

# In My Garden, March

*I spy with my little eye, the sun shining brightly  
The clouds rolling by the last days of winter  
Now seem so far away and everything looks green  
When it used to be gray and I've watched the change*

THE LEVELLERS

One thing that struck me during a pondering session last year was how green the garden was looking. It is every conceivable shade of green but apart from a Berberis and Cotinus there are few complementing greys or no other contrasting purples. A tree I have been keen to get for a number of years is the crab apple Malus 'Royalty'. None of the tree is green in any way. The vibrant leaves unfurling a velvety red gradually fade to unripe aubergine by the autumn. The raspberry red flowers, so loved by bees, are followed by fruits the same size and colour of dark ripe cherries and will be a nice early winter feast for the birds. The second tree I'll be planting is a variety of copper beech.

My grandmother totally refused to entertain the idea of any discussion of how her remains would be disposed of after death. As she lay dying in hospital my father and I took a wander around the very conveniently placed Brighton cemetery. Amongst shrubberies of somber evergreens lurked the oldstyle angels and crosses all in various stages of decay, Grandma was in no way at all religious. Further away on the outskirts were modern graves of vast polished black granite hearts, purple glass chippings and gaudy plastic flowers, tinsel, photographs. Dour, thrifty, Scottish, this "big fat gypsy funeral" was never Grandma's taste. Of course it is up to people what they want to do, this is not a judgement on the style of remembrance. Also these graves need maintaining otherwise they crumble away in a most depressing fashion.

The top of the cemetery, overlooking the city, the Downs and the sea was a woodland burial. Here groups of thirty or so native trees were planted in islands divided by wide closely mown grassy paths. In between the trees wild flowers were allowed to flourish, there were butterflies, children played and a family picnicked. Apart from the trees the graves are not permitted any other sort of demarcation. And what could be more positive than a living thing sending down its roots, absorbing someone's remains, drawing them into itself and that person gradually becoming a tree. Death becoming life again.

At a local nursery we selected a Glastonbury hawthorn which is supposed to flower around Christmas time. But the tree never thrived. The soil was extremely shallow over very porous chalk and completely

exposed to salt gales, desiccating winds and scorching sun. Whilst regular hawthorns are very tough and relish these challenges, Glastonbury ones need a degree of care and protection. After four years the tree was dying back and was half the size of when we planted it. It had since been moved down with me to Devon with a big collection of plants to start my garden. This included seedlings of wild crab apples from a favourite tree in a woodland where I'd spent most of my childhood playing. There were ten saplings grown in all and I still have two, the rest having been dispersed to others' gardens. Replaced with one of these crabs, the hawthorn quickly responded to richer Devonian soil and higher rainfall making a round headed tree. Whilst the hardier crab adapted well to the chalk downland, it flowers beautifully too in May (Grandma's birthday) and has bountiful fruits in autumn.

Ten months after Grandma, my mother passed away, Dad and I returned to the nursery and chose this time a copper beech, we'd noted how well beeches were growing at the cemetery. We chose the variety 'Riversii' over the standard 'Purpurea' copper beech as when it's first in leaf can be a little pale and fades somewhat toward late summer whereas 'Riversii' will hold it's colour throughout the season. This is the variety I will be planting in my garden. March is about the latest I prefer to plant otherwise the won't get properly established before the summer. Well, we chose the tree, dug the holes, planted it and interned the ashes, such a personal act toward someone at the very last closure of their life. Never did either of us realise at the time that by the following March before the tree flushed into leaf Dad would have joined her too.

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