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Gardening later in life

Christine Dakin

Fig. 1 NGS invitation with *Rosa 'Seagull'*

We could have chosen a better site to make a garden and build a nursery back in 1997, but we had determination and a positive outlook for the future. Our site was a flat, four-acre paddock on Blue Lias clay. Gradually the garden grew, and many plants thrived in this exposed position, with waterlogged ground in winter and dry, cracked soil in summer.

The garden is at its best in late summer. I am particularly keen on *Panicum virgatum* 'Squaw' (fig. 2), which looks wonderful with my signature plant *Verbena bonariensis*. Another combination I like a lot is that of *Symphyotrichum novae-angliae* 'Helen Picton' with *Solidago rugosa* 'Fireworks' (fig. 3).

But there is a big issue right now, about how I can carry on maintaining this space as I get older. The proliferation of self-seeded verbenas, aquilegias, pulmonarias, *Geranium*

nodosum, clover, creeping buttercup, thistles and rosebay willow-herb means that removing unwanted plants is an endless task. This work does not get any easier, and I find my thoughts frequently turn towards how I will be able to manage the garden in the future.

Perhaps some of you may share my sense of denial

about the fact that age will creep up on all of us. But it will affect every aspect of our lives, to a greater or lesser extent. We will be surprised when our strength and stamina begin to tail off, and we find we can no longer accomplish some of the tasks we could once do with ease. Ageing happens to other people, right?

I remember when I was in my forties and fifties; I could work all day gardening, and then go and play in a badminton match in the evening. Sadly, the badminton had to stop when my wrist became too painful to flick the racquet, which meant I also missed out on the social side of being in a club, and the involvement in a non-gardening community. But it wasn't the end of the world; I could still earn my living from running a nursery and growing a garden which would open for the NGS (fig. 1).



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Fig. 2 *Panicum virgatum* 'Squaw'

Perhaps one of my problems was that my work/life balance was skewed too far towards work, but to a true enthusiast it's all-absorbing, with an endless variety of jobs. It's also enormously satisfying to be creating plants and a garden. I couldn't see myself as a lady what lunches.

A lifetime, more or less, of working manually now means that there are quite a few aches and pains (fig. 4), plus an almost overwhelming anxiety about how to keep going for a few more years. A suggestion was made to me that in order to hold the reader's attention in regard to this difficult subject, I should make it more light-hearted and not too serious. My ancient brain has been stretched to see if there is anything amusing about getting older, and it has failed to raise a chuckle.

Having run a retail nursery for many years, I have met numerous older people who have had to adapt their garden (this costs money), or pay to have help (this can also be expensive), or downsize to a smaller plot, which can cause some distress. There might be an illness which prevents someone tending their special space and we all know, if a garden is abandoned for even a short time, it quickly becomes overgrown.

Could it be that those of us who are deeply involved with our gardens are

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Fig. 3 *Symphyotrichum novae-angliae* 'Helen Picton' with *Solidago rugosa* 'Fireworks'

deceiving ourselves, because the very nature of the work is all to do with the future? We put new plants in today, expecting to see them mature in a few years' time. And planting trees is clearly a sign of optimism for the decades, nay centuries, to come. A friend's mother moved to a cottage with

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Fig. 4 Years of manual work take their toll

her sister when they were in their early seventies. Asked if she would be planting any fruit trees, she tutted and said that she wouldn't live long enough to get any fruit. This lovely lady died when she was 101 years old, having managed to live independently into her late nineties. I need to keep recalling this little gem, because I can't stop myself from feeling negative about old age.

Luckily I do have a few ideas for how to carry on, while coping with failing eyesight, creaking bones, a stiff back and ever-decreasing strength. The first of these probably doesn't apply to most HPS members, but moving away from growing bedding plants is a really good option for many oldies. Initially, these short-term plants can be replaced with perennials, and then in turn transitioned to growing shrubs, which in general need less tending. Another helpful strategy is to reduce the amount of bare ground in the borders by planting more densely (fig. 5).

Making the growing areas more accessible can be achieved by building raised beds, so that bending down becomes less of a problem. Quite a number of older people are determined to get down on their hands and knees and get intimate with their plants and the soil, but then have a big problem becoming vertical again (fig. 6).

I can almost picture some of you nodding in agreement.

Employing someone to do the things which are beyond our capabilities is an obvious option, but a suitably skilled person will not be cheap (and a cheap person will not necessarily be a wise choice). And it can be quite hard to watch another person doing things differently from the way you have always done it.

Volunteers have been suggested to me, but that too can be tricky. I had one very nice man for a morning a week, and the only thing he wanted to do was trim the edges of the borders. On one level this was brilliant: it's a boring, repetitive job which I certainly would rather not do, but if I asked him to do something else he would show his disapproval by doing a messy job. Another volunteer had such an irritating giggle each time she said anything, it made me want wear ear defenders. I ended up making up some excuse about it being too wet to work. Honestly, I would rather struggle and do the work myself. And this, for now, is how I carry on, with the help of Sarah for



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Fig. 5 *Sambucus nigra* f. *porphyrophylla* 'Eva' with a helenium seedling

5 hours a week. I save up the heavier work for her to do (luckily she seems to relish barrowing compost, or digging out past-their-best shrubs), and I try to pace myself with all the other jobs. Oh, and to propagate plants for sale in the nursery.

None of this will be easy to read, especially for those of you who are under the age of fifty. I know I sound like some cranky old biddy, but I feel we need to have this conversation, because it will affect us all to some degree.

I am finishing with the following positive messages as instructed:

- You don't stop gardening when you get old, you get old when you stop gardening.
- A society grows great when old men (and women) plant trees whose shade they know they will never sit in (Greek proverb).
- Gardening simply does not allow one to be mentally old, because too many hopes and dreams are yet to be realised (Allan Armitage). 🌱



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Fig. 6 Friend of author – problems becoming vertical again

Christine Dakin runs Bridge Nursery in Napton, Warwickshire. Born and raised on a Land Settlement Estate, she has had a lifelong connection to the soil, plants and wildlife, and has a strong desire to continue with this way of life for as long as possible.