

# How do I know where and when to cut?

## Christine Fountain

Over the past years this is a question I have been asked many times by friends and family who seem to be afraid of cutting back (pruning) plants. I am asked similar questions in the vein of how do I know what to pull up and when?

Ever since I learnt about the idea of lifewide learning I have been mindful of the learning and development we achieve in 'situations which are not structured or supported by educators'. As an HE lecturer with previous roles in learning and development and operations management, there are many formal educational experiences on which I might reflect. But it is to my love of gardening I turn to in considering how an informal learning ecology has provided me with myriad learning opportunities.



I first started gardening more years ago now than I care to admit. But I was relatively young when I caught the bug and to be honest had very little idea of what to do. Inspired by an ex-boyfriend's

mother's garden I suppose naivety actually helped me embark on a (so far)

lifelong passion. My inspiration was emulation!

When I started I asked questions and listened to people who could answer them, read the blurb on packets of seed, watched the great, late Geoff Hamilton on



TV and lusted after Barnsdale, his wonderful garden.

I have desire, passion and interest and indeed am quite driven when I discover something that really interests me. This has seen me through many new situations and learning opportunities. So I when I became interested in gardening learning how to create my own garden and developing my knowledge and skills to achieve this became my passion.

So now I know lots of 'stuff' about gardening. I know I garden on quite heavy clay and what will and won't thrive. I know which clematis to cut when; I know how to bring on the most difficult of seedlings. I understand where on a stem or a branch to cut. I appreciate that when you cut into the old wood on a conifer or Lavender it won't grow back! This and many other skills; root cuttings, grafting, division and propagation I have mastered.

How interesting it is that for the most part I cannot tell you how I have developed this knowledge or skill it seems I have

imbibed them – perhaps through osmosis. Or more likely the continuous ecological process of trying something in the context of my garden and seeing if it works. So that my accumulated wisdom is itself part of my garden's ecosystem.

I have never attended a gardening lesson. But I have 'flicked' my way through any number of gardening magazines and books and I am not adverse to a glass of red wine and Gardeners' World on a Friday evening (albeit the hard landscaping and design principles still do nothing to inspire me!).

Ah, I hear you say – so what you are talking about is experience and the learning we take from it. Well yes, in the literal sense of gardening this is true. However, since I have been involved with Lifewide I have reflected not simply on what I know in terms of gardening but what my skills and enjoyment in gardening have given me in the wider context of my world.

Gardening has taught me patience. I have to wait; wait for seeds, wait for cuttings, wait for the next season. It has taught me tenacity. If at first the plant or position is wrong try again! It has given me peace and refuge. At times of stress I know where to run..... I have a slab embedded in the turf in front of the area we euphemistically call the 'wine patio' – on it is written 'An hour in the garden puts life's problems in perspective' - how true this is.

Gardening grounds me, I can see the seasons turning, I know how long ago I planted that tree or shrub, it tells me life goes on and that there will be sun another day. It has taught me to use the right tools for the right job and to treat those tools as trusted friends. I have learnt that a garden is an ecosystem in which

everything has its place and performs a role and that everything that is consumed is recycled. It gives me the thrill of watching a Thrush bash a snail out on the path.

It requires my energy and time to sustain it in the way I want it. I still pick snails off my Hostas on dark, damp evenings and transport them to the field near the house!. I know that if I wasn't there my garden would carry on but find its own way to grow. Perhaps gardening, then has taught me to 'live and let live' a little.

I have learnt that I miss my garden when I am away from it for too long. I am frustrated by weekends when I cannot get out there. I long ago understood that in being a keen gardener I shall never have 'nails' and that conversations about infills



and 'Shellac' will forever be anathema to me.

Were my husband to contribute to this reflection he would tell you that I don't mow lawns, which I consider to be outside hoovering. This is true – it is boring and although I value a good lawn as the backdrop to my garden mowing simply does not inspire me, and besides my husband needs the exercise more than me. My husband would also counter my claim of patience. I won't plant bulbs, I leave this to him. Yet I am happy to rejoice in a daffodil filled spring garden.

So clearly there is more to learn and more on which to reflect.

I am conscious of the years passing and contemplate what age will bring in terms of how much I can achieve and maintain. Surely more learning in how to adapt and garden as I begin to creak.

Nadine Stair said 'if I had my life to live over.....I would *pick* more daisies'. Gardening has taught me that if I had my life to live over I would *plant* more daisies.

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