

# SUMMER



JOURNAL

by Grace Alexander

## GATHER SUMMER 2023.

Through Gather, I publish digital, bi-monthly seasonal journals, capturing the changing seasons in flowers, landscapes, food and forms. If you would like to share this journal with friends, please do feel free to direct them to my website [[gracealexanderflowers.co.uk](http://gracealexanderflowers.co.uk)], where they can sign up and download their copy.

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## AN INTRODUCTION

Grace Alexander knows a bit about the need for escapism. When she isn't packing seeds, turning a back lawn into a kitchen garden or debating the pros and cons of dinnerplate dahlias (just *too* big?), she is an expert witness psychologist in the UK family courts. The days might be a bit grim, but the weekends are filled with dogs, tea, flowers and the wondrous experience of life in a Somerset thatched cottage set within an English country garden.

She has been gardening forever, off and on. What she lacks in technical brilliance, she makes up for with experience and enthusiasm. Her growing space (about a quarter of an acre, tiny) was all developed from scratch in 2013 and has been going from strength to strength ever since. It includes an orchard, a flower field, meadows and a kitchen garden.

Grace is, believe it or not, a registered and certified seed-merchant. She has been growing flowers for sale (either as flowers or for seed) since 2013 and launched her passion project, Gather with Grace Alexander, in August 2020.

She is also the author of the best-selling book, *Grow & Gather*, and her work has been featured in places like The Guardian, Gardens Illustrated, and House & Garden.

She is not a person of half measures so she doesn't really have hobbies or interests, she has obsessions and all-consuming passions. Currently, Japanese textiles and dyeing, unusual winter squash varieties, intentionally under-exposed photography, and building hazel domes for old roses.

Always dogs though, always.



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## PREFACE

In my mind, summer is not one season but two. The beginning of June and the end of August could be different worlds, different colours, different landscapes. This journal is a celebration of High Summer - the glorious green months of June and July. When the sun is high in the sky and the sweet peas are fresh and lush and tall and twining. The dahlias are still in bud, for they are late summer inhabitants; this is the time of the roses.

As I write this on the first day of June, there is a warmth in the air. Clear blue skies, and the sort of weather than makes me rush out and hang sheets on the washing line. I hope you take this journal outdoors, maybe with a cold drink, or even an ice cream scattered with wild strawberries. I wouldn't want you to miss a single minute of these most precious months.



# JUNE

*May might still be considered spring /  
June cannot be mistaken for anything other  
than summer / A rose tumbles across the  
path and bees drift lazily in and out of the  
greenhouse / The turn of the month seems  
to mark the start of something new*





# 01

## BEARDED IRISES THE WHY & THE HOW

I am just going to get one thing out of the way. If you want irises, you are going to have to commit a bit. Primarily in terms of space – bearded irises do not mix well with others, they need the rhizomes to be baked so anything that might cast a shade over them, even after flowering, is a no.

I know, this means that you are going to have to devote some prime south-facing space to an iris bed that will look heart-stoppingly good for all of six weeks and then you can't put anything else in there for the rest of the year.

I haven't found a really satisfactory solution to this, except possibly to treat them as a true cut flower crop and put the bed somewhere I don't have to look at for eleven months of

the year and bring the blooms into the house. Who am I kidding, not even I have enough spare space to do that.

I asked India Hurst of Vervain, the ultimate bearded iris expert, what she thought and she said, with some evidence of defensiveness, that peonies were just the same and no-one ever complained about them. I was too polite to say that peonies interplant quite happily and have been known to be grown in meadows. One does not argue with infatuation.

The book that we wrote together is available inside Gather, or as a downloadable ebook in my web shop.

Now we have that said, why am I devoting this, chapter one of a whole summer journal, to these glorious

beasts? Because I have just been to Chelsea Flower Show, that's why.

Chelsea, the biggest, boldest, and more glamorous of all of the Royal Horticultural Society's flower shows always falls in the last week of May. The designers of the show gardens seem to shun the big roses (although *R. mutabilis* was much admired) because of it being riskily early, and many years, it is simply a celebration of irises, with the odd *Verbascum* in for light relief, and a dandelion or two to indicate edginess.

This year, 2023, was no exception and it will go down in history as The One with the Benton Irises. Sarah Price designed a space that was so different and so arresting that Monty Don described it as 'game-changing'. Its tonal colour scheme was so powerful, made up of Benton irises bred by Cedric Morris, that it seemed to contain no green at all.

It did, of course it did, and when I look back at the pictures, the green is there, but standing inside it, the irises glowed. And simply nothing else

mattered.

If that isn't a good enough reason to grow them, I don't know what is.

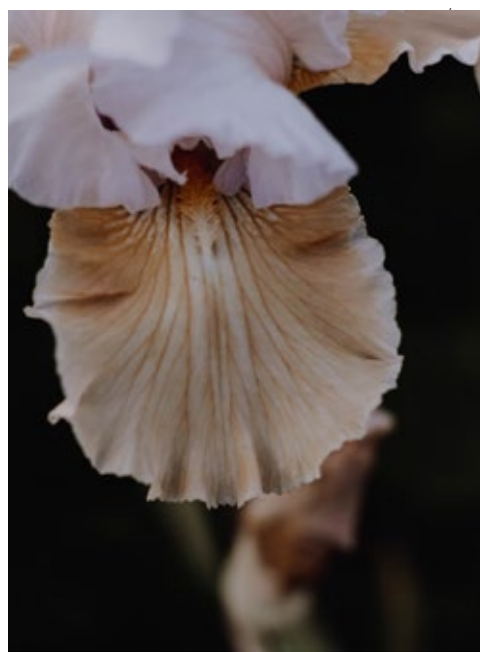
#### TIPS FOR GROWING

Irises love heat and free draining soil. Think Mediterranean, all rock and sand and hot, hot days. In the UK and most of the US, the best way to mimic that is to put the rhizomes (the base part of the plant, like a foot, that the roots come down from) on the surface of the soil so they bake. (If you are lucky enough to actually live in the Mediterranean, you plant them like a normal plant to stop them from getting too hot.)

Full sun, and don't let anything grow over them towards the end of the summer, including each other. You need to plant them about twelve inches apart (absolute minimum) to allow them to breathe and to get enough light. As they grow and the rhizomes bulk up, they will start to creep together, but then you know it is time to divide and replant. If you are

‘The main reason I love irises is for their colours. I can’t think of another flower that offers such a spectrum of colours, from the bright blues to the deepest oranges and everything in between. Not just solid colours either, broken colours, ombré patterns, stripes, splatters, tinged edges and even their little fluffy beards are often a different colour. In the late evening light, the petals (called falls & standards) catch the sun just enough to show off how iridescent and velvety their texture is.’

-India Hurst of Vervain



anything like me, you will end up with quite a collection.

#### HOW TO MAKE YOUR IRIS SEASON LAST LONGER IN THE GARDEN

I have some earlier flowering irises ('Langport Wren' is always the first for me) and some that really come into their own later. Staggering them will give colour for longer.

Top tip from India: if you cut your iris flowers quite hard back when harvesting the flowers, some of them will send up a second flower spike. (Don't feed them to try and get them to do this; I find this just gets you lots of leaves.)

#### HELPING IRISES LAST IN THE VASE

Bearded irises make amazing cut flowers. The best time for longest vase life is to cut when most of the bud is colour, but when the flower isn't out yet. But even if you cut in full flower, it'll last well on the kitchen table and, as discussed above, for most of the season there will be other buds to come after it anyway.

They are often overlooked, possibly because people think they don't last once cut. Almost all of them have more than one bud on the stem so even when the first flower goes over, there are likely to be two, three, four, maybe even five buds, which are going

to gradually open in your vase over the course of a week.

I will confess it took me longer than it should have done to work this out. You can keep irises going for really quite some time by deadheading. Clicking off the spent flower kicks the next bud behind it into action. The first flower might be out for four or five days and if there is a bud behind it that can give you another four or five days that is very wonderful indeed.

The first flower is over when it starts to go limp and turn in on itself. If you leave it longer, it goes a rather strange texture, sort of gooey and wet. You do need to remove this flower quite carefully so as not to damage the bud behind it although by the time the first flower is far over, the bud behind should be quite fully formed. The flower will snap off just underneath the developing seeds, so expect to get some green part too.

I deadhead in the garden as well as in the vase. It is an immensely satisfying task and I cannot recommend it enough.

#### MY FAVOURITE VARIETIES

If nothing else, irises win the prize for the range of colours in which they exist. They truly do span the rainbow. One of the magical things is that the standards (the petals that go straight upwards) can be one colour, and the falls (the petals that sweep downwards) another. Within the falls can be veining, or shading, or variations from one colour to another.

Obviously, having just come from Chelsea, I want to recommend the Benton irises, although I think I would go for Benton Olive as a favourite. I am thoroughly annoyed with myself that I did not immediately source some after Polly Nicholson showed me some of hers two years ago. Now I will have to wait about five years for the stock to start to match demand.

In the meantime:  
I've got a really lovely brown one, which is 'Carnival Time'. It is the most beautiful glossy brown which. Brown irises are very, very highly sought after.

So this one is 'Champagne Elegance', which sounds terribly, terribly lovely.

The standards are a really soft lilac, which is not generally my colour, but the falls are a pale, pale caramel which just soften it. You're right, I would never put lilac and sort of champagne colour together, but they just work perfectly.

Clockwise from top left:

Desert Echi

Carnival Time

Pink Charm

Champagne Elegance





## 2 JUNE

Blissful, wall to wall sunshine. I work for me on Thursdays so I didn't do anything particularly different today but bank holidays always feel different somehow. Pizza in the field at the end of a day of planting up pots and containers in the courtyard. We have started to burn the oven much hotter recently, up to 500 degrees, which meant that not only did we get pizza in about thirty seconds, but also that I could char some bones to make some WCAP (Water Soluble Calcium-Phosphate). Perfect black charcoal-like substance that came apart in my hands. Mixed with vinegar and left to cure for a week, I will soon have a mineral rich foliar spray to boost my plants just as they start to flower.

## 5 JUNE

It is raining. A biodynamic fruit day though and so I plant my squash in the wet. The second wave of peonies, the whites, have arrived. I harvest them all in the rain, because they will be ruined if they are left. Maybe these are the third wave. Does a single Buckeye Belle being in full flower count as a wave? I do love them.



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## JOBS FOR EARLY JUNE

## TRIMMING BOX

Derby Day. The first Saturday in June. Traditionally the day for trimming box. Two things before we get into the hows and whats.

Firstly, if you have any big hedges that might even possibly have birds nesting in them, then you must not do anything until September. I won't be trimming my tall native hedge until then, even though I am pretty certain there aren't any birds in the hedge because two setters do a patrol around them twice a day and they do hard stares at any pigeons who make any foray into the field. Even so, I won't risk it. Plus I don't want to lose all the fruit that it already setting on the longest branches.

Secondly, if you don't have any box hedging and you would like some, don't. I haven't yet got box blight but I cannot believe that I am on anything other than borrowed time. The next topiary shapes I put in will be something else. Yew maybe, what with Malus Farm being next to our village church. Beech possibly, because I adore it. Neither look like box (choose a *Lonicera* or, even better, *Ilex crenata*, if you just can't bear to be without it) but if you can't change something, make a feature of it.

Although it has since succumbed to box caterpillar, I am still obsessed by the shape of Nigel Slater's kitchen garden edges. So big and square. Until my own hedges reach that size, I will be focusing on two things. Firstly, a light trim to make sure the growth stays neat and even. If you wait until the box has reached the desired size before you train it, you are likely to do a first trim and find all sorts of bare branches and patches. Little and often in the final desired shape will get you there eventually. Use a sheet or a tarpaulin to catch the bits, box clippings are notorious for evading even the most assiduous sweeping.

Secondly, feeding. Box looks amazing mature, and often a bit disappointing in its adolescence. Patience is required, but you can keep this time to a minimum by diligent feeding in the growing season. Chicken manure pellets are fine. We're after nitrogen here for green, leafy growth.

## PLANTING OUT

I sowed my beans in the middle of May and the first ones, Cosse Violettes, are ready for planting out. There is nothing more dispiriting than planting out beautiful, glossy, glorious plants and watching them be cut in half by slugs overnight so I do err on the side of caution with these. The four other varieties that I sowed at the same time are nowhere near ready yet, they are too small and too lush at the base.

And it isn't just beans. I am still planting out dahlias that were tubers I started in March (either bought or accidentally dug up when clearing beds). The cuttings that I got are still sitting in the greenhouse being mollycoddled, and they will stay there a little longer.

Into the Dyeing Garden, weld, woad, dyer's chamomile, disco marigolds. I will sow plenty more seed in this week; dyeing is remarkably demanding of plant material. I put some seedlings of Lady's Bedstraw into a pot. It is the roots that give the colour and, like new potatoes, growing them on in the pot makes everything a little easier at harvest time.

Cosmos. They have *adored* this heat.

Irises. After my talking to from India about how pots really aren't the thing for irises, I have bitten the bullet and dedicated a whole bed to them. When they are little, they need very little digging in, so that's always a bonus for this lazy gardener.

More sweet peas. Always.

## SOWING

Yep, I am still sowing. None of that seed tray pricking out stuff now. Just make a line in the soil with a copper trowel, water it, sprinkle the seeds in. I have

harvested much of the first round of vegetables and those that over-wintered are now in flower. Today is fruit, so peas and pumpkins here. Tuesday is my next root day and I am itching to get more beetroot in.

If you are ahead of the curve, then the time is now for biennials.

## BIENNIALS

Biennials are worth a bit of extra effort for lots of reasons, but first it might be helpful to think about why they are an effort. I don't know about you but the rush that comes early in the season has slackened a bit. This is the time of year that I want to be sitting in the hammock, (or indoors watching the rain slide disconsolately down the windows) and drinking gin.

Plus, I don't have a square inch of a bed or a pot spare to put another seed into, and there is so much abundance that I cannot imagine that the earth will ever be bare and cold again.

But, my lovely, overcome that inertia; biennials are worth it and your future self will thank you.

My tips are:

Shove them in a pot or a seed tray in the short term. Mine are probably going to be on the shadier staging bits of the greenhouse but that is only because that is the only place that I have any room. Do not feel that you have to direct sow them if you simply don't have any gaps going spare. It really isn't a good use of space when you could have dahlias just coming into flower.

However, do not leave them in a greenhouse over the winter. They need cold to trigger spring flowering. One year I smugly left a whole bank of trays of honesty seedlings protected under cover and then planted them out in March. I may be the only person to have needed a three year flowering cycle for *lunaria*.

Generally the best guide to when seed needs to be sown is when the flower is dropping its seed naturally. I do find this is a bit tricky with biennials; all the advice is to sow before the end of July to give the plants a chance to bulk up before winter but my foxgloves aren't anywhere near ready to harvest seed from yet. I also have quite a few self-seeded honesty that are looking pretty small and I know they were from a crop I harvested last year and they won't flower until next.

I tend to operate a bit of belt and braces approach to get round this. I have lots of seed from last year in glass jars (I find biennials generally and foxgloves specifically to be abundant in terms of the seed that they produce) and so I will sow that now. But when the foxglove seed is ready, I shall chuck it about a bit and hope for the best. Oh, and save it, obviously.

#### OTHER THINGS

*Hoeing.* You will probably know my thoughts on gardening as therapy, but I do think hoeing is deeply satisfying. Back and forth. Back and forth. On a dry day, it is like a knife through butter. Keeping beds clear is important at this time of year. Not only because they will out-grow the plants you want if you give them half a chance but also because slugs are rampant right now. Giving them shelter will mean that as soon as you plant out your squash, they will be ready to pounce. Take my word for it.

*Check your soil.* If there is one thing that makes my growing life difficult, it isn't, surprisingly, slugs. It's voles. I don't see them very often and they cause me very little problems above ground. However, I regularly plant sturdy looking seedlings out, water them in and go merrily on my way. I come back to find that they look exactly the same or, worse, a little bit yellow. I have no idea why, but it takes me a few weeks to remember why every single year. It means that the voles have dug a tunnel underneath and the roots are touching air, not soil. If you water hard from above, you will be able to tell what has happened because the soil around the plant will collapse. Get your hand in and tamp it down. I quite like my voles though. Corfe is famous for its ancient oak tree and its resident owl, and I would be blessed if it hunted in my field.





## 02

## THE SUMMER SOLSTICE

Tomorrow is the longest day. The first flush of the spring has mellowed into something more steady. It feels like the work of getting each flower from seed to seedling, seedling to plant, has been done. All there is to do now is to watch them come into bloom.

Even after all the mindfulness in the world, I still find it difficult to be content where I am. On days that are so hot that I stick to the Land Rover's vinyl seats and burn my hand on the tap as I go to water for the millionth time, I dream of cold mornings and apple wood log fires. In November, all I dream of is a day that goes by without me having to wash and dry twelve dog feet.

The Solstice is therefore a poignant point in the year. I start to mourn the

summer before it has even ended. My mind skips over July and August and anticipates the fading of the flowers in the field, and the rising of mists from the valley. I pencil in trips out and evenings in the field. I photograph the roses to preserve them for posterity, for I know that they will not last forever.

But this is the peak of the season, not the downward slope, and I try to bring myself back to the now. There is only this moment, and then this moment. These swaying grasses, and this warm buzz of bees in the phacelia. My knowledge that it will one day pass should sharpen, not sadden, the beauty.

And so tonight, stay up late and look at the sky. We are turning now.

## 22 JUNE

There's a jostling at this time of year; plants ready to go out and flowers in full bloom. The first of the summer flowers are over their peak and need replacing. The opium poppies have set fat, blue-grey seed heads and I pull them out and turn them upside down to dry. Taking them out of the matrix planting changes the balance of the textures. The bronze fennel is now flowering with a sharp golden dazzle. Some of the deep purple-toned atriplex is ten foot tall. I cut back the thick chicory stems to stop it flopping onto everything else. I make a wonderful discovery by putting branches in the bedroom; chicory closes its flowers in the night time and opens them up again in the morning. If that is not the most beautiful and romantic thing you have ever contemplated sleeping next to, I have nothing else to say to you.

## 23 JUNE

I finally get round to thinning the fruit on the espaliers. I have been reluctant to do so simply because the weather has been so cruel that much of the fruit has been thinned for me. The path crunches with fallen apples. There are shoots so long that they vertically criss-cross the horizontal branches of the espaliers and the trees take on the appearance of a solid green wall.

## 24 JUNE

Hugo crashes through the hydrangea bed and knocks over some poppies. I take the broken stems inside and put them in the flower press. I remember being eight years old. I remember the turn of the nuts on the bolts. I remember the magical translucent and fragile texture that only pressed petals have. I should leave them for two weeks before I check them, but I open the press the next day to add cornflowers. I did not do a good job of arranging the petals, but I get a child-like thrill of joy when I see them nevertheless.

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## JOBS FOR THE WEEK OF THE SOLSTICE

### DEADHEAD BEARDED IRISES

One of the top tips from India has been to not just deadhead flowers to keep the next buds going, but to cut the flower spikes right back to the base when the spring flowering has finally done. Not only does this feel much tidier (not often my primary motivation admittedly) but I am maximising the chances of getting a second flush of flowers later in the season.

### KEEP CUTTING ROSES

There is deadheading roses and there is cutting roses. Most days, I consider these to be the same thing and my vases stay full.

Snapping the heads off when they have gone over is absolutely better than nothing, and some days, it is all I can manage as I dash past on my way to something else. But if you want to really prolong your roses, then get your secateurs or snips right down the stem, to a point where you can see a bud, preferably facing outwards, and cut there. The cut will trigger growth at that bud and, fingers crossed, you will get a whole other flower stem.

The outward facing bud means that the stem will grow up and away from the centre of the plant, reducing the chances of it all getting a bit congested in the centre.

### SWEET PEA LOVE

If your sweet peas are flowering and you want the flowers, cut them and feed them. (If you want the seed, see below.) I would usually say water them, but the rain is hammering on the windows as I write this. If it isn't raining where you are, water. A drop of comfrey tea, seaweed or fermented nettle juice in the water won't go amiss.

Unless you want seed (see below) cut, cut and cut again.

Some of my late sowings of sweet peas are still only a handful of inches tall. They are looking green and lush but they are flopping all over the place. I usually roam the field with a pair of snips in my back pocket, at this time of year it is a roll of string. Tie in everything. Sweet peas, beans, even tying a climbing rose back to a fencepost makes all the difference. Tomatoes.

#### SAVING SWEET PEA SEED

The circle turns and the cycle never pauses. My first flowers have bloomed, been photographed, appreciated, sniffed, and left. Left because the first flowers on a vine make the best seeds. The fattest, strongest, more perfect seed will come from these ones. If you cut your first ones (and I don't blame you if you did) then maybe leave one or two vines just for seed.

#### SOWING SEED

I know, just keep going. A pinch here and a pinch there. I am still throwing in marigolds for the dyeing garden, a little cosmos because it flowers so fast. My book launch is the middle of September and Matt Austin is coming again on 14 September. The field is more poppies than anything else at the moment but I am focusing everything on peaking late in the season. All dahlias and rudbeckias, nasturtiums and coreopsis. There are a lot of flowers with a seed to bloom time of around 65 days. Cornflowers are around 65-75 days. Nigella is 65. Poppies can be even less, touching on 60. Sunflowers, for their size, are surprisingly rapid; 50 to 60 days. I might have left it too late to get everything in flower by the middle of September, but I would love one last throw of the dice.

And how else do I know that we are coming into peak sowing time? Because the flowers are setting seed. If you wait until a seed head is ripe and simply tip is upside down on some relatively bare ground, you will have the absolute best, most trouble-free flowers you could ever imagine.

You don't even need to do this for poppy seedheads; trust me, they'll do it for you.

## 27 JUNE

We return from camping in the middle of the night. A weather front was due to come in overnight so we make the call to strike camp early. On the way home, we watch an outdoor theatre production in the utterly glorious garden at The Old Vicarage in Gwinear near Hayle. The garden was as gorgeous as it sounds. All geums and delphiniums and wafting scent of lavender. I chose the longest queue at the bar beforehand because it meant I could peer in the windows and see if the furniture was as romantic as the planting. (It was.) And so we all arrived home, well past midnight, just in time for the black sky to open. Even in the dark, I could sense that the garden had changed. *Alchemilla mollis* and the *sanguisorbas* had flopped over the back path, touching in the middle.

## 28 JUNE

I walk out into the field with sleepy dogs and a coffee. Later than usual. They are strangely reluctant to move after the exertions of the holiday and the disruption to their long days of sleeping and snoring. The field has turned into a jungle.

## 29 JUNE

Drifting days. We slide from June into July. The winds are gusty, and the showers need dodging. A topsy-turvy sort of summer. The first dahlias. A horrid hard red so they are not pictured here. I will wait for the dinner plates before I bother taking my camera to the end of the garden. Some small quinces drop in the blustery weather, and I mourn them. There are many still left on the tree though, and they seem to be swelling. And really, who needs more than three quinces a year?

# JULY

*I come from a family of Cancerians and I,  
true to form, married one / This means that  
July is the month of birthdays / Parties  
around the oak table in the orchard /  
Champagne in the kitchen / Scones with  
cream & jam., on repeat*





## 03

## EATING OUTDOORS

It would make more sense to have the pizza oven somewhere near the house. It would make sense to have an area for coffee, like the herb garden, in easy reach of the back door. It isn't.

As a result of the layout of the garden, the orientation of the house, and the height of the enormous lime trees that line the road that passes through the village to the west of us, the only part of Malus Farm that catches the sun in the evening is the orchard.

This means that when we want to have supper outdoors, the baskets and the barrows are packed up and everything, from plates and glasses to salt and pepper, knives and chopping boards, is shipped down the path and into the field. When Kristy Ramage visited and suggested that this was a little daft, I felt resistance spread across my body. Eating out for us is like going on holiday.

I can see the attraction though. If you work from home (and even if you don't) an easily accessible space for coffee where you can watch the birds, admire the changing seasons, soak in the green of a landscape, can make all the difference between a garden that is tended and adored, and one that is just a space for a washing line and a bicycle, passed through between door and car.

Bare foot in the height of summer. A light jumper as the sun goes down.

The compromise position on having a full paddock evening with pizza toppings in precariously stacked bowls, and looking out at the sunset from the kitchen table is a portable supper. Not a picnic – picnics come with all sorts of inconvenient accoutrements - but a one bowl recipe that can be easily transported to a spot bathed in golden light. One hand holding food,



the other a glass of wine, and a spoon tucked into the back pocket. This Anna Jones recipe is one that I come back to again and again. I cannot think of anything edible that isn't improved by a little crunchy caramelisation so this is a dream for me.

If you would like to grow your own butter beans, I hear 'Fagiolo di Spagna' by Franchi seeds is the one to try. If you can't get hold of it, White Emergo by beansandherbs.co.uk is a great alternative.

Full disclosure, these ones are out of a tin. You would not believe how many bean plants you need to get a dried bean harvest that will last a household for a winter.

### SUMMER RECIPE BY ANNA JONES: NOTES

I have some big pans but even I can't find one that will fit two tins of beans in a single layer. Do two batches. Rinse the beans first and let them air dry for a while.

Beans love salt. Do not skimp. A bit when you are cooking and a scatter at the end. Smoked salt is incredible.

For the life of me, I can't get the caramelisation on the beans right if I mix the tomatoes and the kale in. They either don't cook enough to turn golden, or they cook too much and go to mush by the time the kale is done. I start with three pans on the hob: a wide pan with the beans, a smaller one to start the tomatoes off, and one for toasting walnuts. If you have an Aga or an Everhot, shove them all in the top oven.

Be generous with the lemon.

## CRISPY BUTTERBEANS WITH KALE, PARMESAN AND LEMON

Serves 4

2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil  
2 x 400g tins butter beans, drained  
400g vine or cherry tomatoes  
200g kale, washed, stems removed,  
roughly torn  
50g walnuts, lightly toasted  
2 garlic cloves, finely sliced  
Nutmeg, freshly grated  
The zest and juice of a lemon  
Salt  
Parmesan (I use a vegetarian one), for  
grating on top, optional

Heat the olive oil in a large frying pan over a high heat. Add the beans in a single layer. Stir to coat the beans in the oil, then let them sit long enough to brown on one side – about 3-4 minutes – before turning to brown the other side for about the same length of time. The beans should be golden and a bit crunchy on the outside.

Add the tomatoes and allow them to cook for a few minutes, or until they begin to break down.

Add a little more oil to the pan and allow it to heat a little. Add the kale and a pinch of salt to the pan, then cook for a couple of minutes, turning all the time until it is tender and the edges have crisped.

Stir in the walnuts and garlic, then wait 10 seconds and stir in a good grating of nutmeg.

Wait another 10 seconds and stir in the lemon juice and zest.

Remove from the heat.

Serve with grated parmesan and some bread for a hearty meal.



## 16 JULY

A day of glorious, glorious sunshine. I hear the tractor pulling the mower across the meadow behind the flower field. The long, golden, swaying sward topples row by row. We walk late to avoid the heat so the shadows are long and the sky is huge, a soft, innocent pink. It feels as if the year has shifted a gear; this is late summer heat. The girls have slept all day and so they bounce through the long grass like puppies. I spy the first milky hazelnuts in the hedgerow.

## 17 JULY

True siesta weather. As in, in the highest heat of the day, there is nothing to be done but to sit in the hammock. The supporting trees have grown since last summer and they meet in the middle now. Not tangling, but touching. I am grateful for the shade.

## 18 JULY

This season has been chaotic and overwhelming. The weather has been contrary and unseasonal, and the field is teetering on the brink of wild.

The heat has slowed the rate of growth and I take advantage of the baking sun to hoe the paths. Hoeing in wet weather is utterly pointless, everything just roots again somehow. On days like today, the seedlings crisp up in half an hour and that is, quite decidedly, that.

The difference it makes is immediate; the sharper edges and the wider sightlines suddenly make everything more manageable. It is a tricky task though, because I have to do it without looking at what I am hoeing otherwise I make no progress at all. I know, I know. I lack the ruthless edge to become a truly successful gardener.



# 04

## ROSES A STORY OF LOVE & MAGIC

If you order a very big bundle of sweet peas from me, or I know that it is your third or fourth order in a row, I have been known to write 'No such thing as too many sweet peas' on your postcard.

I think this applies to many things. No such thing as too many brass candlesticks. No such thing as too many pairs of gloves. No such thing as too many compost heaps, vintage terracotta pots, or cups of coffee. No such thing as too many pairs of brown leather boots. No such things as too many dogs.

Maybe not the last one. Three is a lot when they are big (the girls) or shouty (Hugo).

But definitely definitely no such thing as too many roses.

It is my tenth anniversary of starting out as a flower farmer in 2023. In

my first season, I planted the native hedge that is now twice as tall as me, and I planted fifty David Austin roses. I crammed them all into one bed, because that was the advice I was given, and jolly good advice it was too. As long as you keep cutting them and feeding them, roses grown close together climb towards the light, which means long, elegant, gorgeous stems. Not the stiff stems that are the dead giveaway for a hothouse-grown, imported rose, but leggy in a good way. Sinuous and sumptuous.

The only one that ever did stiff stems was Queen of Sweden. Too perfect. Too pink. Too polite. I gave it to my mother.

But after ten years, I can't help thinking it is time for a little top up. I still love the cuttable, cupped shrub roses, although I genuinely grieve for the retired Jude the Obscure, and not



just because I had to re-write my whole rose growing guide because I had recommended it so often. (We found the new 'Dannahue' on the David Austin stand at Chelsea this year, and I am convinced they have bred it as a replacement for Jude.)

But my taste has changed. I want opulence and abundance more than ever now. I want wild romance. I want buckets and buckets of fleetingly fragile exquisite blooms, and then bough and boughs of burnished hips.

In gaps between things, whilst waiting for the kettle to boil, last thing at night and first thing in the morning, I find myself sliding again and again to the David Austin catalogue. I make lists on scraps of paper so that in the middle of a shopping list is written, rather incongruently, 'R. SPIN. 'Dunwich Rose' – black hips? Too shrubby?'. I turn over a phone bill and it says 'Adélaïde d'Orléans' - Rambler – Sissinghurst? Height?' I light the fire with a piece of newspaper with 'R. SPIN. 'Marbled Pink' – amazing or awful?' scribbled in the margin.

As we move into the later stages of high summer, I value the roses for their fruits as much as their flowers. I treasure the gorgeous article by Troy Scott Smith on the best rose hips (Gardens Illustrated, December 2018. Yes, I have kept every copy of Lucy Bellamy's editorial reign) and take note. Both Kiftsgate and Wickwar get a mention, although neither are for the faint hearted in terms of their growing habit and I have seen Kiftsgate smother a small house. He is lyrical about *R. rubiginosa*, 'similar to the dog rose, but with perfumed foliage that is reminiscent of apples, particularly after rain'.

Oh, my heart. I cannot resist. I am so swept up in his descriptions of the different shapes and tones of hips, that I write down and underline 'R. 'Penelope'' on my wish list before I remember that I already have one planted in the box-lined beds. He's not wrong though; she does have great hips.



VARIETIES THAT CUT  
PARTICULARLY WELL:  
Princess Alexandra of Kent  
Chandos Beauty  
Irish Hope  
Duchess of Cornwall  
Just Joey  
Graham Thomas

MY FAVOURITE ROSES:  
Summer Song  
Desdemona  
Claire Austin  
Lady of Shalott  
William Morris  
My least favourite? Hot chocolate.  
Gorgeous colour, lethal thorns.

SOURCES FOR ROSES:  
David Austin roses  
Pococks  
The Cornish Rose Company

19 JULY

Chicory grows very very tall and then falls over. You can't even cut it out because it's so tangled and wiry that it's got mixed up with everything else. But here are three reasons why I adore it and I will never ever not grow it again.

The flowers close at night and open in the day which means that if you have it in your bedroom, it is like it is sleeping.

The petals don't shed, or fall off, or drop, they just sort of dry and disappear. So neat, so tidy. I am pretty much allergic to housework, so this is an excellent quality.

In the beautiful blues, you occasionally get a white. It is all the more special for its rarity.

20 JULY

A hot day. A balmy evening. A barbecue in the orchard. The field is to the east of the cottage and so evening sun is tricky. Tonight, the light is perfect. The teasels and the daucus carota seedheads, silhouetted against the fading sky.

13 JULY

I have a week off work. It rolls out in front of me. Is there anything so luxuriant as the abundance of time? I drink tea in the orchard and watch hay being made. The soft grass shorn in an afternoon. I have ideas and make lists. I have big dreams. I watch the world go by and listen to the bees on the hedge germander.

21 JULY

A day out. I visit a farm shop and debate the merits of cuts of oats. Who knew porridge oats were not the best oats for porridge? I buy fresh eggs and herbs and I covet white currant bushes. Home to the first harvest of tomatoes and to the discovery that Dom Pedro tulip bulbs are already sold out for this season. And I thought I was so organised to be even thinking of them.



*July is a month of managing, conducting,  
directing, tweaking and, more than  
anything, glorying / A few seeds to sow & a  
few cuttings to take, just to keep your hand  
in and the flowers flowing / but just enjoy  
it too*

## JOBS FOR JULY

## MY FAVOURITE BIENNIALS FOR FLOWERING NEXT YEAR

Foxgloves, of every colour, but I adore Sutton's Apricot. Grow the perennial ones for low maintenance flowers; *Digitalis lanata* 'Café Crème' is exceptional.

Honesty. Because truly, there is nothing like the lunar seed heads. I have them in wreaths all year round.

Hesperis. The white one. The scent is utterly wonderful.

Aquilegia. Early July is the latest you can sow them because they need to be a good size to make it through the winter to flower next spring.

Stocks. I grow the apricot and the copper double varieties. Beautiful.

*Anthriscus sylvestris* 'Ravenswing'. Black cow parsley. Whatever you have read or heard about what I said was my favourite flower, I was lying. It's this.

## STARTING PERENNIALS FROM SEED

My flower field, Malus Farm, is being guided more and more by regenerative principles and that means the surface of the soil should be covered, and the underneath of the soil should be as undisturbed as possible. & that means as much permanent planting - perennials - as possible.

/ Achilleas

/ Verbascum

/ Hollyhocks

/ Dianthus (Try *D. carthusianorum*)

/ Echinaceas (I favour *E. pallida*)

/ The big textural plants such as Echinops and Eryngium

/ Bupleurum

/ All the heucharas

/ *Rudbeckia triloba* - hardy enough for overwintering

## HARVESTING IN JULY

Everything should be looking glorious right now. I have roses and honeysuckle and achillea and drying ammi. The grasses are in their first flush (many are better if you leave them to grown on and then start to dry). There are sanguisorbas everywhere, reaching the sky. Teasels.

## SEED SAVING

The opium poppies are tantalisingly not quite ready yet, which is annoying because I am itching to make lemon and poppy seed cake. (I am having to make do with violas.) However, the ravenswing is in danger of taking matters into its own hands if I don't capture them in an envelope, and the earliest of the grasses are very much ready to fly. The ammi is in full flower and I have tied a red ribbon around a few of the best plants to remind me not to cut them. One sweet pea plant has scrambled sideways into a hedge of beech and honeysuckle and the other has obligingly set pods. I am keeping an eye on them and just as they start to brown and crackle, I will catch them.

The early tagetes in the Dyeing Garden were looking distinctly unattractive and dishevelled when I returned from holiday. Deceptive, because splitting open the old flower heads revealed the most perfectly packed torpedo-like seeds. How can anything be so satisfying?

Now is the time for starting your seed collection. Once you are self sufficient for seed, you have everything you will ever need.

## SOFTWOOD CUTTINGS

Cuttings are a magical way of propagating plants. One of my earliest memories is my mother being given bags of twiggy leaves every time we visited anyone's garden. I have just bought a lot of new plants. One of each, which is hopeless for a good planting design. But they are not destined to live alone; I will be



harvesting them for cuttings, and creating clones from the stems. In a year's time, I will have created a wonderful collection of plants.

Softwood cuttings are taken in early summer from the tender new growth of the season and will develop sufficient roots to survive the winter.

I am taking these cuttings in early July:

- / Roses (especially *R. glauca*)
- / Physocarpus
- / Hydrangea
- / Honeysuckle
- / Jasmine
- / Salvias (so excited about *S. uliginosa*)
- / Viburnum

Softwood cuttings are very easy but I have some tips.

Firstly, work quickly. Secondly, cut don't crush the stems. Thirdly, label. One cutting looks much like another...

How to:

- / Remove shoots, longer than the finished cutting, just above a leaf on the parent plant.
- / Aim to make a cutting not more than 10cm long. Use clean, sharp snips to cut just below a leaf joint. Strip off the leaves from the bottom half of the cutting.
- / Insert cuttings into pots of moist compost with lots of added grit, keeping lower leaves just above compost level.
- / Push twigs in around the edge of the pot, then cover with a clear polythene bag held in place with an elastic band. Label.
- / Place cuttings in a warm position, out of direct sun. I put them on the lower staging of my greenhouse which is perfect.
- / And just wait. You will know that the cuttings have taken if you see white roots at the bottom of the pot, or new growth in the leaves at the top.

## HARVESTING

Cut and cut and cut again. I brought armfuls of ammi into the house last week, and not a moment before time, because they were flattened by a rainstorm not half an hour later.

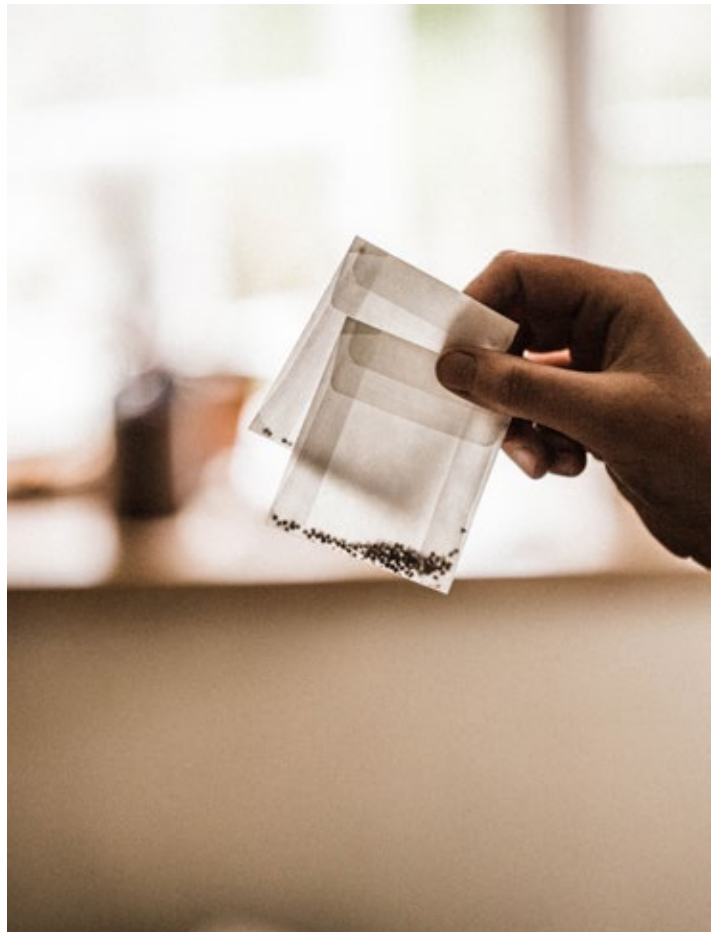
There is barely a surface bare of a little jar of sweet peas. The first of the hare's tail grass harvest are hung up to dry. The moment that you cut them depends on whether you want to use them for seed in the future or you want them to hold for longer. I, somewhat typically, hedged my bets and cut half and left half.

But as well as the cuts, there are other things being harvested too. The tagetes in the Dyeing Garden have come slowly and sporadically. Not enough to do anything meaningful with all at once, so I have been lopping their flowers off and drying them indoors. When they are fully dry, I add them to the growing collection in a paper bag. A winter project maybe.

With similar (and unusual for me) levels of thrift and preparedness, borage flowers are being added to ice cubes. Just in case it stays hot long enough for a summer supper party.

I caught my neighbours staring at my all gold raspberries yesterday. The canes are, rather unexpectedly, growing in a beech hedge and they are, rather startlingly, very yellow, so I can understand their consternation. I offered them some and they pulled that face that is so universally human that it makes me laugh out loud. There is evolutionary advantage in being careful about what you put in your mouth and unfamiliar food is meant to be approached reluctantly and with suspicion. Once they had got past the toddler with broccoli stage and put the fruit in their mouth, they declared them delicious.

(I ate one first, to prove them to be safe. Copying others is also a universal human trait.)



## 28 JULY

I often impulse buy plants for their names. Dusty Springfield sweet peas. Jude the Obscure roses. Agrostemma githago. Any calamagrostis, because the name is so round it makes me smile.

I bought one plant because of the description on the label. It said:

*This fairly vigorous Japanese climber bears from spring to early autumn intriguing urn-shaped flowers, the four fleshy petals staying almost closed, and covered on the outside with brown hairs, resembling a bunch of baby rabbits clustered together.*

That thing where people say they just knew when they had found their wedding dress? I had found my plant. It was through the till and in my car before you could say 'fluffy bunny'. It is named *Clematis fusca* and it the most wonderful, most cheerful and just downright bizarre flower I have ever seen. I want to drape it over everything in the house and put little jars of it in unexpected places. But I shan't because I am going to save as much seed as I can.

It flowers today. And yes, it looks like a bunch of baby rabbits.

## 29 JULY

The days are shortening. I can tell because I am an early riser, and there are two magic tipping points in the year where my moment of waking matches the sunrise.

Today marks the start of the turn towards dark mornings and even darker nights. As I get up, the cleft in the hills is filled with a soft coral pink.

I think about taking my camera outside and making the most of the soft light, the golden hour. I don't obviously. I make another cup of coffee and take it back to bed.

You just can't rush setters getting up in the morning, and Hugo is still snoring with his head on a pillow.

30 JULY

The orchard and the flower field are separated by a row of espalier apple trees. A mix of cider apples, cookers and eaters; they are a wonderful sight.

At this time of year they appear less as trees and more as a wall of green upright branches. The fruit is obscured by a season's worth of growth. I start looking up when to do a summer prune in the middle of June and it invariably says to wait until August.

I cannot wait a minute longer and I tackle the first tree, a prolific James Grieve. We bought a tree for each of our nephews: a James Grieve, a Thomas Putt and a William Crump. Our niece, Iona, came later and had us stumped on the fruit front, so she remains treeless.

James Grieve is the heaviest cropper, but I defy you to find a better apple to eat stilton with than William Crump.

31 JULY

Wild clematis is now out in earnest. It grows in rambling waves along the track behind the church that leads to the field gate. Every year I watch it grow and hope that the seedheads fluff up before the farmer comes to cut them all back and clear the ditch. It has seeded into my formal beech hedge behind the cottage which, although far from ideal, at least gives me a back up.





If you have enjoyed this seasonal journal, then I think you will adore being a member of Gather. Every week, I publish words, pictures, and films all about life in my glorious flower field and my beautiful Somerset cottage.

It doesn't matter if you have a few acres or a few pots, what matters is that flowers make your heart rise and your fingertips tingle. It matters that you feel compelled to be amongst flowers and plants. It matters that you are willing to let go of the mundane and just wander around in my world. There's no falling behind or keeping up, just pick it up and put it down as you wish.

## WHAT IS INCLUDED?

- Writing and photography narrating the seasonal shift as expressed through plants, flowers, food and feelings.
- Monthly videos of expert tips, techniques and mechanics for sustainable and foamfree flowers.
- Members-only shop for my seeds.
- Free access to all my published ebooks and digital guides. This includes the most comprehensive seed sowing guide (subtitle being 'all the mistakes I have ever made so you don't have to') and an absolute beginner's guide to natural dyeing.
- Regular blog posts including growing or arranging tutorials and my little black book of sources and suppliers.
- Access to the members-only Instagram account.
- A weekly email on a Sunday morning, letting you know what has been going on in Gather that week, and some personal thoughts about what has been going on in my week.

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I feel like I am amongst friends...”