

# The Green Gardener



**There is something mildly rowdy about allotments, with their irregular shaped sheds and greenhouses.** Some are tended like perfectly manicured gardens, while others hover between overgrown dereliction and laid-back weediness. Some plant rows laid out neat with taut peg and line; others ignore the straight and marvel more at the fresh seedling bursting from its shell, nose poked gently between loose crumbs of earth.

These are the fields that would dream our lives as farmers or tillers of the soil. In the distance stands the figure of an 80-year-old man, straw hat against the late march sun.

In my mind I can see his weathered hands - calloused, broken nails, years of working the earth permanently stained into the ridges and grooves of his skin, creating their own fingerprint of his life. Hands like spades you might say. He walks with the stoop of a man who has suffered metal hips to replace his withered bones.

Despite years of living away, his accent remains untainted, still bearing the soft lyrical sounds of Kerry. Some 30 years away from the fields of his birth, I am drawn to paint pictures of his mind, the sometimes-ghostly beauty of southwest Ireland. An early morning mist rising slow some two feet above the ground, wrapping itself around trees and the monastic ruins of the ring. Does he yearn, I wonder?

This piece of earth holds freshly planted potatoes between carefully dug ridges.

Here, all the noise stops but for the twittering birds and the lazy monotonous drone of distant lawnmowers. What thoughts? Do I plant carrots? Parsnips? Maybe some cabbage? I could sigh for the days that have left me, but there is an easy harmony to this near silence. Still only late March and yet the sun shines so brightly there is a haze in the air that hangs over and frames him in the broader landscape, reminding me more of the south of France than an allotment in Manchester.

Old man as he is, his devilish humour still leads him to play tricks on some of his pals - tales of which he happily regales me with in snatched conversation, him leant on a spade handle for comfort in the telling. The time he put a potato plant in M's greenhouse and told him he had put in a tomato plant for him.

M thanked him, worded on his generosity, then tended, watered and cared for it along with his other tomato plants until he wondered at its lack of growth and height compared to the rest of the plants. Minded he quizzed him, who fell around laughing and told all and sundry: "Sure the silly old fool couldn't tell the

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difference between a potato and a tomato".

M of course denies it ever happened.

When I was little my head would sometimes fill with pictures of far-flung places, dreaming of the scorching desert sands and people clothed in what I thought full-length white dresses. Later, I devoured any books I could written by travelers brave enough to traverse the earth. In fact, I was so taken by the writer Dervla Murphy and tales of her travels in Afghanistan that I wrote her a letter, hoping secretly that if I was keen enough she might take me on one of her trips. In return, I got a very sweet postcard, handwritten, which I still have.

One of the wonders of allotments is the diversity of cultures and backgrounds of the people who work them - a pair of wellies and muddy hands the same in any language.

An Indian woman makes her way to her plot, carrying a pocket full of precious seeds sent from her village back home. People share passions, tips and seeds, bringing all our diverse cultures and traditions to small patches of shared earth. I am minded to think we are made of our dreams when we nurture them.

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