

Musings on a Veggie Patch - an exercise in co-operating with Gaia.

After finally getting a garden big enough to create a decent-sized veggie patch, I began to wonder how I could do this in a way that was sympathetic to the needs of the soil and plants and in tune with the rhythms of Gaia, our planet. We'd acquired a bit of land that was more wilderness than anything: the previous elderly owners had been forced to give up on it through sheer size, so it was the ultimate clean slate – if you turn a blind eye to the brambles, blackthorn and drifts of nettles! My previous experience of gardening was in the traditional manner: clearing the ground of weeds, lots of deep digging and the application of quantities of chemicals to increase productivity and kill pests and diseases. This time I just knew this would be the wrong thing to do - but I didn't have much of an idea of what should be done instead. For some reason I was drawn to think of my own past experiences as a nurse in the NHS, and my present role as a complimentary therapist.

As part of the *raison d'etre* of western traditional medicine, we hacked and slashed too, clearing damage and cutting out the bad bits, and using a huge variety of chemicals from antibiotics to vitamins supplements, and from antivirals to anti-cancer drugs in order to bring about some sort of change in the patient's condition. All this was done in an attempt at 'cure', although to me what that actually meant always remained an elusive concept. Some people seemed to survive quite merrily no matter what their illnesses – or the medics – threw at them, yet some others seemed to wither and die at the first whiff of illness, despite all attempts to save them. Now, as a complimentary therapist, I am aware that the most obvious methods aren't necessarily the best. Like all healers of whatever ilk, my aim is to look at the whole instead of the parts, and try to offer ways of bringing that whole back into balance with itself and with the cosmos, universal consciousness, divine spirit, call it what you will - so that it can itself deal with whatever the problem is in the most effective way for that particular individual.

And so it is with my veggie patch: ex-pasture on weed-infested claggy clay with a thin topsoil it appears, superficially at least, to demand flame clearance, drainage channels, deep digging with tonnes of grit and manure, and chemical additives to improve fertility, structure, and pest and disease control. Rather than go down this path, however, I started to investigate how I could use a different approach, and was delighted to discover that, as in complimentary therapy, there are indeed other ways of cultivation, many if not all of which go back into antiquity. For example, Permaculture, as a system of living as well as of planting, offers a method of growing crops which tries to mimic what happens in nature by creating 'forest gardens' of companion plants with different layers of growth (trees, bushes, undergrowth) while at the same time keeping the soil well-covered and healthy. Biodynamics, attributed to Rudolph Steiner but much older, recognises and works with the effects of the moon, sun and planets on the growth and productivity of plants, and makes special emphasis of the vitality of

the soil to the whole process, which is in itself part of this cosmic cycle. Lunar mandala planting takes this one stage further by recommending planting in conjunction with the sidereal (star) zodiac and using the four elements of fire (fruit-bearing crops), earth (roots), air (flowers) and water (leaf crops). Each method attempts to work in harmony with both soil and plants and what they have to offer (like complimentary therapists do with their clients) rather than impose its own needs and demands on them and the planet as a whole - which in many ways is what western medicine does to its patients.

Its early days yet as clearance of the worst of the brambles is still in progress, but my ideas are beginning to take shape. Green manuring - that is, using specific plants to enrich the spoil - is imminent, as is mulching with home grown compost (the resident compost toad is passively unimpressed). The young orchard is in place (OK, currently a stick farm but I have vision), and underplanting with protective and nutritive plants is planned. I'm also trying to use as many local native plants as possible, and am amazed how many of our indigenous plants are not only edible but very tasty too! The vagaries of paid work mean that trying to stick to lunar mandala planting is a bit hit and miss, but I avoid the no-gardening days like apogees, perigees, tricky conjunctions and so forth. I'm sure my hit rate will improve with time and practice, and watching how the land changes through the lunar cycles is absolutely fascinating. And the best bit of all is that the list of wild flowers to make essences is getting longer by the day!

Not sure we'll have much in the way of home-grown produce in the next couple of years, but I'm hoping that if the garden recognises that I want to work with it rather than impose my will, that we'll eventually come to some sort of happy compromise – assuming the squirrels, rabbits and deer don't get there first, of course...

Chris Harris lives in Surrey and is a practitioner of Zen Shiatsu and a number of other complimentary therapies. www.inacryalgarden.com