

**DIRTY NAILS:**  
Taking care of tomatoes

EVER since sowing tomato seeds way back during March, then planting them up in grow-bags in the greenhouse at the end of May, Dirty Nails has been carefully tending Gardener's Delight and Tumbler tomatoes. Each day he has given them water and thoroughly looked over his charges for signs of disease.

Any discolouring leaves have been pinched off and burned. Blight and other nasties have been kept at bay, so botrytis has not yet reared itself because the plants have not been overcrowded, and companion-planting with marigolds has so far warded off insect pests. His tomato plants are becoming laden with masses of fruit, and the Tumblers are especially well-ended.

Dirty Nails has now reduced the amount of water given to their roots. Instead of a daily soaking he is giving them a drink every two or three days only, depending on the heat and strength of the sun outside. He always stirs a drop of nettle and comfrey tincture into the water at this stage.

Less frequent watering should stimulate his tomato plants' energy into fruit production and ripening instead of lots more foliage, which is what he wants to happen at this time of year.

**Butterflies**

Dirty Nails is a big fan of the butterfly bush, *Buddleia davidii*. He grows a few specimens around the veg plot to attract butterflies and other insects. They flock to the nectar-rich flower cones. The purple-bloomed varieties are often on the turn as July gives way to August.



By removing all the spent heads a second flowering flush can be induced. Done now, this may be timed to occur at the same time as many of the beautiful aristocratic butterflies such as peacock, red admiral, painted lady and small tortoiseshell are on the wing in large numbers.

**Potatoes**

Second Early spuds can be lifted with a reliable crop underneath any time around now. Dirty Nails only digs up what he needs for immediate use because if the tops (haulms) are still healthy then the tubers will be quite happy to stay where they are and fatten up some more.

First Earlys have been on the menu for some weeks now but a request for baked potatoes from a visiting family member prompted Dirty Nails to harvest a clutch of Second Early Kestrel spuds this week.

These are old-fashioned tasting tatties which usually come up a perfect size for baking and have a lovely fluffy texture. They also sport attractive purple patches on the skin. Care needs to be taken when harvesting spuds because they are easily skewered on carelessly placed fork prongs (tines).

Dirty Nails pulls away the haulm from the plant he is intent on eating, and removes this top-growth to the fire site. He then pushes in his fork parallel to the earthed-up row, slightly back from the bottom of the ridge and as deep as possible. The fork is levered upwards, exposing the tubers as he lifts the soil. This process is repeated several times for each plant in order to collect every last spud. It is unwise to overlook even the tiniest pea-sized tubers because they will sprout and grow next year.

In that instance, being now of uncertified stock, these weed potatoes could become a vehicle for disease.

● *A Vegetable Gardener's Year by Dirty Nails (ISBN 9781905862221) is available from www.dirtynails.co.uk and bookshops at £12.99.*

**NEXT WEEK: Dirty Nails gets to grips with globe artichokes**

**Gearing up for annual celebration**

THE distinctive white canvas of the big tents at Taunton Flower Show will soon be sprouting up in the town's Vivary Park ready for the annual extravaganza on Friday and Saturday, August 7 and 8.

Competition entries are still being welcomed for the 267 separate classes within 11 distinct categories, including dedicated children's challenges, photographic and wine making sections, alongside the traditional floral and vegetable features. Nearly £4,000 of prize money will be won by the green and nimble-fingered gardeners and craft exhibitors.

The perennially popular displays in the Floral Marquee highlight horticultural experts from across the country, including some who have shown at Chelsea, with an opportunity to purchase blooms and plants from the spectacular stands.

● For more information visit [www.tauntonflowershow.co.uk](http://www.tauntonflowershow.co.uk).



**GARDENING**

Sarah Pitt takes a tour of a hidden oasis beside the Exe

**Inspired by the life of the river**

THE garden at The Lookout is designed to appeal to the Robinson Crusoe in everyone – on the edge of the Exe estuary with a house seemingly marooned in the middle of nowhere.

There are drifts of sea pinks, clumps of spiky sea holly, grasses swaying gently in the wind and driftwood used as sculpture. Nautical code flags flutter in the breeze and a skull and crossroads flag is hoisted beside the gang plank leading to the house.

The undulating garden feels as though it has simply evolved beside the water. In truth, though, it has been years in the planning and planting, a labour of love for its creator Jackie Michelmore.

Jackie and her husband Will had long been searching for somewhere beside the estuary to create a garden with a seaside feel. And some nine years ago they found it in an overgrown plot with stunning views across miles of open water.

The two-acre site near Lympstone was strewn with rubbish, prone to flooding and being eroded by the tidal river which had breached the sea wall many years earlier. It was disfigured, too, by derelict buildings and huge cast iron tanks from its previous life as a mussel purification plant.

Jackie, though, was undaunted. It was the site from hell, she says, but in "the location from heaven".

With a course in garden design at nearby Bicton College and two previous house and garden renovations under her belt, she began work on the design.

Both house and garden are intended to blend in with their surroundings, with wood, slate and local stone chosen to blend into the estuary foreshore.

There are stunning views across the water to the western banks of the estuary from the

**The planting adds to the illusion that nature has the upper hand**

Michelmore's house. It is difficult, though, to see their house from the opposite bank. The couple's first step was to rebuild the sea wall to halt erosion to the site.

This was a complicated procedure and, coupled with the time taken to design and build the house, gave Jackie plenty of thinking time for the garden.

"I wanted to make the new house disappear as quickly as possible and give the impression that the garden had almost washed up from the beach," she says.

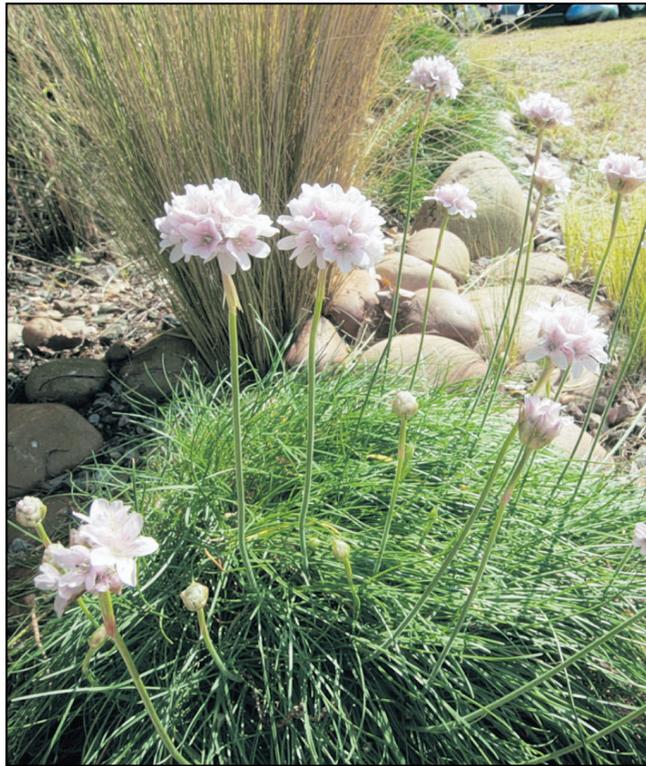
"The grass plantings mimic the marram grass on nearby Dawlish Warren, and thousands of pebbles I collected during seawall repairs and foundation excavations have been used to define path edges and form a mulch around planting, reminding you just how close the estuary is."

The most crucial plants in the garden were the first ones Jackie planted; the "toughies" which form the garden's shelterbelt.

Hawthorn, blackthorn and tamarisk put up an effective windbreak against the storms which slam in from the south west. This provides a first line of defence, although the plants within the garden also need to be pretty impervious to wind and salt.

"The plants here have to look right, but most importantly they are to be able to survive the coastal conditions," says Jackie.

"In stormy weather, the wind whips the water up and pressure washes the garden with it. Plants can look like they have been blow torched, because salt spray burns certain foliage.



Sea pinks, top, views across the wildflower meadow, left, and pool, right

"I have selected plants that survive these sea trials, plants that are flexible, salt tolerant and cope with the desiccating effects of the wind."

She has used grasses that thrive in the nutrient-poor soil beside the estuary and form rippling waves of movement, complemented by clump-forming perennials with vertical accents like Euphorbia and Libertia. Drought tolerant sea pinks, sea holly and sea kale work well here too.

Flowering plants are in the minority, with Jackie opting for ones that don't scream for attention, in soft creamy yellows and washed-out pinks and mauves. The planting reflects the natural beauty to be found outside the garden and adds to the illusion that nature has the upper hand.

Jackie leaves the seed heads on the grasses

after they have turned from green to brown, finding a beauty in the sculptural shapes illuminated by the setting sun.

The house is hidden from view within the garden, tucked into the undulating landscape, deliberately created to give a serene feel. There is no hard landscaping; visitors drive along a track covered with grass. It gives the feeling that no one much ventures up here.

"I wanted to create that feeling of remoteness," says Jackie.

There are numerous *Phormium tenax*, with their erect sword-like leaves and dramatic bright red flower spikes. These fast-growing natives of New Zealand would quickly dominate a smaller garden but here they have the space to stretch out.

In a sheltered corner away from the water, Jackie has planted figs, Australian tree ferns



Sea holly by the pool and below left, the path leading down to the estuary with salvaged buoys from the river



*Dicksonia antarctica*, and the giant reed *Arundo donax*. And hidden in this jungly lushness is a pergola, built to conceal the treatment plant.

Where it has not been possible to eradicate all eyesores from the site's former use, these have been incorporated usefully into the design.

Jackie's husband shipped in several lorryloads of sand to create "East Devon's biggest sandpit" in one of the concrete water tanks, where he and his friends play beach volleyball on summer evenings.

Another tank has been transformed into a sheltered walled garden, where Jackie has planted tender Mediterranean plants.

The boundary of the "gardened garden" is formed by a curvy bank of prairie-style planting, with touchy feely grasses like the silky *Stipa tenuissima* and natural looking perennials.

Beyond this is a wildflower meadow, which during the summer is teeming with wildlife. It is mown once during the autumn, but apart from that, nature is allowed to get on with it.

The garden has proved to be the ideal springboard for Jackie's ambition to set up her own garden design business, Lookout Landscapes.

"This was my first job after qualifying and the challenges thrown up by the site have been a real test of my enthusiasm and creativity," she says. "It has been a tough but rewarding training ground."

● *The Lookout is open for guided tours to groups by appointment in aid of REGAIN, a charity which helps people paralysed through sports injuries. Contact Jackie Michelmore on 07866 580471.*



Jackie has used driftwood and stones to continue the seaside theme

**ROSE CLARK**

of Otter Nurseries answers your gardening questions



We spotted this flower (above) while coastal walking near Prawle Point – have you any idea what it is?

We would be very interested to know.

Mrs Ann Rowbotham via e-mail

This is *Lonicera periclymenum*, more commonly known as "Honeysuckle" or "Woodbine". It's native to Britain; often seen during the summer and early autumn, scrambling its way through hedgerows, woods and scrub. The flowers are sweetly fragrant and are followed by red berries. In its wild form it is vigorous and can reach six metres. Fortunately there are "tamed" cultivars suitable for most gardens, and all are fragrant; "Belgica" (Early Dutch) has reddish purple flowers that fade creamy yellow. "Graham Thomas" is white in bud opening yellow. "Serotina" (Late Dutch) is a rich red/purple. "Sweet Sue" is creamy white fading to yellow. Grow in sun or partial shade.

Last winter I planted my successful blackcurrant cuttings and cut down to two buds. They have grown really well producing several new branches from ground level. They are now about 2ft 6in high, and I would like to know when and by how much I should prune them to get maximum harvest, hopefully next year.

Olive Richardson via e-mail

Blackcurrants are generally grown, as you have described, to form 'stooled' bushes – with as many shoots as possible originating from the ground or just below ground level. As two-year-old plants, during this coming winter, any weak, horizontal or badly placed shoots should be removed. The remaining shoots should bear fruit next year. As the bushes mature and become established the pruning regime may vary. It's worth remembering that the majority of the next season's crop of fruit will be carried on the growth made in the current year and that old wood is unproductive. Established bushes can be pruned anytime between cropping and late winter. Sometimes whole shoots bearing ripe fruit can be removed – this helps to make picking easier, while benefiting the bush with more light and improved air circulation. The aim of any pruning will be to remove weak stems and older wood (three years or more) in favour of the potentially more productive younger growth. Incidentally, neglected blackcurrants can be rejuvenated by removing, during winter, as much old wood as possible, keeping only the strongest young shoots, or if that's not feasible, cutting the whole bush down to 7.5cms (3in) from the ground. Feed and mulch. Bushes 10 years old or more ought to be replaced; new stocks of all soft fruit will be available in the autumn.

I've removed some large shrubs from the front of my house which were blocking out the light. I'd like to fill the bed with perennial cottage garden flowers – I find annuals too much work and too expensive. What can you suggest?

Huw Watkins, Totnes

Great idea! There are many herbaceous (Cottage Garden) perennials that will produce a colourful display. Dare I say that Otter Nurseries produces some 300,000 and at the moment has a goodly amount on display, so there's plenty of choice!

You don't say how wide your border is or its position in relation to the sun. Careful planning is important and will give the best results; taller plants should be planted at the back of the border. You may have a colour theme in mind, but some of the best borders consist of a mixture of colours. Aim for as long a season of flowering as possible; spring flowering bulbs won't look out of place.

Draw out a rough planting plan to help you. Prior to planting the ground will need to be dug over to prepare it. Dig in composted stable manure and rake in a general fertiliser, such as Vitax Q4. Use as your planting mix, a bucket of multipurpose compost to which a handful of bone meal has been added. Here are some useful suggestions:

For the back of the border you could try the purple mauve flowers of *Verbena bonariensis*. *Anemone japonica* produces pink or white flowers according to variety. *Rudbeckia* has orange yellow daisy-like flowers. R. Goldstrum has brown centres. *Helianum* has shades of orange, red and yellow flowers over a long period. *Crocusmia* (Montbretia) has architectural sword like leaves. C. Lucifer has vivid scarlet flowers. For the middle of the border, the many colours of *Hemerocallis* (Day Lily) or *Kniphofia* (Red Hot Poker) with orange, red or yellow flowers work well; as does *Phlox paniculata* with its colour range of mauve, pink, white, orange and blue. Lobelia Fan Burgundy is one of my favourites, with its rich deep burgundy flowers. Penstemons have a long season of flowering and a great range of colours. *Doronicum*, Astilbe "Sprite", *Dicentra eximia* (Bleeding Heart) are all great for the front. Don't forget to include plants grown for their coloured foliage – *Heuchera* (H.Midnight Rose is fabulous) and *Hosta* – I could go on..!