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## **My Life on a Hillside Allotment**

**Terry Walton**

### **Introduction:**

#### **The Adopted Allotment**

It was 1 July 2003 when Phil Jones, the producer of BBC Radio 2's Jeremy Vine Show, rang me up to say, 'You're on on Friday!'

There are a few notable dates in life you always remember, aren't there? You know the day you were born, and you never forget the day you got married, nor the dates when your children were born. And this was another of those life-changing moments.

It had all started some time earlier, back in April 2003. My wife Anthea regularly listens to Radio 2, and it so happened that day that my older son, Anthony, was also tuned in. They both heard Jeremy Vine present an hour-long special on allotments. I didn't hear it because I was up on my own plot, on the side of the Rhondda valley in south Wales where I've been gardening for more than half a century, man and boy.

I'd rather be on my allotment than anywhere else I can think of. My plot has always been my passion and joy (as well as my constant source of good food), and it's been the theme running through my life since I first opened my eyes in the hospital maternity unit just the other side of the allotment fence. This book is the story of my gardening life there. It began in earnest when I was just four years old and starting to help my father regularly on his plot, on the same site and very close to the house where I was born. And I'm still up there, sowing and planting and harvesting, only now I share it with all the listeners to Jeremy Vine's radio show.

Towards the end of that allotment special, Jeremy announced he'd had a tremendous response from listeners, who were all ringing in with comments and questions, and the amount of interest was brilliant. Maybe it was only meant tongue-in-cheek, but he then added that he ought to get out of the studio more and perhaps have an allotment of his own. Was there anybody

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out there who would like to share their allotment with him and other listeners?

I knew nothing of this, of course. But when I came back home, first Anthea told me what Jeremy Vine had said and then Anthony rang me up and said I ought to write in, seeing as I was up there every single day.

My immediate reaction was a firm 'No!' Much as I enjoyed being out on the plot, I had always felt that allotments and radio simply weren't compatible. How could you have a show about allotments on the radio, where there's no visual element? It is said that a picture's worth a thousand words, and that seemed particularly true about trying to describe to a radio listener all the smells and sights of a garden in full growth. As I was to discover, it can take many graphic words and sounds to present the scene effectively, but it's a skill that develops with experience.

It took a while, about five or six days during which the family pestered me constantly, until I finally decided to get in touch with Jeremy. His original request for an allotment to adopt had sounded like a bit of a joke, so I thought I'd be equally light-hearted. I said I was perfectly willing to share my plot with him, that it was a great passion of mine, and that to me it was not just gardening but a whole way of life, with every visit a social occasion. I added that I thought there was this misconception that allotment gardening was hard work, but said it's never hard if you enjoy doing something and can mix the effort with the pleasures.

I explained that to me the allotment is a gym that helps keep me fit, it's my sunbed because it keeps me tanned, my stress counsellor because it's my way of relieving tension, and my means of relaxation in the open air.

I have all those benefits without paying large sums of money to join a club, and at the end of it I have the reward of taking home fresh, organic produce for my salad bowl or lunch plate. The place is so good for my health and well-being that anything I grow is an added bonus.

Well, I explained all this, not expecting anything to come from it.

Time passed and nothing happened: it turned out that being accepted for broadcasting is a long and involved procedure. About two weeks afterwards I came home at lunchtime on a mild, sunny April day, made myself a couple of sandwiches and a cup of coffee, and went outside to settle down on the patio. Just then the phone rang, and Anthea came out to say the BBC was on the line, for me. I didn't believe it, even when the caller announced she was 'Jessica from the BBC'.

'It's Keith Harris who put you up to this, isn't it? Where did he find you then, to get you to ring me up and pretend you're from the BBC?' I asked her.

'Oh no,' she said, 'this really is the BBC.'

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'I reckon he's getting his own back for a practical joke I played on him a while ago,' I said. 'But go on. Now you've gone to all this trouble and he's obviously briefed you, I'll play along.'

I should explain that Keith is a very good friend of mine, someone I'd worked beside since the early 1970s. He's got a wicked sense of humour, rather like mine; our sons were a similar age and so our families went away on holiday together; and we both tended to take part in anything going, usually winding each other up (and everyone else) wherever we were.

Now Keith had a habit of making a big thing of other people's birthdays, adorning the front of their house or garden, for example, with huge banners saying 'Give a hoot!' or 'Go and knock on the door!' So on his fiftieth birthday I thought I'd dress up as a town crier for a lark, and I managed to borrow the full ceremonial outfit from a real crier: big red coat, tails, shirt, dicky bow, hat and bell.

Then I went round the houses near where Keith lived, knocking on all the doors and asking if I could borrow the children to go along and serenade him. Up and down the streets I went, ringing my bell and looking like the Pied Piper with this long stream of children walking behind me. When we reached Keith's house I could see him with his family through the window, sitting down to a meal. All the children lined up behind me, and I produced my scroll and rang the bell as loud as I could, shouting, 'Oyez, oyez. Keith Harris is fifty today.' And then all the children burst into a chorus of 'Happy Birthday'.

I knew he would try to get his own back if he could, but when 'Jessica from the BBC' began to interview me it became obvious she really was who she said she was, and I had to apologize for my initial doubts. She went on to ask me a whole range of searching questions.

Later I found out there had been hundreds of applicants, and I wondered why they had picked me out of all the others. Jessica explained that she would ask each applicant to tell her about their allotment, and most people responded, 'What do you want to know?' But I had launched straight into describing my plot and my life on the allotments, which apparently showed the kind of enthusiasm they were looking for and an ability to think quickly. I obviously enjoyed talking about it, which she said stood me in good stead.

Again everything went quiet for two or three weeks. Then I had a call from Rebecca at the BBC, following up the conversation I'd had with Jessica. They were now down to a shortlist of allotments for Jeremy Vine's show, she said, and she wanted to ask a few more questions about mine. So we discussed the social life of the allotments, what was enjoyable about being there and what I did there besides actually gardening, how much time I spent there, and so on. And that was that.