



FORTY SEVEN TOMATOES

By Al Campbell

Lockdown came too early for spring. At least, too early for the vast majority of gardeners. I had already made several trips to the garden centre to stock up. As was my wont in the early months of the year, soil improver had been scattered across the sizeable expanse of 7 raised beds that made up my vegetable plot and lightly forked in. Whilst at the age of 66 I was still going to the gym twice a week, I found digging brought an additional aerobic buzz to a crisp February morning. Not a bad workout regime for a man who had been drawing his state pension for 18 months.

On inclement days I pottered in the greenhouse. The bloke next door, a recent neighbour, had announced over the fence that he was taking down the previous owner's two storey 'Wendy Mansion' that robbed the greenhouse of light in the early low-sun months of the year. He was replacing it with a man-shed. But that had yet to happen, so sorting and tidying potting paraphernalia, and conducting the annual seed audit, was reserved for the sort of days when the wind drummed the rain hard against the glass and even the dog stayed safely indoors.

I rejoiced in my weather-proof haven. An old stand-up chest of drawers, which I cut the legs off and wrestled to the far end, acted as my seed repository. I had built staging down both sides. There was only one cracked pane of glass – not bad for an inherited greenhouse. Late afternoons I would work slowly and methodically, a glass of beer by my elbow. I had discovered a particular favourite gardening beer, 'Owd Roger', in the local Londis. The label had an image of an old country gaffer sporting a smock, a neckerchief, and a straw hat. My late father-in-law had been called Roger, a keen gardener in his own right. At 8% proof it was a sipping beer which warmed you to the toes as the gloaming crept closer.

As ever this year the annual seed audit resulted in a cull of part-used packets well-past their sell by date. I threw most into the old compost bag I used as a bin, grieving for a hundred or more lives un-lived. Some I kept. Things like Pak Choi seemed to germinate for ever. Yet experience had taught me that fresh seed germinated best, and I was keenly awaiting this year's catalogues.



This summer I had determined to be patient. Last year enthusiasm had got the better of me and I had planted out too early. Even in sunny West Sussex, 60% of the veg crops were lost to a late May frost. Replanting proved that, even after a cold snap there was plenty of time to restart the process. This summer I determined to hold fire until the soil warmed up.

I had also made a promise to myself not to grow tomatoes from seed. I have an enormous penchant for this cultivar of the Nightshade family, whether grilled, roast or raw. If my dream to be invited onto Desert Island Discs ever came true, albeit I wouldn't recognise Lauren Laverne from a pot of lavender if I bumped into her in the perennial section of the garden centre, my Desert Island luxury would have to be an endless supply of what the French called 'Pommes d'Amour'.

Last year's early tomato crop had been nipped in the bud by frost. A later planting was decimated by blight. Following a major strategic re-think with the dog, I had decided to simply buy plants from the garden centre. Any replacements could easily be picked up at the garden gates of people around Sussex who grew too many and flogged them off for 50p – with a plastic flowerpot thrown into the bargain for good measure.

But lockdown struck, flattening hopes like a hailstorm in a wheat field. At the first mention of the impending induced coma the Government intended to enforce, horticulturists came down on garden centre veg like the wolf on the fold, hotly pursued by a brutal plague of locusts. Shelves were stripped and whatever there was, plant-wise, vanished.

So too the seeds. I got lucky on a trip to Lidl for the weekly shop, securing the final packet of pea seeds (of German pedigree). Luckily I dropped them as, lying on the floor behind the seed stand and overlooked by others, I saw a bumper pack of 5 tomato varieties of varying provenance ranging from large French Marmande, through Italian San Marzano plum style and yellow Sungold, to Sweet Cherry and striped Tigerella. Abandoning my vow, losing all sense of control, and urged on by a sense of panic, I scooped it up and popped it in the trolley.

Back home I showed them to the dog. 'We'll plant six of each in seed modules on the kitchen windowsill,' I told her. The dog sat with her head on one side with a look that said: *'you know that even if you're lucky only half will germinate as normal, don't you?'*



'Don't worry, three of each should be enough,' I told her. Looking unconvinced she went for a lie down.

I brought the compressed seed modules down from the greenhouse in a gravel tray, setting them to soak overnight. The next morning, when they were suitably engorged with water, I sat them on the kitchen table, found a toothpick with which to make a tiny seed-sized hole, and carefully dropped one seed into each. As they had different growing habits, I lined them up and labelled them – gardeners need to be organised.

Later that day, as the dog and I were emptying the old compost bag into the wheelie bin, I spotted a packet of tomato seeds I had thrown away. The variety was 'Tumbler', a variety I hadn't planted. Snatching it from the refuse I checked the sell-by date – July 2018.

'What do you think dog?' The dog wagged an affirmative tail. 'Very well, we'll give them a try – as my green-fingered Grandmother used to say, they've got two chances.'

I repeated the planting process and counted – all in all there were 47 tomatoes waiting to germinate. The dog still looked dubious. 'Cross your paws and wait and see,' I told her, scratching behind her ears.

I marched back up the garden in the spring sunlight, the dog trotting alongside unusually well behaved. I wondered if she'd been watching Monty Don's dog on Gardeners' World.

'Better build another raised bed just in case don't you think?' I picked up some old decking board and carried it to the shed, setting about it with drill and screws whilst the dog looked mystified then scratched at a flea.

Mother Nature can be a contrary mistress. As Covid killed off the old and the weak, every single seed planted, not just the tomatoes, germinated and thrived. There had never been a spring like it in the garden. The plum and damson trees burst into flower, followed by the apple and the pear. Soon the kitchen windowsill was filled with foliage. In the greenhouse, seed trays were a variegated cornucopia of leaves demanding to be transplanted outside.



At the same time, Nature kicked spring up the backside and gloriously unseasonal weather meant the soil warmed up and the new normal for planting out arrived three weeks earlier than previous years. Having created smart rows of lettuce, French beans, runner beans, potatoes, leeks, onions, beetroot, chard, courgette and kale, and sown parsnip and carrot seeds, one question remained. What on earth (or, more exactly, where in earth), was I going to do with 47 seedlings?

The first 15, three of each of the bumper packet, went into two raised beds. Then I gathered together all the pots and troughs I had collected over the years and managed to install a further 12 tumblers, knowing they were always the first to fruit. That meant 20 left that I planted in smaller pots. 'Tell you what dog, I'll sell them at the gate. As there's a shortage they're bound to be good for a pound apiece. What do you say?'

The dog sniffed her bottom in disdain, checking that the very non-community-like capitalist smell in the air wasn't her.

On the way back from daily exercise on the golf course the dog jumped up at the next-door neighbour's gate, where said neighbour was deadheading his roses. At a suitably social distance we exchanged gardening chit chat.

'How are your veg this year?' I enquired.

'Rather sparse to be honest. Missed the break on seeds and all the plants had gone. You seem to be having a bumper year though.'

Suddenly I felt rather guilty at my first mover advantage on Nature's largesse. 'I could spare you a tomato plant or four if you've got space.'

The neighbour looked delighted. 'That would be wonderful, nothing beats a home-grown tomato.'

'Wait here a sec, I'll go and fetch them and pass them over the fence in a suitable distanced box!' I felt rather good about it.



Later that same day the dog started barking at the front door and wouldn't stop. When I went to see what was up, standing by the gate was the nice lady from across the road.

She smiled at me. 'Neighbour says you've got a tomato plant or two going spare,' she said looking hopeful.

I smiled back. 'Four do you? I can give you a couple of tumblers, a Marmande and a plum.'

'That would be wonderful.'

The dog seemed extra-affectionate that evening, licking my face in a good night kiss. Walking on the empty golf course the next day I had a thought. 'You know what dog, I've only got 12 tomatoes left now, doesn't seem worth trying to flog them. No, we're all in this together. I think I'll put them by the gate with a sign telling people to help themselves.' The dog jumped up and licked my hand.

I labelled them and put them in a box on top of a wheelie bin, along with a couple of leggy courgettes and a slightly dodgy cucumber plant. Standing at the kitchen window with a cup of fresh mint tea, I watched as neighbours from up and down the street saw the sign and smiled to themselves. The tomatoes were gone within the hour. But nobody took more than one.

As an experiment I had planted a few of my own stock in the front garden where there was more sun. For some reason they failed to thrive. But I enjoyed working in the front – as people passed by an exchange of extended pleasantries had become the new normal.

One afternoon, some weeks after lockdown had ended, and the front garden fruits were struggling on the vine, I was watering them to encourage growth when two dog-walkers stopped at the gate. The dog rushed over to greet them and share sniffs.

'Excuse me,' said a blonde woman with a black Labrador. 'I can't help noticing that your tomatoes look a bit sparse.'

I looked up, nodded agreement and shrugged. 'Some years that's the way it goes.'



'We feel a bit guilty,' her companion, walking a yappy Jack Russell, said. 'We both took plants from here when you were giving them away, and we both have a bumper crop.'

I walked over towards them grinning from ear to ear. 'Well that's simply wonderful, I'm delighted they were so fruitful.'

'If you need some,' the first lady offered. 'We'd be happy to share.'

'That's very kind.' I moved as close as social distance would permit and said confidentially, 'the thing is I've got another 25 plants in my back garden and they're doing rather well. But, if you have too many, you'll get a lot of pleasure from sharing them with others.'

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