From a Dumfriesshire Garden

David Graham Clark

From a Dumfriesshire Garden

Pennyland Press is an independent publisher founded by David Graham Clark. It focuses on works of memoir, chronicle, narrative and reflection - both fiction and non-fiction.

More material of this type can be found at:
davidgrahamclark.net - blog
https://anchor.fm/david-clark14 - podcast

Contact: david.graham.clark53@gmail.com

First published in 2022 by ©Pennyland Press.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilised in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from Pennyland Press.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
ISBN: 978-1-7397652-0-0

From a Dumfriesshire Garden

David Graham Clark

Pennyland Press

Acknowledgements

Some people deserve my special thanks for inspiring and helping me with this book, which I designed and produced myself, using the Blurb platform. Hugh Bryden, for technical and editorial advice. Sue Scott and Michael Bloor, for feedback on my writing. Andrew Walls, for his enthusiasm about my garden musings. Colin Crosbie, for horticultural wisdom. I'm grateful to them all. The book covers the life of the garden in 2021: another remarkable year spent with Fiona Graham and Miriam Graham Clark, for whose presence I am eternally thankful.

Introduction

The garden you will find here has been 25 years in the making. Captured from clumps of dead ash trees, nettles and countless alders, it has emerged over time and from the first modest border, is still emerging.

Circumnavigated by the Pennyland Burn, the Dumfriesshire garden sits in the Dalswinton Moraine and owes its topography to the last Ice Age. Straddling a substantial drumlin, extruded by the retreating glacier and later sliced through by the burn, if you dig a spade's depth here you'll mostly hit glacial deposits. I'm still using a pinch bar for planting in some belligerent spots.

The person who is the love of my life once told me that this place is the love of my life. I believe both person and place can and do live in creative harmony and in this book I celebrate the shared passing of a single year, observed close up in a special way.

This is not a book about COVID-19, lockdown or the febrile times through which we have been living. I make some references to these things, but chiefly this is a book about a year focussed on the rhythms and rumbles of the seasons, the unfolding months, the passing days and the timeless hours that each bring their rewards when energy is directed towards them.

My methods in making the book have been simple. In the course of 2021 I wrote short musings about events and circumstances in and around the garden. In addition I carried a smart phone with me, taking photographs as I went about my quotidian garden tasks, as well as on dog walks and in quiet moments of repose.

Out of the resulting material, I've made a selection of words and images, from the start of the year to its close. It's not a comprehensive account of the year, but rather an idiosyncratic miscellany of fragments. A kind of *bricolage*.

There is a vast literature on gardens and gardening. I add little to this. I am no horticulturlist, but simply an *amateur* open to the full potential of the garden I have created, and its power in turn to resonate with others who encounter it. I can see ways in which I have both made the garden and it has made me.

Whoever picks up this little volume will enter my world in 2021, however tangentially. The Dumfriesshire garden is in my care for the moment, and shared with you in these pages.

David Graham Clark
Dalswinton December 2021

Winter pruning: 5th January

The garden ground is frozen hard. Light snowfall settles and turns to ice, carapacing in a crusty thin layer that crunches beneath my feet.

It's a propitious time to undertake winter pruning.

I choose the easy-going hazel stems, *Corylus Avellana,* leathery barked and massing in vase-shaped clumps, topped with emergent catkins.

My newly purchased pruning saw has come from Japan and sits snugly in a wooden sheath. Curved handle, looking for all the world like an 18th century pistol.

I proceed respectfully, for the hazel is said to promote wisdom and inspiration. My saw makes light work of the task. After each cut I pull another stem free from the clump, letting in light and air.

The longest and straightest stems are destined to form two wigwams in the kitchen garden. When the snow and ice are long gone, they will support fresh green legumes - to grace a summer lunch.

The fieldstone: 12th January

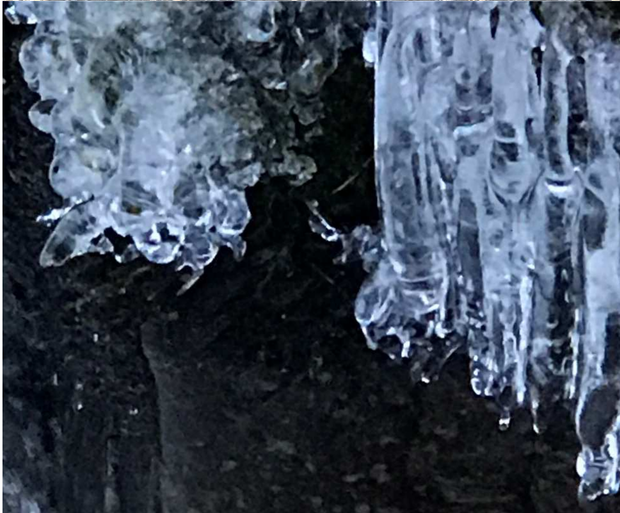
In Autumn 2020 during a lull in the lockdowns I spotted a beautiful sandstone gatepost lurking in the back of a gardener's work yard. It wasn’t hard to imagine a place where this imposing piece of stone might sit in the Dumfriesshire garden.

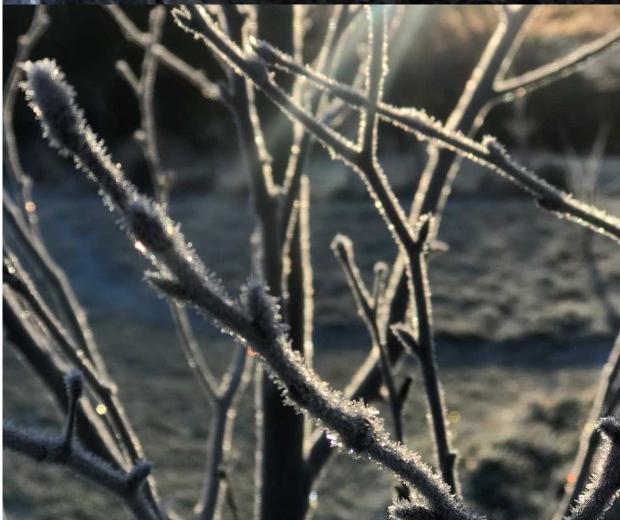
Without problem, we agreed on a sale, and a few weeks later my purchase arrived and was dropped deftly within inches of the chosen site.

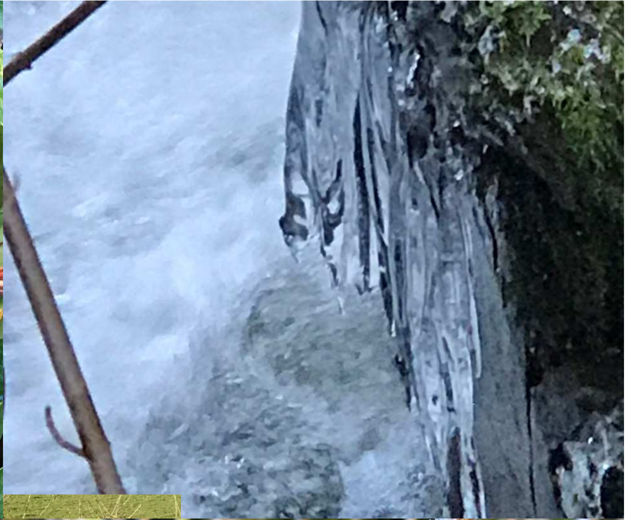
Nudging towards seven feet in length and a little under two feet at its widest point, its rounded top sweeps down elegantly to the base.The edges and the two broad faces are flecked with chiselled markings.

This month we brought it to rest. Standing upright, safe, firm and solid.

I hope a local stonemason will carve some words for me in the smooth patches between the fleck marks. I have chosen a phrase from Julian of Norwich, the Medieval mystic, who despite her multiple sorrows and tribulations, proclaimed repeatedly a sense of optimism and resolution. Her words on view in the garden might bring hope for 2021, and perhaps even for years to come?







Snowdrops at Candlemas: 2nd February

For such diminutive plants, it was a Herculean feat. After a month of frost, and with fresh snow falling, our old friend *Galanthus Nivalis* made it through just in time. For the snowdrop is closely tied to the Christian festival of Candlemas, celebrated at the start of February.

Candlemas marks the occasion when Simeon, for the first time, meets the infant Jesus with Mary in the temple, and knows he has seen the light of the world and can thus himself die fulfilled. As the *Nunc Dimmitus* has it: 'now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace'.

By the Middle Ages, the festival was celebrated in diverse and colourful ways, both within the church and outside it.

.

Candlemas meant pageants, plays, municipal feasts and candle-lit processions. The white ‘Candlemas bells’, often planted in graveyards, were gathered into bright bunches for church decoration on the appointed day, and deemed unlucky to pick before it. An air of celebration prevailed.

Yet the timing of Candlemas resonates with something far more ancient than the Christian world. The day in question is the mid-point between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. It is adjacent to Imbolc, the Irish festival that later became the day of St Brigid, and which is associated with fertility.

This day, the very middle of winter, was and remains a time for light, for hope, for saying goodbye to the darkness and waiting for the harbingers of spring. It was undoubtedly important to the earliest people of these islands, now long gone.

Meanwhile, the snowdrops remain, and this year they have taken on another significance for me. Eagerly awaited, delicate yet tough, they have arrived just when we needed them most. In 2021 perhaps we see them in a new light, emerging through the iron-gripped cold of lockdown and, we must hope. leading us beyond it.

Stacking wood: 18th February

Robert Frost's evocative poem, *The Wood-Pile*, mourns a beautiful 'cord' of maple: cut, carefully stacked in the forest, and then apparently abandoned. It leans precariously and is 'far from a useful fireplace'.

Discovered by the poet, on a wintry walk, Frost considers this must relate to someone who flits from one thing to another, forsaking and forgetting past achievements - to leave so carelessly such a useful stockpile.

To the contrary, my own thinking settles on another interpretation. Surely, the person is no longer alive. For what woodcutter would relinquish such a carefully assembled horde, other than through death?

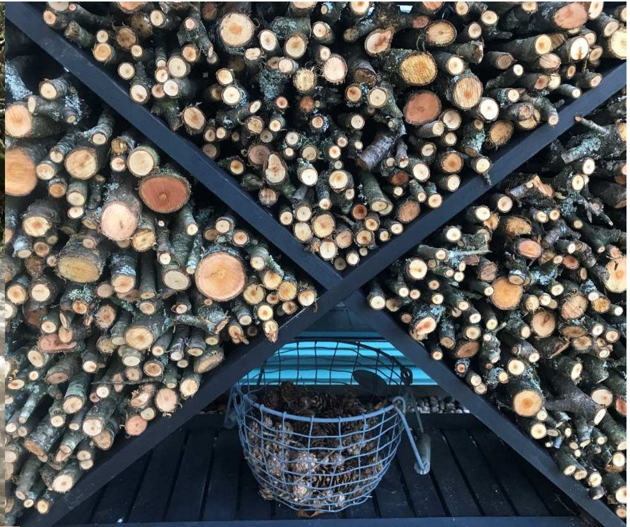
I've long been a devotee of well constructed woodpiles, often spotting and admiring them on walks and journeys.

My own efforts are simple, but even then I try to proceed with respect and diligence. Enquiring from whence the wood comes, how long it has been cut, and the provenance of the trees is important. So too is attention to the stacking.

Which is why this week I was curious to receive a delivery of firewood where as part of the service, the logs would be stacked for me. I watched in admiration as barrow load after barrow load was tipped in front of a young man who then stowed them to perfection.

Like a dry stone dyker, he selected each piece of wood with care and then placed it with confidence in such a way that the log sat snug and neat with its neighbours, eased into an almost pre-ordained position. His spatial economy created an end-grain jigsaw of satisfying complexity, with never a need for a second try.

Why should such things matter, I ask myself? I am not by temperament a perfectionist. But the perfect order in a wood shed full of beech, sycamore, birch and ash brings an inner pleasure. It is not for abandoning. In fact my new woodstack pays a double dividend. It will warm my home when next winter comes, and it warms my spirit now, as I pass it each morning on my way to the garden.



Time to act: 4th March

Derek Jarman, film maker and horticultural improviser, once said ‘if a garden’s not shaggy, forget it’. His view is one to which I mainly subscribe.

I am also opposed to ‘putting the garden to bed for winter’. Who would not take pleasure in fragile bracts dusted with frost, towering stems of rheum spikes turning hollow, dying grasses that rustle and sway in the westerly wind? Or birds feeding on poppy heads and finding countless bugs among yellowing iris fronds, now spread like the fingers of your hand, across the cold earth.

All these things enhance our experience of the garden in winter, beautifully set off by a modicum of structure - like some clipped yew or box. But now it is all change. Out with secateurs and loppers, we are ready to say a sad farewell to last year’s growth, as it makes way for the new.

At the beginning of March, a measure of order is required. It's the moment to bring things into a state of readiness that will facilitate the splendour of spring.

Herbaceous foliage, brown and damp, is the first to go, followed by perennial weeds. Now we see the scattered bounty of the thieving blackbird, as raspberry stems poke up where they are least wanted. Turning to the peonies, I resolve to push in new birch twigs and then mulch. If I get it done before the new growth comes through, it will be a first.

Just one bitter-sweet task remains. Cornus branches - sanguinous, black stemmed, green stemmed - all must go. Enjoyed for months in the winter light, in frost and in snow, now they yield to the loppers, cut down into great bundles, bigger than your arms can hold.

I love dogwoods. Never mind that someone once told me they belong only in car parks and on roundabouts. Their gorgeous cut stems will continue to bring pleasure in the coming weeks, giving an artistic air to the dead hedge. Some I'll bring into the house to sit in a large glass jar filled with water and pebbles. And of course soon the Cornus stumps will be breaking into new growth out in the garden, and the whole cycle will begin again. Standing now at the gates of Spring, with the garden about to burst open, it's time to act ...

Frog season: 11th March

The tell-tale signs began to emerge a few weeks ago. Members of the family *Ranidae* were appearing in the porch on rainy nights. Some were found in watering cans. Others came out of woodpiles and from dry stone walls. The evidence was clear. Frog season was upon us.

This year it began in earnest on Wednesday 10th March, in the afternoon, to be precise. The protagonists went about their task with considerable enthusiasm, setting alive a shallow spot on the edge of the garden pond with their urgent need to reproduce. Next day, a hubble-bubble of spawn brimmed at the surface of the water.

Frog he would a wooing go' is a verse that first appears in The *Complaynt of Scotland* of 1549, as a satirical rejoinder to the 'rough wooing' by which Henry VIII sought to break the auld alliance and have Mary, Queen of Scots, marry his son Edward. In that version it is entitled 'The frog cam to the myl dur'.

Frog wants to marry Miss Mouse, but needs the permission of Uncle Rat. After numerous versifications, each with some repeating refrain or other, consent is duly given, albeit with various diversions along the way. But then, despite the anticipated ceremony and the accompanying celebrations, in most versions things end badly and by predation. As the great Dick Gaughan once said, whilst introducing one of the bloodier border ballads, 'this is the one where the guy gets killed'.

Meanwhile, two days after the rough wooing in the pond, all was calm. The protein rich spawn was everywhere. Suddenly the peace was broken by a prehistoric-like bird flying in, head hunched in its grey-blue plumage, its beak like an awl. Landing in the shallow littoral with crazy back-drafting wings hard at work, it took up position right next to the largest and most bulbous batch of eggs in their glutinous caul. Froggy *did* a wooing go, but now the heron was here - and seemed to have supper in mind.

Late frosts: 21st April

Over past weeks, the most memorable feature in the garden has been the heavy frosts we encounter each morning. Following a cloudless night and just before light is about to break, the sharp sub-zero air descends, so that by the 7am dog walk, a white carpet awaits us, soon set off by the sun's slanting rays.

The beautiful early morning scene also brings a sense of disappointment, even an intimation of mortality.

Many flowering plants are dipping their heads in mourning. Narcissi of all persuasions, short and tall, look funereal in their stooped posture. Hellebores lay in flat fans on the frosty ground, awaiting the sun's CPR. Ceanothus, magnolias and early azaleas suffer most, their leaves blackened and emergent blooms cut down before their time.

We wonder when the cold will end and search for signs to mitigate the chill. Then, as the month of April turns into its final stages, the air suddenly warms, scythingly bitter winds moderate: and the garden breathes in relief. But this year as it turns out, not for very long.

The big border: 21st May

When visiting large gardens, I’m often inspired by the long border that is crammed with herbaceous plants and shrubs, sometimes sprinkled with topiary or elevated by decorative trees. It can be a thing of splendour that stirs the gardener's ambition and unfolds its treasures in phase after phase of forms, colours and movements, revealed through the rhythms of the year.

Which is why, when I began to rent the field next to my garden in 2015, I quickly decided to start something like it myself. Six years on, it has come to be known, rather prosaically as ‘the big border’: roughly 24 metres long and 8 metres wide.

The border has a southerly aspect, but with no protecting wall or hedge, it is prone to cold blasts that sear in from the north east, as well as wet volleys from our prevailing south westerlies. Add in that it sits at the edge of a field where ploughed-out stones have been dumped since Patrick Miller began his improvements here in 1785, and you can quickly see some of the challenges.

That said, I have been more and more pleased with the big border as each year goes by. It's a part of the garden that as the year advances, just keeps on giving.

From the early daffodils, hellebores and arums, to the Jacob's ladder, then the azaleas and on to the coppery red Great Dixter euphorbias, and the bronze elders - once the the big border cranks into gear it doesn't let up. Then come the geraniums, the white foxgloves, the irises, lupins and lavender, Indian love grass, eryngium, oxeye daisies, the day lilies and the colocasia.

By mid-summer there are countless plants I'm struggling to name, their labels lost or never present. The roses are blooming at full-tilt. Soon we have the crocosmias – orange, yellow and deep red – and then a little later, the Japanese anenomes, verbena, sedum, asters, eupatorium and heleniums. Some of these can keep a worthy display going until the end of November, frosts permitting. When all flowers are gone, the clipped box, juniper, cryptomeria and western red cedar gradually appear to the eye and make for real interest in the shortest days, slowly disappearing from view again when spring returns.

I'm lucky to have the big border, and I see it each time I leave and return to my home. It's a haven for bees and birds of many kinds. Yes, it needs a robust haircut and weeding in early spring. But beyond that it largely looks after itself and provides interest of some kind for 12 months of the year: a perfect garden almanac.

Meconopsis: 25th May

The Himalayan Blue Poppy has a special place in my gardening affections, though over the years I've not had huge success in growing it. When a couple of years back, I made progress and got a small clump established, I was therefore content.

So in autumn 2019, with the poppy heads nice and ripe and just as a visiting deer started to nip them off for a tasty snack, I collected a paper bagful of pods and cracked out the fine black seed before storing it carefully in a labelled envelope.

In March 2020 I filled several trays with seed, scattered on damp compost, with fine grit over the top. By May I had a gratifying array of seedlings. By July I was transplanting.

At Lammas, when a sense of early autumn pervades the morning air in these parts, I felt confident they could be planted out from their four inch pots. They looked extremely promising in their permanent home, near a rill that runs from the burn into the pond.

Over Winter my *Meconopis* slumbered beneath the leaf mould, disappearing completely. Returning hesitantly in March, they were un-phased by the Spring frosts.

Today, to my delight, I have spotted my first two flowering plants, their blooms not quite fully unfolded but looking majestic in a porcelain deep blue. I feel ridiculously pleased about it.

I've read that the blue poppy was first cultivated by the French botanist Viguier in 1814. There are many named varieties, often shrouded in debate as to provenance. Privately, I intend to call my new arrivals *Meconopsis Pennylandis*, after the lovely burn that runs close by.

I have just acquired a rather splendid greenhouse. I suspect it will be packed with *Meconopsis* seed trays next Spring. Assuming of course that I'm not been thwarted by the deer!

Camassia magic: 4th June

In 2016 in the emerging arboretum field adjacent to the garden, I planted these delicate blue Camassias inside a circle of nine hazels. From time to time they get new botanical companions that blow in from around the plot. Taking a while to establish, this year the Cammassia bulbs have settled in and brought huge reward to the patient gardener.

Who could fail to enjoy this wonderful mixture of colour and form, spreading contentedly through old pasture? It's a haven for bees, butterflies, moths and assorted bugs.

It also has symbolic power.

In the middle of the circle is a figurative well. This represents the well, surrounded by the nine hazels, from which, legend has it, the Irish giant Fionn mac Cumhaill took the salmon of wisdom. He was quite a giant, Fionn. On one occasion, he threw a great rock to chase off his adversaries. It landed in the Irish Sea and became the Isle of Man.

Indeed, it's said that if a day goes by without Fionn's name being uttered, then the world will come to an end. So I’m glad I mentioned him today.

Cobra lily: 19th June

I readily admit that I am no plantsman. My approach to the garden is to focus on the full symphony rather than the constituent notes. But this weekend it was a real pleasure to have a close encounter with two particular plants, each I think with a distinctly exotic air. Both are forms of lily.

The first, seen here looking settled and stunning in the Dumfriesshire rain, is *Arisaema Candidissimum*. The Chinese or Striped Cobra Lily. I bought three of these last year and decided to plant them in an old salt glazed agricultural trough, fairly close to the house. They look almost too delicate to be outside, but seem to be thriving.

I read that *A. Candidissimum* was first introduced into Britain from Yunnan (the most south-western province in China) by George Forrest, in 1914.

I'm delighted that it is now safely ensconced with me and other gardeners, in the most south-western region of Scotland: Dumfries and Galloway. Looking perfect and quite content.

Voodoo lily: 20th June

My second exotic example is the Voodoo Lily, or Devil’s Tongue. Either way it sounds quite scary. Its Latin name is *Amorphophallus Titanum.*

With *A. Titanum*, we get into seriously strange territory. For one day only it gives off the smell of rotting meat, attracting associated flies that buzz around and inside the plant, in what when I saw it, looked like a frenzy of destruction.

The flies apparently pollinate the plant. In general, I would stick with bees and butterflies as my favoured candidates for this job, but the black flies do appear effective and Devil’s Tongue seems to have found an ecological niche.

But after this treatment, my three plants looked anything but happy. Apparently this may be a passing phase, and before too long another shoot will emerge and produce an umbrella of attractive foliage.

8 August - additional note.

The resurgence of the Voodoo Lily some weeks after its first bewildering appearance and disappearance did in fact come to pass, revealing gorgeous spreading leaves and beautifully patterned stems.

'All shall be well': 21st June

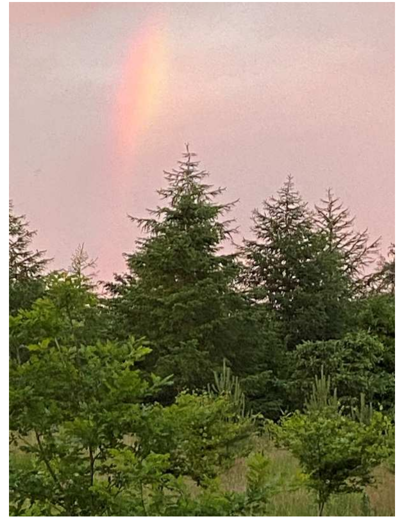
Max Nowell is a man of many skills: dry stone dyker, small holder, artist and cider maker, to name just a few. He is also well known in these parts for his ability to carve rope patterns into our local Locharbriggs sandstone. I figured that a small piece of lettering on my fieldstone would not task him unduly.

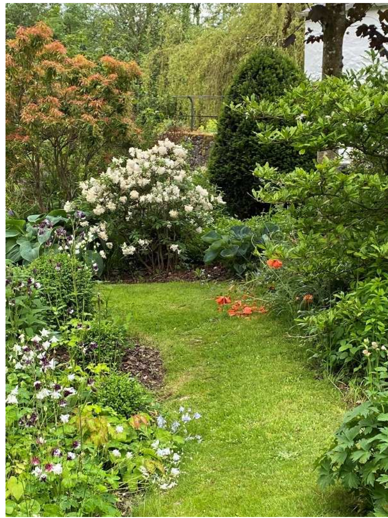
Back in the winter I had decided on a quotation from the medieval English mystic, Julian of Norwich. Julian struggled with the existence of sorrow and bad things in the world. I thought about her during the pandemic as we sought to question why such a thing can happen and what might follow from it.

I don’t think it is necessary to be a believer to accept her injunction, made in the face of suffering and a vision of what might follow. It seems perfectly acceptable to a secular optimist such as myself: *All shall be well*.

Max and I settled on a combination of Gothic and Times Roman for the script. He completed the work in two short visits. Now, on my regular walks through the garden each day, I stop at the stone and give myself time to reflect on Julian’s words and the hope with which they are imbued.

ALL
SHALL
BE WELL





Summer delicacies: 15th July

In all my decades of garden pottering, this year is the first in which I have owned a greenhouse. It has delighted me in three ways.

First, it's a lovely place to sit, drink a coffee and reflect on the world at large, or simply the plants that surround me. Second, it totally enhances the process of growing from seed, which becomes an organised pleasure rather than a fiddly and unpredictable chore. Third, and most importantly, it extends and transforms the growing of crops we love to eat in summer - notably salads and herbs of many types, and of course tomatoes!

One successful crop this year that required no protection from the elements, however, was garlic. Planted outdoors last September and harvested in June, its long growing period is more than compensated by the firm and flavoursome bulbs that result, and which should last us for months ahead.

Age 10 I took the train each Saturday to my grandmother's, where I had my own tiny vegetable plot of radishes, spring onions and lettuce. The memory lives on, even now.

Patterns in the turf: 8th August

Maze or labyrinth? Until recently I thought they were interchangeable, synonymous even. Not so. My brother Peter explained: a labyrinth is unicursal. What an evocative word. A single enclosed line, space or path: from the Latin *cursus*, meaning course.

I found a drawing of a classical form with just three paths and a central circle. It would fit within a screen of hornbeam I planted a few years ago. Half an hour of head scratching and measurement with gardener Jules Gillam gave us the shape on the ground before she put the mower to work. The result was inspiring and can be seen here by the light of moon and sun.

I now 'walk the labyrinth’ every morning and evening. From the first circumnavigation my social science scepticism fell away. Walking into and then out of the labyrinth brings precious time to set aside for uncluttering the mind and focussing on the moment. I have found that as I concentrate more on my steps and on my thoughts, arrival at the exit to the labyrinth brings a surprising sense of release and freedom.

Call this the pointless musing of a recovering academic if you will, but I find myself day by day, literally and metaphorically, drawn into the enriching elements of the labyrinth experience.

The pineapple lily: 28th September

A chance encounter with a new gardening magazine recently led me to a plant called *Eucomis*, part of a sub-family of asparagus. A native of several countries in southern Africa, in its natural habitat it favours moist settings, alongside streams and swamps, but can grow in more exposed hilly areas as well.

There seemed much to admire about it. Gorgeous wide leaves, suggestive of gentle climes and wonderfully restful to the eye, a remarkably elegant creamy-white flower rising up from the centre of the basal rosette and topped with a spiky green fringe, like a miniature pineapple.

First described in the late 18th century, the name comes from the Greek *eu* (good or pleasing) and *kome* (hair of the head).

It wasn't difficult to be tempted by this new find. Yet the more I read, the less confident I was that such a plant would survive beyond a single season in the Dumfriesshire garden. I imagined one hopeful display, followed by abortive searches the following year and the gradual realization that on this terrain, the bulbous specimen perennial was merely an annual.

Then a thought struck me.

Earlier this year, and for the first time in my fairly long gardening history, I had become the owner of a rather splendid greenhouse. I'd already put a few ailing houseplants inside among the tomatoes, salads and herbs and found the new setting had remarkably restorative properties.

Looking beyond the summer, I had started to muse on which plants might thrive and give pleasure in the glass house as the cooler weather and shorter days drew nigh.

Eucomis would be a step in the direction of this ‘plant house’ experiment. In the month of August however, I wasn’t sure if I had missed the boat for this particular plant. But finding *Eucomis* bulbs still available for sale, I decided to take a punt. I ordered two packs of six bulbs each, and then rashly bought a rather more expensive single bulb.

The bulbs soon arrived. On Saturday 22 August my daughter and I gathered in the potting shed, where I encouraged her to carefully plant up and label them. It was a lovely parent and child interlude in which we did full justice to a modest endeavour. Indeed, it was a brief reminder of my old grammar school motto – *aut nuquam tentes, aut perfice*. If a job is worth doing, it's worth doing well.

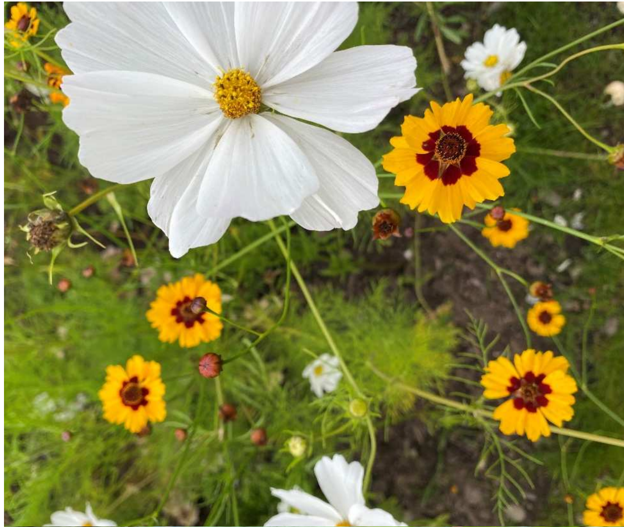
To our delight, in about 10 days green shoots were appearing in the pots. By 15 September the flower stems were emerging and for well over a week now (late September) they have been reaching a slow crescendo of delight.

I think the bi-coloured form shown here, with its waxy off-white flowers etched with purple, may be *Eucomis Montana*. It also has speckled leaves and stem and is slighter taller than the others. It looks very elegant as a singleton in a tall pot. *Eucomis Autumnalis* has other merits, and with its shorter stems and frothier white flowers, looks good in a group.

Exotic plants in the greenhouse! I feel like a new venture has opened up.

The tomatoes are now cleared out, an ancient Benares table and a couple of chairs have been installed. It's the perfect spot to take a cup of coffee and enjoy a close up look at my new friends from the *Eucomis* family.

Now I just need to work out how to store them safely over the winter, in hopes of a return visit next September!



The year of the courgette: 19th October

The hot summer, punctuated with pulses of heavy rain, seems in these parts to have made 2021 the year of the courgette, or zucchini, or maarroo, or small marrow - depending on where in the world you live.

In March I made an early courgette sowing in the greenhouse. By the start of June, flowers began to appear and by the middle of the month, my young courgettes were on show in all their ribald glory.

Soon they were brought into the kitchen for griddling, then dressed with olive oil and lemon juice, salt and pepper, to delight us all. After a week or two, pieces of feta cheese were added to the ensemble, to give extra appeal. By mid-July, cherry tomatoes became another key ingredient, along with beautiful fresh basil and garlic – all grown on the domain.

As the summer advanced I installed three courgette plants in the vegetable patch. Courgette soup quickly followed, then courgette ‘farcie’, and eventually courgette cake. At this point a truce was called. Now I became like one of Pavlov’s dogs, studiously avoiding 'courgette corner'. A state of denial continued into late August, when I chanced to look into that raised bed of fecundity.

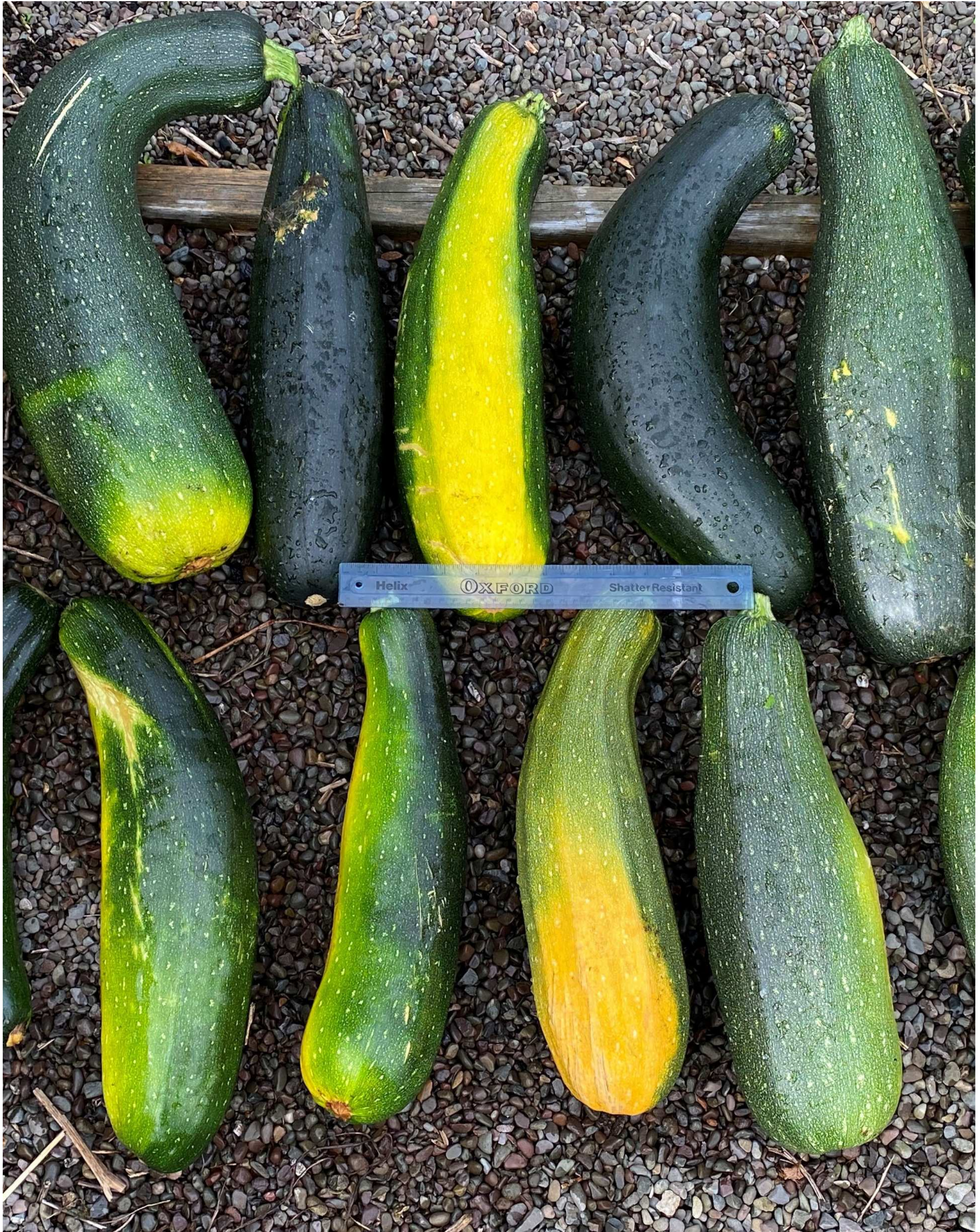
There it appeared that not one, not two, but a dozen over-sized courgettes, now fully fledged marrows, were lying among the foliage like green hump back whales or even unexploded World War Two ordinance.

Making a bee line for the potting shed I returned with a Hori Hori knife, given to me some Christmases back.

It proved the perfect tool for the marrow harvest, a sort of vegetal Nordic ‘grind’ where hapless victims were dispatched *en masse*. I laid out the magnificent specimens and photographed them immediately, for posterity.

I then emailed a neighbour who keeps chickens. Perhaps the hens would like to peck away at the split marrows, providing both nutrition and distraction in the long summer days? My offer was politely declined, the neighbour explaining that she too was experiencing courgette over supply and the hens were already complaining.

I thought the story might end there. But no. Quite quickly a second flush of new courgettes appeared on the outdoor plants and these offerings simply had to be taken to the kitchen.


Helix
OXFORD
Shatter Resistant

Then, in mid-October, leaving to visit friends in Lancashire, I put together a haul of home grown produce. I found a few only slightly over-sized courgettes that were later transformed by my expert pals into various culinary delights and displayed on Facebook

But in the process of harvesting, I had seen that we now had a *second marrow crop* of prize-winning proportions. Fortunately, a breakthrough came. Whilst away, I read somewhere that unwanted pumpkins could be cut in half and turned into attractive bird feeders. Simply scoop out and add seeds, along with windfall apples or any other attractive pecking material, and the garden birds will feast. Could it work for my green monsters at home?

Now back from holiday, my Japanese garden knife is about to be put to a new use. I'll soon be slicing marrows roughly into the shape of a Thames barge, and then filling their hulls with autumn garden bounty – to delight blackbird, robin, blue tit and finch. In an act of supreme charity I may even lay some 'barges' on the ground for the benefit of the pheasants.

The year of the courgette is coming to an end. It may not pass this way again for a while. Meantime, the courgette patch is frost free and still appears healthy. More than that I cannot say. In the last few weeks, I haven't dared to look closely!

Aspects of Autumn: 30th November

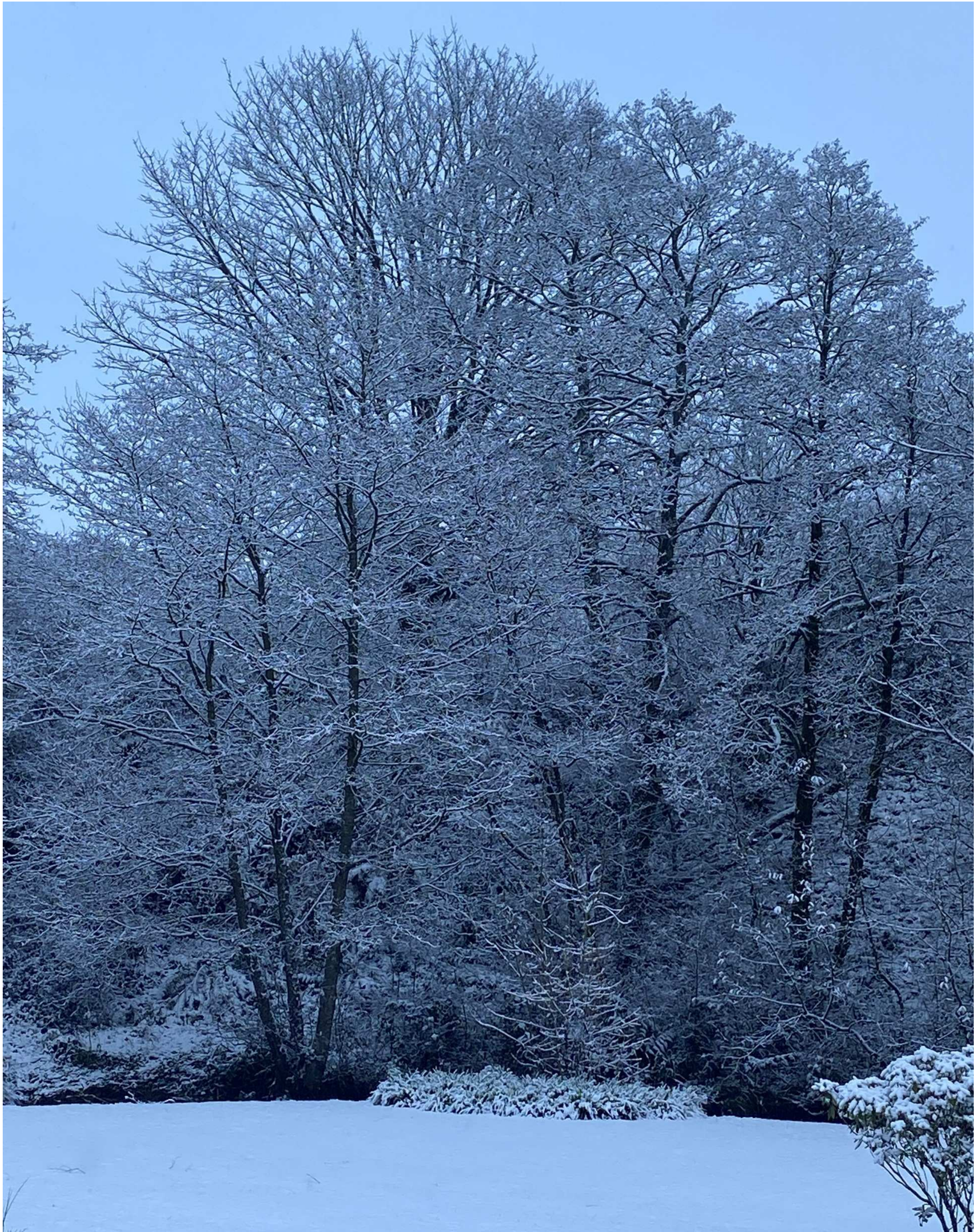
The season of mellow fruitfulness is now at an end. The apples are gathered in, and I go into my writing shed each day to be greeted by complex notes of Galloway Pippin, Melrose White and Bramley. The autumn stock of pickles and preserves awaits the feasting of winter. Beautiful parsley literally shines in the raised bed but is also in pots in the greenhouse for when the cold grips for days at a time. The new garlic is planted, and already poking through into the shortening daylight.

Amongst all this is the pleasant and additional bounty of living right next to that inspiring watercourse, the Pennyland Burn. At various times these past weeks, the heavy rains have transformed the placid summer burbling of the burn into a raging torrent of fearsome proportions. Care is needed when walking the dog. We keep clear of the rushing current as it hurtles down to the weir and then drops a good 10 feet to the pool below. The water is brown, strewn with leaves and debris and speeding downstream faster than you can walk. On and below the surface it is carrying flotsam from the woods and hills upstream.

As the flood fines down therefore, the burn has much to reveal.

A new deep pool has emerged in one spot and looks a favourable lie for migratory fish. Among the stones I see splendid blue-green Scots slates, irregular in size and thickness, and marked with beautifully punched holes, where sat the nails that once held them to a steading roof. I spy twelve bore cartidges of plastic and metal, a fertilizer sack, a broken bucket and other desiderata. Here and there are pieces of Locharbriggs sandstone, washed down from the collapsed mill lade wall, a few hundred yards upstream. A rotting pheasant carcass lays at the water's edge.

The Pennyland Burn runs round the perimeter of the Dumfriesshire garden. A watery boundary that provides constant movement and a varied spectrum of ambient sound. I delight in what more than one person has called this *magical* stretch of water, sweeping round from the north, falling sharply at the weir into a steep gorge before reaching the flood plain, disappearing three miles down in a mini delta, and then into the River Nith. The burn brings interest and pleasure all year round, and at this time of year, following heavy rain, it also provides a delightful gift of ash branches, oak limbs and pine kindling. Once dried, chopped, and stacked, these make a fabulous haul of driftwood to feed the winter fire. For the snow is just around the corner.



The waning moon and the labyrinth: 2nd December

Seven o'clock in the morning

The waning moon cuts a sharp white arc from its own mottled shadow. I'm walking with a five foot staff, taken from an ash coppice. It's for utility, not affectation. In any case there is no one to see me or it. A cold north-west wind is blowing, and the grass is glutted with frost. Out from the garden, to the rising drumlin ground. Should I walk the whole arboretum field and meet up with my fossicking dog as I return? Or choose the adjacent labyrinth, where he will lay at the boundary, patiently awaiting my next move? I decide for the labyrinth. It's 'as good a place as any to begin'. Two external co-ordinates shape the reverie. By turns, the biting north-wester sears my face and back; whilst the morning moon patrols the eastern sky, just above the treetops. In the almost-dark I can't see the tiny Cedar of Lebanon at the labyrinth's centre. Looping round where I know it to be, I continue the unicursal path to the labyrinth mouth. The place of entering and leaving.

Now I am saying goodbye to the night, and limping towards the new day.

(Photograph courtesy of Dr Dave Borthwick. Quote from Robin Williamson. The Barley, *Ten of Songs*, 1988).

Reflections on the 'arboretum': 16th December

The idea of the arboretum came about in 2015, when I had the opportunity to take a long lease on the field adjacent to the garden. After reading the Irish legend of the well of wisdom surrounded by nine hazels, I decided to plant various trees and shrubs in circles of nine and to link them together with mown paths through the meadow grass.

The circles currently comprise oak, dogwood, beech, hornbeam, witch hazel, mahonia japonica, viburnum - and of course, hazel. I have been astonished at how the early hardwood plantings have thrived. The more decorative shrubs have taken a little while to establish, but now add variety and colour, especially in winter.

Some circles have carefully placed stones within them and are covered with raked gravel. Elsewhere are a couple of cairns.

I walk through the arboretum field and its labyrinth at least twice a day with the family dog, and never tire of its variety and meditative opportunities. It's a place where new ideas germinate and plans of action are formed.

Catkins at year end: 31st December

Back in January, this hazel bush was comprehensively pruned and the older stems removed. The treatment appears to have been beneficial. and the show of catkins this year is like none it has produced before. The efficacy of the right intervention at the right time!

On the afternoon of the last day of the year, the sun appeared briefly and a gentle breeze blew through the garden. Perfect conditions to spread the catkin pollen through the monoecious shrub.

I spent some time watching the catkins shimmer brightly in a beautifully choreographed aeolian dance. Delicate, soft green tails, each said to comprise over two hundred flowers.

I shall be looking out for a good crop of cobnuts from *Avellana Corylus* next autumn, that is if our resident red squirrels don't get there first.

Meanwhile, the catkins shine out, as they light our way with trust, into a new year in the Dumfriesshire garden.

Afterword

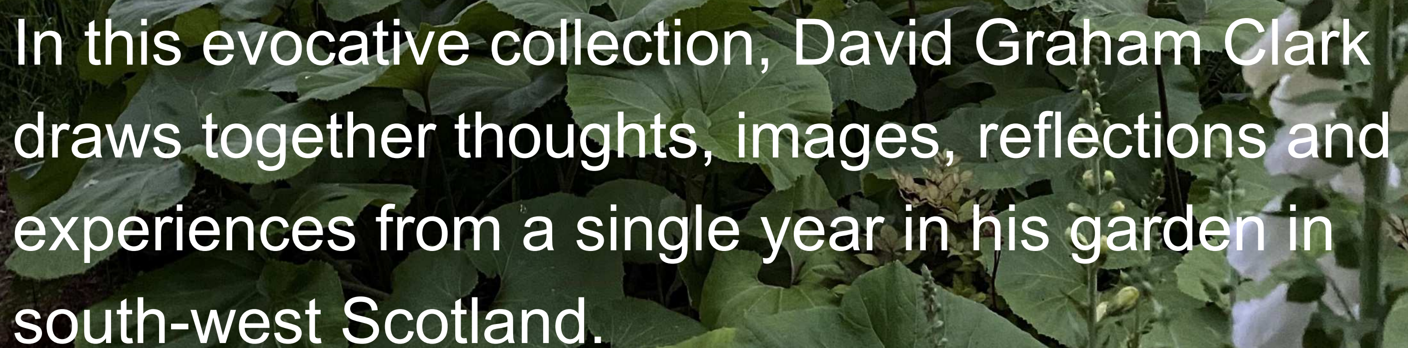
Traced through its varied rhythms, patterns and surprises, another year in the Dumfriesshire garden has come to an end.

It has taught me several things. Close observation and recording of aspects of our daily life can bring huge personal rewards. The quotidian world is replete with imagery, metaphor, narrative and meaning, and the garden is a perfect place to explore such abstractions.

When a quarter century ago I acquired a Dumfriesshire ruin and a patch of uncultivated ground surrounding it, I had no idea of its true potential. Moving here permanently a dozen years later began to unlock its rich possibilities. Now, each day, I deepen my understanding of the place where I live and in uncovering its story, find I am inspired to write stories of my own.

Full of random acts of whimsy, inspiration or happenstance, the Dumfriesshire garden evolves in its own place and at its own pace. Each passing moment sediments transience into memory and with it, the hope that the garden will continue its story with others still to come - perhaps far into the future.

Reader's notes



In this evocative collection, David Graham Clark draws together thoughts, images, reflections and experiences from a single year in his garden in south-west Scotland.