**How does your garden grow?**

In trying to write about how love starts, develops, changes, plateaus, and dies. I have had to consider that there are extraneous circumstances that impact on how I understood love to be. I thought love was pure; that it conquers all. In fact, love seems to come in different forms and each form can be appropriately used for only one purpose. The love a parent has for a child that is not their own originates from an urge to protect something cute and vulnerable. I read somewhere that the reason that kittens and puppies are cute is so they are cared for by their species. It could be a ‘chicken and egg’ thing though. Anyway, in humans, I believe, our familiarity with a cute infant grows into love for that individual. The important thing here is that in almost every situation an infant to almost every person is not a threat to circumstances that are invariably controlled by adults. And, here, is where love has an injurious enemy; an individual’s desire to control. Of course, we can’t have pre-school-age politicians making laws for adults to follow. So, there has to be a necessity to shape lives, but, I suggest, sometimes in shaping lives we inadvertently shape love.

I chose to compare a garden throughout a year with how love unfolds and changes. Weather affects the garden and is inevitable.

These are the notes I wrote after I had written my little love story about Toby, Mimie and Kate. I know England’s seasons so I could quite easily use the changinf seasons as a template to how love in my story unfolds. However, I always wanted to have a parallel story taking place alongside, that mirrors what is happening to Toby, the protagonist, so I had to dwell a little in my imagination and wax lyrical in these notes.

It is Winter. The nights are cold and mostly cloudy. It is usually damp; humidity is always high during the cold months in England. Thankfully, the snails and slugs are absent from gardens. There really isn’t much for them to eat when the temperature stays below 5oC. It rains quite a bit and sometimes snows across the whole country.

Snow can fall as tiny frozen particles, which are more like the ice scraped from the inside of a home freezer. Snow, as we commonly recognise it as white clumps of frozen water, can fall straight down when there is no wind and the temperature of the flakes are too warm to keep the six fingered stars it naturally crystalises into when the conditions are right. It can float to the ground and is toyed with by the slightest hint of a wind when the temperature is just right. This is romantic snow. This is the snow that children stop doing their school-work and watch through the school-room windows, in awe. ‘It’s snowing’ they say. Their voices might just as well be welcoming Father Christmas because right before them is a magic show that means that they will have a new kind of fun. Different games will be played; snowball fights; making angels in the fallen snow with their bodies; and snowmen, women, children, and snow-animals will be made. This is the snow that we see on Christmas cards and photos of winter scenes when it lays atop branches and walls, and has bluish shadows, not grey. This is the snow that creates a monotone landscape, with stark silhouettes of trees and tiny cottages huddled on hillsides. This is the snow that sits on the thatched rooves of cottages with smoky chimneys on Victorian style Christmas cards and really exists in Yorkshire and Wales. The promised warmth of the fire inside the cottage makes us happy. But what if the snow is on a building with a collapsed roof, or lies atop a still body. What if the snow comes at the ground from an acute angle and is driven by a gale. What if cyclists trying to get home are blown into ditches, or sheep are lost on hillsides because they cannot see far enough to the next safe place? This is the same frozen water but comes in the name of destruction and ruin. A poet might make a romance from a blizzard but most of us have no affection for it.

Snow can blanket the ground and seal it off from severe freezes. This can save the dormant bulbs and tubers for plants such as snowdrops, crocuses, and bluebells. Many gardens have Spanish Bluebells as ornamental plants, though these will poke their leaves into the sunlight early in the year, it is not until early spring that they start to flower.

Once the temperature rises and snow does not fall, we are confronted with rain, no-one likes rain, except people who don’t like the lingering and persistent snow that just lies around doing nothing and getting dirty. At least rain move the snow on. Now in Spring, the wind blows hard and drives the rain sideways and cyclists off course. When the rain hits people in the face, it stings and cold and wet bone-felt cold. Joggers and cyclists feel it on the bridge of ther noses and across their cheek-bones. Late Winter and early Spring is a season which forces people to know it is there. There is even a folklore character associated with Spring – Jack Frost. This sprite is responsible for those magnificent mornings of white lawns and parklands, when the trees are still bare but the sun is bright.

In Spring, we have the first hopes of better weather when we see the still low sun melt the frost wherever it can reach, but ‘Jack’ hiding in the shade of walls, allotment sheds, buildings, and large trees, still persists in his work. We see a stark contrast on the ground of white and still dormant green grass where the sun has reached and melted the frost. The edges are clear, there is no mistaking that the sun is winning the battle for control over the earth. This is a mark of the earth reawakening. Now the gardeners are seeing tiny shoots in the ground and try to identify what they are; they don’t want to pull up any seedlings that they want to keep and which they hope to nurture throughout the rest of the growing period. They have hopes for a colourful and satisfying outcome. But anxiously, they wait for the time that a frost will not destroy their efforts to introduce new plants to the soil.

This is a time of speculation, of rising hopes and dashed dreams. Excitement is quickly replaced by disappointment and submission. It is a time of both wins and losses. Choosing which paths to take to bring about a spectacular and rewarding showing of flowers or a hoped for bounty of vegetables fills growers up and down the country with fascination, discovery, sadness, and triumph. Slowly, the tiny seedlings in the ground grow. They are noticed but not yet identifiable except to the most fastidious and rigid gardener who grows the same plants each year. The experienced grower has long ago learnt to recognise and differentiate the weeds from the plants worth growing. Yet, the funky people, with their own gardens, are looking at the use of the plants that live only at the periphery of most of our attention; they want the wildlife to enjoy themselves; to be able to reproduce and make more insects that pollinate the local flowers. In these people’s gardens both weeds and cultivated plants grow. There is a respect for the weird, the unusual, and the temporary aberrations in the world.

It is late Winter and early Spring when optimistic people plant seeds in seed-trays and let them warm on their window sills and other places. Little moments of expectation of a good reward later in the year cheer these winter-weary, sometimes lonely people. Many people who want to grow plants, cannot be tolerated in their homes by their partners and fellow renters if they leaves traces of soil and seedling compost inside their shared homes.

Spring is a time for making plans, determining courses of action, and making decisions. It is a time of adjustment and temporary disruption. Effort put in now will pay off later. Yet, there are downfalls and tendrils of anticipated joy are shrivelled by the changeable weather. A period of unexpected low temperature devastates newly transplanted seedlings which have been carefully grown over the two or even three months from seed. Mini heatwaves bring forward flowering periods and give plants an obvious headstart. Now, if the plants have grown too quickly, a dry period will mean the gardener will need to water the garden. An expectaton of an easy life and letting nature provide moisture for the plants sometimes does not happen. Artificial and structured action is taken in the garden. The growth in the garden is no longer organic. It does not find a comfortable place in nature. Among all this human activity directed at producing strong plants to enable a good floral display or harvest, the pests also gather; the snails and slugs, menace to every gardener savagely munch on the new and tasty favourite plants in midnight feasts. By morning, they have gone; only a few leave their presence known with their demise spread on garden paths and pavements from the tread of late-night teenagers, who now brave only chilly nights to kiss and vape.

Late Spring signifies to the gardener that whatever they have sown, so shall they reap (or less than what their efforts have so far have achieved). There is now no time to start new plants. There is no expectation of a bright and colourful garden or a bountiful harvest if the first efforts have not given adequate results. Except there is; sometimes, there can be found young plants that other gardeners have started early, but are left out for their neighbours to adopt. Sporadic offerings in villages might include tomato, cabbage, pepper, and courgette plants and a garden in late spring once cleared of weeds and lightly dug, can change from bare brown soil to short rows of young vegetable plants only a few inches high, or flower-beds suddenly have their bareness neatly replaced with spots of young leafy plants. For the buyer of these plants, there is an expectation of pleasure that comes about through not hard work or gentle nurturing. In the garden, there are plants that have been collected from, or donated by neighbours and other kind persons that have been adopted and will be lovingly cared for, just like a human parent wants their charges to do well in life, so a gardener with these plants gains pleasure from providing care and nutrition. Not all of us are ‘green-fingered’ or amazing pet owners. Plants are least expensive on our time than other people, just like, in the villages and very small towns across the world, cats are easier to ignore than are dogs, so in many gardens there are plants doing well and plants doing less well.

The Spring weather has sections made up of days of sunshine followed by days of cloud and days of rain. There are troughs and peaks. One day the landscape is turning green and a week or two later, the weeds are tall and the buds of leaves on trees have opened. Gone is the bareness and a parade of what is to come is experienced; Summer.

The garden in early Summer has only some of the effect that a gardener is ultimately aiming for. Of course, there are flowers, but for many gardeners these are ‘fillers’ that have been specifically grown to preserve the space for the ‘grand show’ or the ‘extravaganza’ that 365 days of planning, effort, and adaptation, will have brought about. At least, that is the plan.

Summer is a time of unified expectation of fair weather. This is when, as children, we might lay in a field or a back garden and point out to each other the shapes of the clouds against a deep blue sky, and how they resemble animals or faces. Rarely, would we ‘see’ houses or motorised ships. If we are lucky, and only half child, we might see a sailing ship from yester-times. Maybe grandad is keeping an eye on the kids when that happens.

Blue skies tell us that we can allow ourselves to be confident that our efforts towards a scheduled day of fun will be reciprocated. We might go to the beach or the seaside. In the garden, the plants will sunbathe and be visited by insects, but like us they will begin to feel thirsty. In the plant world, this is an indication that it is time to flower. Early flowers in Spring will have been triggered by a lack of rainfall. In the garden, the tomato plants that are still in plant pots and didn’t get planted in the ground or taken by neighbours from outside gardeners’ homes, will be in advanced stages of fruiting if they have experienced a wave of drought and flood period. Plants in pots in early summer will usually exerience this. Little fruits on the plants are there but these will never reach a satisfactory size, and will only be considered to be the result of laziness or lack of planning. In any case, they sit by the shed, half-forgotten but not fully discarded because no-one has the heart to just kill them by dehydration. The lawn, green if it has rained occasionly needs cutting and is the chore that almost surpasses the pleasure of having a garden lawn. In many gardens there is only a lawn and it is cut only because there is some notion that we will be judged by others tthat we are unruly in our minds, if it is left to its own devices. So, we must tame it; keep it constrained; stop it running riot and having too much fun.

Summer weather in England brings with it many changes that most of us never recognise. The roads, denied a wash from falling rain become dusty. Yet, we come across this dustiness most acutely in the countryside, right outside our towns and cities. On dirt tracks, rutted by the farmer’s tractors when the ground was sodden in the two previous seasons, the dust can be kicked up by a shoe scuffing the ground. The smell of it is different to when it is wet; and different again, when it has been dry for a while and recently wetted by Summer rain, than when it has been cold and wet for long periods in Winter and Spring. The smell of the dust blends with the scent from the heated weeds happily growing on the verges. We don’t notice it much if we smell it every day, but as soon as it starts to rain so much dust is thrown into the air that almost everyone can ‘smell’ the coming rain, if they are downwind. For a few precious moments we have a new experience before the ground is wet and lays gratefully quiescent as it waits to return to its preferred state of being just moist. Of course, deserts across the world have adapted to being arid and much prefer very little water, but in England, there is a sigh of relief if the rain follows a long dry spell, Near ‘droughts’ in England, followed by steady rainfall often brings out children in swimming costumes and adults in shirts, shorts and t-shirts from their dry and safe homes into their garden where they dance with feigned glee mixed with their sudden release from the oppressive dry heat.

Autumn has the same aspect to it; dry heat is now past and there is a fullness to the air, but there is no celebration in the garden by the children. Damp soil and fully grown plants give off a scent that tells us all that the conkers on the Horse Chestnut trees are almost ripe and will fall onto the pavements below. The plants are seeding and the last tomatoes are ripening on the plants largely stripped of their leaves to encourage this last push towards an edible product. This is a time when, in England, the sun gives a different light to us. It is a light tinted with yellow; a softer light, but fuller, despite there being a significant shift from the full spectrum of light that originated from the sun. Autumn is a time of contentment; still warm in its early stages, people are still wearing shorts and skimpy tops but now there is a frisson of cautiousness in us, a slight chill that without us knowing it, excites us; attracts our attention; not like a glass of iced water in Summer accidently spilt on us that gives us a delightful shock; more similar to a very rapid wave of goosebumps that passes before we acknowledge it.

As early autumn progresses towards mid autumn there are more days of cloud but the days of sun are warm and humid. This is when the gardener finally reaps something from their many hours of effort. Root vegetables are pulled from the ground, cabbages are cut as they are needed, and top-fruit is picked; apples; pears; plums; blackberries are plucked from gardens or, for some of us, from roadside trees. This is when the person picked up for work in the morning who takes the same amount of time to eat an apple when they get in the vehicle has thrown it by the roadside and a row of apple trees have grown. Often considered to be vandals of the countryside by people in following vehicles, gardeners and scavengers laud them as heroes.

The leaves turn from green to reds, yellows, russets, pinks, burgundy and finally brown, and fall from the trees. If we are lucky, we might have a period of dryness that lets us rake up the leaves in the garden in mounds that creatures like hedgehogs enjoy, or in our roads and streets get pushed around by passing traffic and fickle wind. Inevitably though, they will get wet and never dry out. Slowly, the thin parts fade and there is only the skeletal veins of the leaves, which collapse among themselves over the next weeks. Some of these last until Spring but only a tiny few. Autumn was once when we would preserve fruit by fermenting or pickling. Meat would be salted to last over the Winter. Autumn is both a time of bounty and a time of planning for the coming meagreness of Winter.