 'There is nothing that a young man likes so much as a girl who is good at parallel bars'.

THE OLDEST TREES



Oxford Botanical Gardens contains a yew tree planted during the English Civil War.



However, the winner is the Fortingall Yew in Perthshire which is believed to be the UK's oldest tree, with an estimated age between 2,000 and 3,000 years.

Once trees reach a certain age, they are considered ancient. This means they have passed maturity and entered the third and final stage of their lifespan. The age a tree needs to reach to be considered ancient varies from species to species.

The yew is the longest-living species and isn't considered ancient until around 800 to 900 years old. Oak and sweet chestnut can both live for over 1,000 years and are ancient at 400 years. Other trees have shorter lifespans - like beech, which becomes ancient at 225 years -

THE OLYMPICS TAKE TO THE WATER

Training and competitiveness



The Seine is playing its part in the water events at the Paris Olympics. But the French used the water features at Versailles in the 17th century to practice naval manoeuvres using scaled down model battle ships. A practice also carried out on the Serpentine in London, in readiness for the real thing. Interestingly one can see a French flag on one of the ships in Hyde Park in the photo on the right.



OTHER EVENTS THIS SUMMER - THERE IS A NEW EXHIBITION AT THE GARDEN MUSEUM – LONDON

5TH May – 29th September



GARDENING BOHEMIA: BLOOMSBURY WOMEN OUTDOORS will centre on four extraordinary women and the green spaces they surrounded themselves with: writer Virginia Woolf and her garden at Monk's House; her sister artist Vanessa Bell, whose garden and studio was at nearby Charleston; arts patron and photographer Lady Ottoline Morrell, who presided over Garsington Manor; and garden designer and writer Vita Sackville-West and the gardens at Sissinghurst Castle. To whet your appetite here is an excerpt from Virginia Woolf's diary for May:

From Virginia Woolf's diary 31st May 1920

The first pure joy of the gardenweeding all day to finish the beds in a queer sort of enthusiasm which made me say this is happiness. Gladioli standing in troops, the mock orange out. We were out until 9 at night, though the evening was cold. Both stiff and scratched all over today, with chocolate earth in our nails.



Virginia and Leonard Woolf bought Monk's House at Rodmell, near Lewes in July 1919. It had three-quarters of an acre of garden with already a fine orchard and Leonard laid out the hard landscaping, designing discrete areas or rooms united by brick-paved paths.



WILD GARLIC



It's time for wild garlic and it can be found in drifts in woodland areas with moist, shady conditions. Leaves must be picked responsibly - only take what you need for your own consumption and do not pull up the bulbs to allow the plants to continue growing and then what? Try making wild garlic pesto:

60g wild garlic leaves - washed

60g rapeseed oil

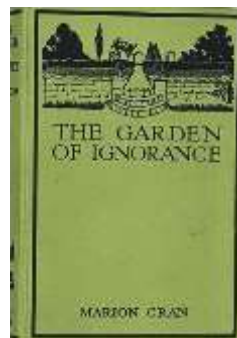
22g parmesan cheese

35g pinenuts

15ml white wine vinegar and seasoning.

Place all ingredients in a blender and whizz to a rough consistency and put in small jars. Freeze or use within two weeks. Enjoy!

WE CAN'T ALL BE WINNERS - SO SOME COMFORTING READING FOR THOSE WHO ASPIRE TO BE MEDAL WINNERS BUT KNOW IN THEIR HEART OF HEARTS THAT THEY NEVER WILL BE!



Marion Cran (1875 – 1942) was a prolific writer of books and articles on gardening including **The Garden of Ignorance**, saying 'I knew nothing at all of gardening; never did anyone know less'. However, she went on to become one of the most read authors and was tried out as the first radio talks presenter on 2LO – a post taken on later by Mr Middleton. Such was her fame and her desire to dispense garden advice to all that a ditty was written about her:

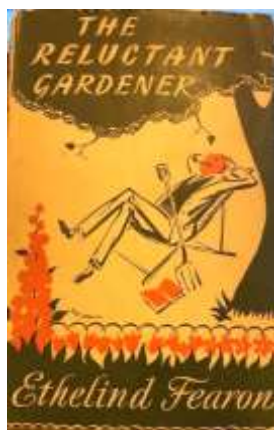
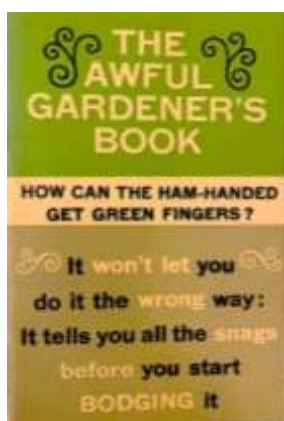
Beverley Nicholls and Marion Cran

Hadn't been born when the world began

That is the reason I must confess

Why the Garden of Eden was not a success

Cran later turned her hand to writing fiction and her book '*The Lusty Pal*' – a minor bodice ripper of its day, earned her far more than her gardening books.



My shelves groan with glossy books bursting with colour plates of perfect flower beds and splashing fountains and also the earnest 'How to...' books usually in black and white, with small print and with simple line drawings of where to prune or how to chit. And then there are the histories of the intrepid plant hunters which come with grizzly tales of being shot at by unfriendly natives, being almost drowned crossing a river with rapids or stranded miles from anywhere and starving and forced to eat your botanical samples. It is very refreshing to come across gardening books that seem to be written to comfort those of us who have a lot to learn and can only aspire to green fingers. I've chosen just three - one of my favourites is ***The Awful Gardener's Book – how can the ham-handed get green fingered.*** This was part of a series published in the 1960s of *The Awful...* which included topics such as *Cook, Bride, Slimmer, Salesman*. The cover declares *...If your garden is a loathsome thing, read the Gardening Doctor's down-to-earth prescriptions -and be not nearly so awful.* And all this help came at the modest price of 5/-

The Reluctant Gardener dates from the 1950s and was written by **Ethelind Fearon** who also wrote *The Reluctant Cook, The Reluctant Hostess, Most Happy Husbandman* and *How to Keep Pace with Your Daughter*.



I greatly enjoy this book, it feels as though it were written with a wry smile and a slight tendency to be non-PC. Such as this entry: *The Italian in noontday heat is by no means an energetic man but by judicious scheming he can dodge most of the hard work. And if an Italian can do it so can we.* However, it continues with practical advice on growing tomatoes and recommends certain varieties including *Puck*:

This is Puck which will carry six to eight trusses of the most enormous tomatoes and ripen all before the frost comes. Chosen because it needs 'no stopping, tying or staking' Perfect for the lazy gardener.

And her advice for pruning starts with '*The mere mention of pruning sends most reluctant gardeners into a cold sweat and a blue funk.*' Amusing in buckets, wise in parts and always instructional, especially in how to cut corners and cheat – it cost only 3/6 to own the work and the author, Ethelind, was dubbed very appropriately '*The doyenne of the lazy approach*'.

'*Everything you can do in the Garden without actually gardening*' is the work of Philippa Lewis. First published in 2009 it is a most interesting read. It goes into great detail backed up with photographs of pursuits such as 'A Place for Fresh Air and Exercise', 'Games for the Lawn', 'Engaging with Nature', 'A Place for Displays, Parties and Performances' and 'A place of Escape and Inspiration'. Who would have **time** for gardening with those possibilities on offer?

And **LAST** but not least the **Answers**

1. around 400BC, of ox gut
2. in 1672 in Amsterdam, made of leather
3. in wall paintings from AD706, although then known as penjing in China and not brought to Japan until AD1195, and not called "bonsai" until much later
4. in the 1st century AD, promoted in Greece by Pliny the Younger
5. the mathematician Salomon de Caus, being a movable wooden framed structure to shelter orange trees at Heidelberg Castle in Germany
6. Nathaniel Ward in 1832 with his enclosed glass boxes known as Wardian cases, and used extensively on plant explorations after
7. the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses III, about 1230BC
8. Telford family, Yorkshire, UK in 1775; previously, listings from firms had no prices
9. a stained glass window in Chartres Cathedral, France, dating to AD1220
10. Chuko Liang, a Chinese general, in AD231 for use by his troops in moving supplies through mucky soil. To that time carts had at least 2 wheels and were 2-person affairs. His had a large central wheel, flanked on either side by boxes to hold goods.

NEXT MONTH THE SPIRIT OF COMPETITION CONTINUES AS WE WILL BE LOOKING AT OTHER GOLD, SILVER GILT, SILVER AND BRONZE MEDAL WINNERS AT THE RHS CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW.