

Garden Secrets

Garden Secrets - Tale the First

In our previous house we had a long, tall and vigorous beech hedge. My wife is the gardener, I merely her assistant. Yearly I was cajoled into trimming this hedge and other bushes, tasks usually deferred by many excuses until the autumn. On a five year cycle I mauled the beech hedge from our side, pruning deeply to reclaim the narrow path which ran alongside it. Thankfully, our neighbour took great pride in trimming the high top, keeping it straight and true, a task which took him at least two and sometimes three days of erecting temporary staging, trimming and checking, supervised by his wife. I was always quick to praise him and he in turn was quick to grasp the proffered share of our vast harvest of rhubarb: what a wonderful swop. I digress.

Trimming, pruning and other such activities produced a growing mound of burnable material. At this point I must explain that my wife is a closet pyromaniac, a trait inherited from her father, a man with seemingly heat-resistant hands who could wash dishes in water poured straight from a boiling kettle. I digress.

Every year this pyre was stacked in a quiet corner awaiting its cremation. My wife's bonfire had to be timed carefully because our neighbour's wife was addicted to high levels of cleanliness: almost every dry day she festooned her many washing lines with super-clean clothes. I digress.

The ideal day for a great burning would be one which was preceded by a dry, windy spell. A wet autumn created seething impatience in Mrs Vulcan. At last, a suitable day dawned. Memory often deceives but I believe this occurred on a Sunday, probably in late November, the first day of winter, cold, bright, with a clear sky and slight but knifing breeze. The sort of day I prefer to remain indoors, reading the paper.

From an upstairs bedroom my wife checked and waited. For whatever reason, there was no washing out next door. She made her decision, raced out to the garden with that familiar mad pyromaniac's gleam in her eyes, and inserted paraffin-soaked newspapers whorls into the heart of the huge pile (it was a five-year pile!). She lit the taper, threw it at her masterpiece and stood back to bask in its glow. Two minutes into the great burning the breeze freshened and flames licked sideways igniting the tinder dry leaves on the beech hedge. With screeched imprecations I was summoned to help fight the burgeoning fire.

An hour later, with judicious hosing and multiple buckets of water, between us we had the remains of the bonfire dowsed to a dark grey beside a ten metre stretch of darkly charred hedge. In the immediate aftermath I learned that, inexplicably, it had been my fault. Many years passed while I had time to contemplate such recurring

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mysteries. Only recently I learned of a turn of phrase called a *paraprosochian*, and of the particular example which applied to my situation on that long ago day:

"I'm not saying it is your fault, just that I am blaming you."

If they were at home, our neighbours kindly saved our embarrassment by staying indoors. As the weeks rolled by, 'the situation' was never mentioned and by the next summer the resilient beech hedge was almost as new.

There was a sting in this tale! Our hedge burning occurred long before mobile phones and the internet and it took a few days before we discovered that our telephone line was not working. Ordered to investigate, I looked up at the charred overhead line and declared with glee that it had been melted by the great fire. My wife prefers not to deal with such issues and steadfastly refused to telephone BT. Indignantly I sat high on my horse of righteousness and refused to act. Weeks went by while we remained incommunicado. I forget now who gave in but I do remember that rectification costs were high.

Garden Secrets - Tale the Second:

This time I admit at once that I was dangerously culpable.

Our new approach involved multiple, smaller bonfires, enclosed within a circle of loose fitting cobble-stones. These cobble-stones came from Queen's Dock on Clydeside, removed to allow the construction of the SECC. Transporting them to our garden involved some scary driving with the boot of my Cortina Estate grossly overloaded causing the front wheels to bounce clear of terra firma. I digress.

That autumn was warm and damp, almost balmy. Weekends came and went. Mrs Vulcan hopped from one leg to the other, itching to ignite her first pile of the year. Eventually she snapped. The chosen day was not ideal as it was damp and drizzling. Consequently, there was no washing out next door. After some debate, we made a start, me the standby fireman, with hose and buckets at the ready.

Mrs Vulcan inserted paraffin-soaked newspapers then applied the lighted taper. The paraffin burned brightly but the damp pile of debris merely smouldered. My wife soaked further whorls using the last of our paraffin. In our garden hut I then discovered a one gallon container clearly marked "PETROL" (not paraffin which is very much less volatile). It contained but a dribble of fuel. I lifted it, gave it a shake then standing behind Mrs Vulcan, hurled the dregs at the smouldering bonfire, to 'give it a lift'.

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Near disaster followed. A great whoosh of blue and yellow flame shot back from the bonfire towards the container in my hand, engulfing us momentarily as the highly volatile petrol vapour ignited. Hair and eyebrows were singed but no real damage was done. Mrs Vulcan however exploded, scolding me severely for my stupidity. I skulked off indoors to wash my face clean of the singe marks, drink coffee and read newspapers.

Time passed. My wife encouraged the bonfire into a pathetic form of life. A little while later she knocked on the window and called me out to give my opinion.

"The bonfire is "squealing", she informed. "What could be causing it?"

My first thought was that somehow an aerosol can had become buried in the now smoky, smouldering pile. The risk of an explosion loomed in my mind and I banished the lady gardener to the far side while I doused the reluctant flames and dismantled the bonfire with a garden spade.

Sadly, what I discovered was a partially cremated hedgehog, its rear quarters broiled. I despatched the poor beast, using the spade as a guillotine.

Mrs Vulcan, who loves hedgehogs, ('the gardener's best friends', she calls them), was distraught. I was at once sworn to complete and utter secrecy for ever and ever. Me, keep a secret? If you know me well enough, you will have already heard a version of this story.

And the moral?

Never trust your husband to help you start a garden fire and always check for somnambulant friends in your bonfire before igniting it.

Oh, and never trust him to keep a secret!

Garden Secrets - Tale the Third:

This tale involves me and our older son, Stuart. Mrs Vulcan was present throughout but was entirely innocent. Of course in the aftermath she was, rightly, fully indignant. In my defence it has to be said that Stuart has a propensity to become involved in bizarre situations. I wonder who he gets that from. . .

The roots of this story lie in Oz, the land of wide open spaces and *potato cannons*ⁱ. The previous Xmas we had been on holiday in Perth, Western Australia, staying with friends who have two sons of similar age. We, the adults, rather unwisely thought it

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would be safe to leave the four boys alone in Perth while we went off to Margaret River for a week. Later, back home in Scotland, gradually, the tales of their exploits leaked out including their fire-fights with potato cannons.

When this event took place Stuart was aged 21, still at University, studying engineering, following in my footsteps. One day he decided to make a mega version of the potato cannon, working alone, secretively, in our garage. From my stockpile of leftover bits and pieces he purloined a two metre length of 100mm diameter PVC tubing, sealed the firing end with a screw-on cap. He is a practical chap, and good at DIY. We did not know that he had been on a shopping trip for the other parts he needed, including several canisters lighter fuel (butane) and a pile of around a dozen huge baking potatoes. Later I weighed them, most were more than a kilo.

Working alone, in the garage, undetected, he completed his mega-cannon adding the final touch of a spark igniter cleverly glued inside a plastic screw-in socket placing the spark at the centre of the tube. With a potato rammed in the firing end to seal the tube, he unscrewed the igniter and injected the lighter fuel as his propellant, filling the tube with vapour. Still working undetected, he moved his mega-cannon to the rear garden and supporting it like a bazooka, aimed it upwards over the trees, pointing in the direction of a local park.

The device would not fire. He removed and checked the igniter, loaded yet more fuel, then reassembled, aimed and clicked. Still his mega-cannon would not fire.

Only then was I asked to give advice. On first sight the potato gun looked very impressive although at that stage neither of us was aware of its potential power.

I offered up dimly remembered sage advice that gaseous fuels have both an upper and a lower explosive limit. This means that there must be sufficient air mixed with the fuel to provide a source of oxygen to allow the fuel to ignite. After my mini-lecture I suggested Stuart's mixture was fuel rich and I returned indoors to my previous task.

Several tries later Stuart's mega-cannon fired with a horrendous **KRASH!**, hurling the huge potato high over the trees never to be seen again.

Stuart, now ghost white, ran indoors and threw himself on the settee, feigning indifference. Mrs Vulcan appeared from upstairs to begin the inquisition.

Neighbours in nearby gardens shouted to each other, demanding an explanation.

Stuart and his parents stayed indoors.

Eventually the grumbling diminished. A few hours later life returned to normal.

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Our subsequent investigation revealed that the screw-on end cap had been blown off rendering the potato cannon inoperable. The potatoes were confiscated by Mrs Vulcan and stern warnings delivered to both father and son. Potato cannons were never again, ever, to be contemplated. Promises were extracted.

I have often speculated about what happened to the whizzing potato. Hopefully it did not cause mayhem. Mrs Vulcan scanned our local paper over the next two weeks but no report of a potato hit was mentioned.

I offer a tailpiece.

One summer, many years later, we were ensconced in our caravan at Rosemarkie. It was early evening, the time for drinks and nibbles ahead of an impending barbecue. A transit van and an estate car arrived. Like most other caravanners and campers we love watching others struggle setting up as it is free entertainment. However, within a few minutes two couples, with children and dogs racing through their legs, had successfully erected several tents and started a huge barbecue, using charcoal, the type of open barbecue that requires a while to burn off the smoke and produce the grey embers which raw meat needs.

With smoke a-billowing, the two men, aged around forty, repaired to the beach with cans of beer and a potato cannon. They had a sack of potatoes and a handful of aerosol cans. After loading they fired out to sea, aiming at an unoccupied mooring buoy some hundred metres from the water's edge.

I went off to nosey and learned their cannon had also been fabricated from PVC tubing with a short 100 mm diameter firing chamber and a three meter long 50mm diameter rifled section. The taller lad in charge of the gun was South African in origin, an ex-soldier. His aim was good and soon he was peppering the red buoy with his shots. These guys were serious professionals.

I joked that the garrison at Fort George across the firth might think they were under attack. The soldier advised that the military would be able to tell from his arc of fire that he was not aiming at them. I asked about his propellant, explaining Stuart's incident. The soldier had never had experienced such problems: he always used the cheapest hairspray he could find - lighter fuel being too expensive.

ⁱ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paraprosdokian>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.instructables.com/id/The-Original-Potato-Cannon/>