

Up from Woolridge Cross

I went away for a week in early June, and when I returned everything in my garden had doubled in size. Everything, that is, apart from certain perennials for which the rabbits evidently share my passion – e.g. my scented white and crimson phloxes, which are nibbled as soon as ever a shoot shows. Perhaps I should have rehomed a Jack Russell not a collie. When my cousin and I visited the Dowland Country Fair I looked longingly at the ferrets and wished they were for hire.

Meanwhile, fat bramble shoots rake at me from the hedge, and the nettles I overlooked in the yard are now flowering above my head. I particularly dislike the way nettles and goosegrass gang up: as soon as I start pulling at either, the roped-together nettles swing down to sting my ears. Even my dog, who is fanatic about chasing sticks, politely refuses if I mistakenly fling one in the nettles.

But I'm not seriously grumbling – how could I, in such a wonderful time of year, with honeysuckle in the lanes and the elders covered in creamy flower? I am particularly pleased by some of my mother's rose bushes this year. One is an old French rose called Great Maiden's Blush, which I resurrected from overgrown azaleas and Solomon's Seal, and which has now produced several gorgeous big flowers of a pale shell-pink. Andrew the Gardener reliably informs me that its original French name, Cuisse de Nymphé, means "nymph's thigh", which I suppose those who imported it considered too racy for English ears.

Despite all my clearing and pruning, however, Mum's remaining gooseberry bush is on it's last legs. I particularly love seasonable foods (gooseberries, damsons, white peaches, potatoes fresh from the ground) that simply can't be bought year-round. So I was delighted to find gooseberries and sweet English strawberries, grown at Launceton, at the Thursday farmers' market at Merton. Like many so-called farmers' markets this also has a range of craft stalls (and a fish stall), as well as selling locally-grown vegetables and soft fruit, and home-made sausages plus a good deal else. It's small, but nicely complementary to our own mini-market on Fridays. Between it and our own Top Shop I was able to buy all the food for my cousin's visit without a Torrington trip.

The one crop that is doing well in my garden is blackcurrants – so I'll be able to make summer pudding. For anyone who has never made this, it's the simplest possible sweet, best made the day before eating so it has time to consolidate.

You need slices of white loaf, preferably slightly stale so it easily soaks up the blackcurrant juice, and with its crusts cut off; the juice from blackcurrants stewed with sugar; and soft fruit of other kinds (e.g. raspberries, strawberries, sliced peach or pear). Quickly soak the slices both sides in blackcurrant juice, and use them to line a pudding basin, shaping them to fit together without gaps. Fill the middle with the other fruit, mixed with the stewed blackcurrants, and put a layer of soaked bread across the top. The trick is to fill the basin enough for there to be some pressure on the contents when you put a plate on top and weight it down (you want to squeeze the contents together and ensure that the juice completely soaks the bread). Do put another plate beneath, to catch the juice that runs out! I fridge my pudding overnight, and then upturn it on a fresh plate – it should come out like a sandcastle. Serve with cream and a jug of extra blackcurrant juice, if there's any left over.