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Introduction

It's not nice to be called lazy, but as we live in a world where long working hours and hectic schedules are the exhausting norm for many of us, we do need to take it easy sometimes. When we finally have some spare time, we often find ourselves too decrepit and fed up to spend it feeding, mowing, seeding, scarifying, de-mossing and weeding the lawn. Generally, for a great many of us caring for a demanding garden is just too much. But if you have managed to acquire a house or ground-floor flat in this country, you are likely to have such a monster outside, practically yelling for attention. And you may possibly have critical neighbours peering at the muddy mess and thinking bad thoughts about you. Or so you fear.

So this book is not addressed to the keen gardener, though I hope they will also find treasure within. It's

principally addressed to you, the much-neglected reluctant gardener. You don't watch the TV gardening shows longing to know how to grow a cucumber, and you never touch gardening magazines because they bring on a severe bout of depression. You may be reluctant because you hate the outdoors and hate gardening outdoors most of all. Maybe the garden is just too big, or you'd love a beautiful garden but there's no way you want outdoor housework added to your list of chores. Or you'd love a beautiful garden and already have the plot, but you have no idea of how to turn the plot into said garden before you're dead or bankrupt. Maybe you do have a beautiful garden already but – here the keen gardener *does* slip in – the way you have been looking after it is just impossible to continue. So, I want to help.

It's important for me to say at this point that probably the most important thing I can offer you is not so much alternative ways of gardening – though I do have a lot of those for you – but perhaps a different mindset. A mindset that involves asking yourself 'Do I *have* to?' whenever you are faced with something you don't like doing. Followed by 'Might there be another way?' when you decide it's just a horrible way to spend your time.

At Veddw House, I was originally faced with what

rapidly proved to be an impossible task: to create a garden out of two fields, with a spade and very little money or help, and at a time when I was not even very well. I had to find alternative ways of doing things – and I did. I thought I might have to dig everywhere I wanted to make a border, and I even made a feeble effort in that direction. But that really seemed a bit too much like hard work, so I researched hard for alternatives, and discovered mulching. This involves covering the soil or, in this case, grass, with organic matter, which cuts out the light to whatever is growing underneath and kills it. For initial land clearing it takes about six to eight inches (15–20cm) of something like bark or wood chippings, thereafter about two inches (5cm). The soil is fed by the rotting vegetation and the mulch itself (there is no significant nitrogen depletion, no matter what people say, quite the opposite). The mulch benefits the soil also by adding humus – this is not the stuff you eat as a dip with flat bread, which is hummus. Don't eat soil, however well mulched – it's gritty. Thanks to mulching, a two-acre ornamental garden suddenly became possible. Instead of digging, I mulched where I wanted beds and borders. (You can see something of the result on our website veddw.com.)

I also had no idea of how to separate a grass path from a border with no money to pay for edgings, and had no

inclination to do the edgings myself. Observation led me to plants like *Alchemilla mollis*, which kindly keeps edges for me. To level a piece of ground I needed a retaining wall, which we all know cost the earth. Instead, I planted two beech hedges with earth-retaining roots. One to hold back the soil and one in front to hide the soil and root. They have supported that bank through all weathers for over twenty years. And so I went on, problem solving all the way.

So part of my intention here is to encourage you, whether you have several acres or a little roof garden, to risk experimenting and finding new and easier ways to do things. Be sceptical about what I say, and be sceptical about every bit of garden advice you are offered. There may yet be an easier way – and that way lies revolution and, potentially, relaxation.

How to be a deckchair gardener

If you know *anything* about gardening, this will not be easy. If you want to take it easy outside, it's best if you know nothing about gardening. That way you will have much less to unlearn. Unlearning is hard. Science says so – never mind your own experience of making New Year's resolutions. Science has experimented with giving mice a sugar craving and then comparing what happens to the brains of the mice with a sweet tooth to the brains of the mice without when it comes to pressing a button for a sugar treat. Without getting too technical here, the mice with the sugar habit had such obvious and dramatic brain change that (Warning: sensitive souls, look away now)

it was possible to tell which ones they were just from looking at separated bits of their brain in a Petri dish. So your gardening habits – while no one is suggesting that they are sugar sweet – are etched into your brain, and if you’ve been a conscientious and concerned gardener all your life, even if your life has so far been a short one, you will have some serious unlearning to do. It can’t be easy to rearrange your brain, can it?

In fact, it’s not easy to become laid-back about anything once you have absorbed the lessons many of us are taught as children. Typically, we may be taught from an early age to keep busy and to do things ‘properly’, and both these things militate against being a good layabout. It sounds on the surface as if being lazy would be easy (lazy has that kind of reputation). But it isn’t, so learning to take it easy will actually be your first and most serious task if you are, as it were, to be properly laid-back.

Then there’s all the specific gardening learning you may be burdened with, such as how to be a ‘good’ gardener. You may have worked hard at that one while you sat in front of the telly with a glass of wine or two, wondering how Monty Don does all that with just two dogs to help him. You might even have embarked on your gardening education back when Geoff Hamilton was creating lots

of jobs for you, like the eternal ‘how to take a cutting’. That one never made sense to me, though it’s a popular one, since what most people like in their gardens is a plethora of random and different plants. What do they do with all their successful cuttings? Start a nursery, I suppose, and therein lies much grief. Stick with the day job, especially if it has a pension.

The ‘proper’ vs the ‘improper’ gardener

Even a total novice gardener may have admired the tidy and busy gardens of those ‘proper gardeners’ and this in itself will have left you with a lot to unlearn. You may also have got the parental and TV gardeners’ rules confused and become a gardening parent: it is currently the thing to drag small children away from happy times with their computers out into the cold and wet to learn to become good citizen gardeners and to have fun. ‘Fun’ is an ominous term and we should all learn as soon as possible to avoid all threats of having fun. I understand Shakespeare never knew the word and if he could manage without it we certainly can. It usually turns out to be