

GARDENING

AS I WRITE THIS on 12 January the cold spell has come to an end and how pleasant to read over 50° F. on the outside thermometer. But a few days of mild weather does not herald the spring, for our winter has a long way to go yet. However, there will be at least one day in February when the sun will shine, it will be mild and the crocuses will be in bloom. Just a taste of the real spring which will arrive in March or April or even later.

It is too early to assess the damage caused by the freeze but it seems that the winter flowering pansies have come through as have polyanthuses and primroses. Sweet Williams and the dianthus family seem to have suffered in some parts. But don't despair for many shrubs and plants that appear to have been destroyed may throw new growth from the bottom when the soil warms up.

I recommend that you postpone until March all pruning and cutting back that you had planned, for I have the feeling that more freezing weather is to come. No harm will be done by late pruning.

It is not only Jack Frost that ravages our gardens. If you are in or backing on to open fields and woods, pheasants, hares and rabbits, which also get hungry, will denude anything of the carnation family and any vegetables available. They are very fond of phloxes too. Forget-me-nots and particularly irises are not considered tasty. But then you may like the sight of a cock pheasant and his wives strutting around your garden – you have to choose.

There is some consolation. A warm room, a comfortable chair, a seed catalogue and a dream of your garden in full bloom in high summer.

V. Mitchell

CONGRATULATIONS VAL!

How fortunate we are that a lad of fourteen, apprenticed into carpentry, lost his job after six months when his employer went broke. The father then decided that the boy should follow his own calling and learn to be a good gardener. So Alfred Valentine Mitchell, Val or Mitch as we know him, after a full green-fingered life, celebrates his ninetieth birthday with us on St.Valentine's Day, 14th. February 1997.

In every issue of this magazine since it was first published seventeen years ago Val has contributed his piece on gardening – 102 of them. Val is a fair minded, unbiassed man who is proud of his skills which are many. His greeting is a smile and a courteous word; there is a lovely sense of humour and a ready anecdote. He will talk at length and with enthusiasm of his life as learner, gardener and head gardener and seemingly there is little that he regrets. Most important, he is always ready to listen.

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He has a great love of nature, carefully observes the changing seasons day by day and times the arrival and departure of our summer visitors almost to the hour. He has made friends with a tiny wren that creeps through a little hole into the greenhouse to roost during chilly nights.

A very knowledgeable person, always ready to give advice, answer questions, identify plants and flowers and often he has been sought as a judge at flower shows and as a panellist on *Gardeners'*

Question Times in neighbouring towns and villages.

Under the guidance of his father he learnt his craft in a number of gardens, nurseries and 'big houses' and his first position as head gardener was in 1936 with Lady Henderson at Barnsley Park. At Val's request she kindly gave enough land to make a cricket ground which was laid out under Val's guidance. After sixty years, the cricket field with the original square is still used by Barnsley-Beeches C.C.

Val moved to Bruern in 1955 when he became head gardener to Mr. Michael Astor. Once again cricket became an interest for he had much to do with Bruern Cricket Club which was sponsored by Mr. Astor. Val played until he was fifty.

A gunner during the war, firstly engaged in the defence of Bristol followed by 3½ years in the Middle East. He chose to be a soldier rather than remain in a reserved occupation growing potatoes, in his estimation an indignity for a head gardener!

So much more could be written of this amiable man, of his family life and many interests outside gardening but, unfortunately, space is limited. So, on behalf of the people who run this magazine and of his many friends and readers, Val is thanked for all that he has done for us and good wishes are extended for a very happy 90th birthday and in addition the prospective enjoyment of many more years with good health, happiness and peace of mind.