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An Introduction

My Gardening History

*“Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter.
Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”*

SAMUEL BECKETT 1906–1989

I've grown things, on windowsills, on balconies in planters and in increasingly large gardens for most of my life. I do it because it makes me giddy with happiness.

I garden with music, in silence, clothed or naked, on golden sunny days and by silvery moonlight. I garden alone and with company. I garden when I'm happy and when I'm sad. When I'm feeling good about life, gardening is a simple pleasure: planning, planting, harvesting and cooking. When my mood is low, it's a meditative and restorative pastime.

The very act of doing something, that by its very nature is looking to the future, is good for me. I can focus on the present, sowing a tomato seed in a little compost, while looking forward with some hope because I know that very soon, if I'm lucky, a tiny green shoot will appear.

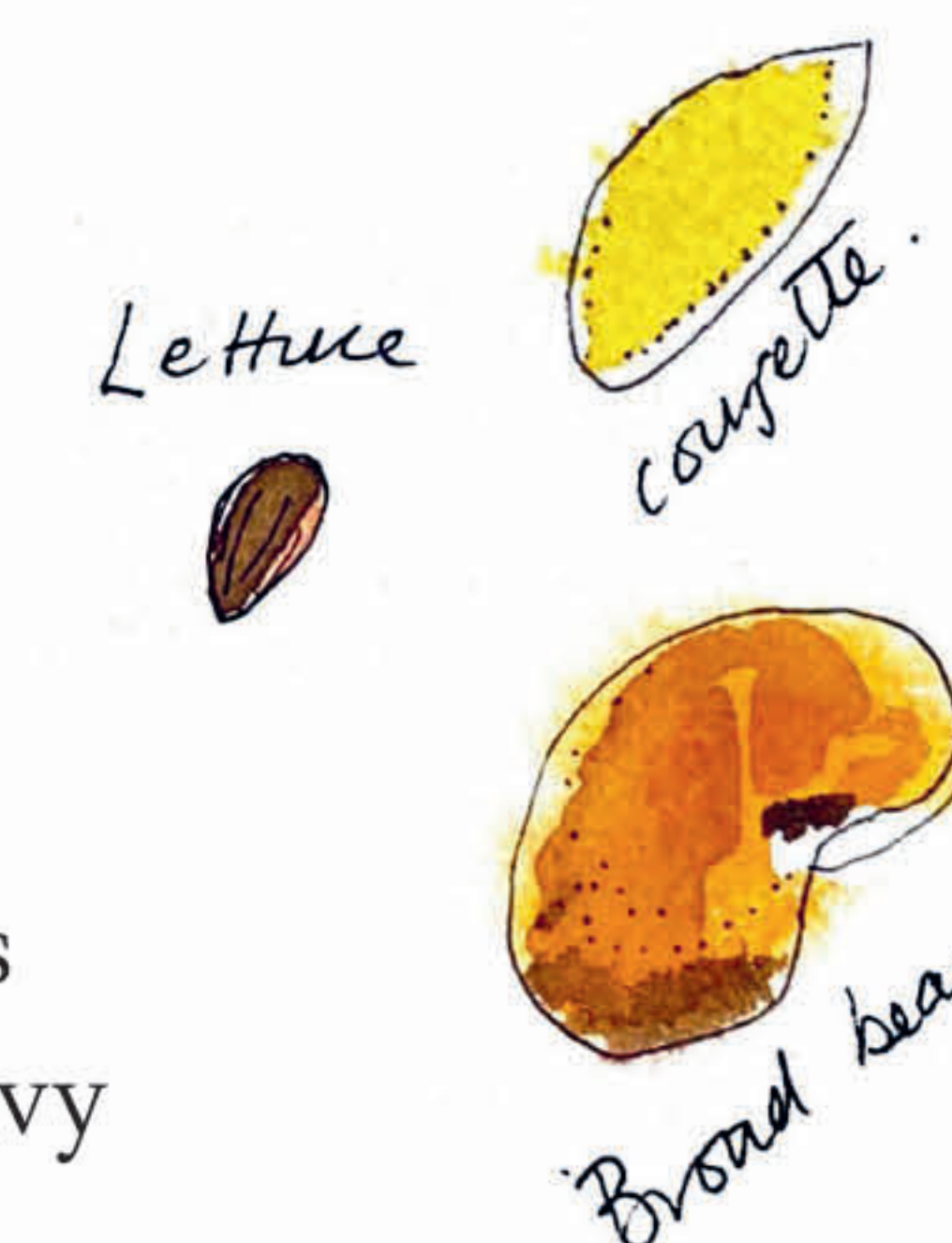
Gardening is the perfect antidote to my full-time job as an actor. Happily, theatre, TV and radio still interfere with my gardening life on a regular basis. Filming for TV usually happens in the summer because here in the UK the days are longer, lighter and better for location shoots . . . just as they are for the green shoots. After the long, cold, dark winter months, as spring arrives, I'm always painfully aware, that, as I open up my greenhouse and potting shed, washing pots, cleaning tools and excitedly shuffle new, brightly coloured seed packets from one hand to the other, that as soon as I'm absolutely ready to start sowing . . . the phone will ring. Like all actors since the dawn of time, I'm thrilled at being offered a job – my ego and my bank balance will be given a boost and I'm grateful that people still want to see me do what I've been doing for nearly fifty years, doing what I love.

Why then do I feel, increasingly, that the excitement and anticipation is tinged with a sense of reluctance? It's because, I think, I know that my time in the greenhouse, the garden and the potting shed will be seriously curtailed by my juvenile desire to show off, either on stage or in front of a camera. As the years go by, I am finally realising that my time is precious and that I must make better choices as to how I spend this dwindling resource. I may have loved being an actor for but there

has always been another, secret love, hiding just out of sight ... a deep love for my garden. My two great passions have always had to compete for my time and attention but age and perhaps, finally, a modicum of maturity mean that I'm choosing to spend less time with that glittery, fickle, showbiz companion and opting to hang out with the calmer, kinder, more constant and reliable friend, my garden.

Those of you who follow my Instagram account @cqgardens will know that, much as I love my garden, I try not to be too earnest and worthy about it. When, many years ago, I first started to grow things, I often felt rather over-awed by television and radio gardeners, the experts in the field, if you'll pardon the pun. Sometimes they made gardening seem too daunting and difficult for a beginner, that it was something that could only be done by old men in roll-neck sweaters, with tidy hair, who'd been to horticultural college and learned the dark art of double digging and how to do a proper side parting. They used a secret language – mulching and composting, leaf mould and potato blight, pinching out and tying in. I just wanted to grow basil on a window ledge. I didn't even have a balcony back then, so I was pretty sure that knowing how to dig a potato trench wasn't going to be particularly useful to me.

Years later I have come to realise that gardening, just like life, is a series of well-meaning cock-ups and happy accidents, unplanned successes and baffling and frustrating failures. Happily, unlike life, gardening mistakes are rarely worth crying about. I did lose an azalea to frost damage in the nineties but I can talk about it now without sobbing – just. Generally, though, gardening is a low-risk hobby. Nobody gets hurt. As I write this though, I'm reminded of the time I stood on a heavy garden rake (the metal end) and the long handle flipped up very quickly and with great force.



Asparagus

I first cooked my favourite asparagus recipe over twenty years ago. Sam and I and our two children, who were very small at the time, were living in a rented cottage in the depths of the Devonshire countryside. The delightful garden had an overgrown patch by some trees, and one day while enjoying the sunshine in early May, I noticed that amongst the wildflowers and weeds were masses of tall strong clumps of asparagus spears. It was like finding a treasure chest where you thought there was only an empty cardboard box. I knew that to cut asparagus properly you need to find the bottom of the stalk, then cut with a sharp knife just below the surface of the soil. I gathered enough for the four of us and trotted inside to rinse the fresh spears. I can still remember gently steaming that first unexpected crop, drizzling them with a little butter and handing them to the children. They were delicious. Little did I know that the surprise asparagus bed was enormous. It had obviously been planted by a keen gardener who knew that because the harvesting window for asparagus is short lived, starting in late April and finishing in mid-June, it's best to have plenty of crowns. One has to allow some of the asparagus spears to remain unpicked to go to seed, fade to yellow and fall over, so that all of the energy from the ferns goes back into the asparagus crown to ensure that there will be a plentiful crop the following year. For six weeks my little family gorged on asparagus in as many ways as it is possible for asparagus to be eaten. Baked in the oven at 180°C for 10 minutes, drizzled with a little olive oil and flaked salt; steamed and allowed to cool served with hollandaise sauce or little mayonnaise; in omelettes; in salads and in soups.

A word to the wise if you haven't eaten asparagus before – it makes your pee smell. According to some sources this only happens with certain people. I discovered during that summer, all those years ago, that I'm a person who knows they've eaten asparagus. Strong smelling pee is a small price to pay, I think, for enjoying a delicious vegetable.



Asparagus and Pea Risotto

Serves 4

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| 1 onion – <i>chopped</i> | Asparagus (obviously)! <i>I allow 3 large spears per person but it's entirely up to you.</i> |
| 300 g/10 oz Arborio/risotto rice | |
| 2 handfuls of grated Parmesan <i>(you'll need to finish the dish)</i> | Butter, a large knob <i>(if that's not too Benny Hill)</i> |
| 1.5 litres/50 fl oz vegetable stock – <i>hot</i> | 175 ml/6 fl oz white wine/vermouth |
| 2 handfuls of frozen peas – <i>defrosted, or fresh if you're lucky enough to have some</i> | 50 g/2 oz butter |
| | A handful of sage – <i>rough stalks taken away and leaves finely shredded</i> |

This recipe converts well to a chicken dish. Leeks, mushrooms, spinach, broad beans and thinly sliced runner beans work well too. If you don't grow your own asparagus, it really doesn't matter – it's usually readily available in supermarkets, and despite losing the absolute joy of that plot to plate flavour, it is still one of the finest things you'll ever eat.

It's best to prep everything and have it handy as it will all go straight into the pan. I always start by making a big saucepan of vegetable stock. Occasionally when I come over all Martha Stewart, I make my own. Otherwise, good quality stock cubes, pots, or Bouillon are fine. It's useful to have either a ladle or a little jug handy, because you'll be adding the stock little by little as it gets absorbed by the rice.

- Finely chop the onion. Measure out the risotto rice. Grate the Parmesan into a small bowl. Bring your stock to just below boiling and keep it hot. Keep the white wine handy. Take your frozen peas out of the freezer and let them defrost as you get ready to cook.
- Take off the woodier pale end of the asparagus – the bit that was under the earth. Then cut off the growing tips (top 5 cm/2 inches).

- Wash the lot under a cold tap, keeping the tips separate. They will go in last because they are tender and go mushy if cooked for too long.
- In a large frying pan, heat three-quarters of the butter then gently fry the onions until soft. Be sure not to let them catch and turn brown. Add the asparagus stalks for 4–5 minutes, then add in all the rice and cook for a further 1–2 minutes. When the rice looks translucent, add the wine and a small amount of hot stock. Make sure that most of the liquid is absorbed before gradually adding the rest of the stock. Keep stirring!
- After 15 minutes or so, you will have a tired arm and hopefully most of the stock will have been absorbed and the rice will be almost tender. If it's a bit brittle and hard, cook and stir a little longer, then add in the peas and the asparagus tips. Cook for a further 5 minutes, until the rice is tender.
- Take the pan off the heat. Stir in the Parmesan and add a little salt and pepper if you think it needs it.
- Melt the remaining butter in a small frying pan and fry the sage leaves for 1–2 minutes until just golden. Drizzle over the risotto and serve.