

O FIE! 'TIS AN UNWEEDED GARDEN, THAT GOES TO SEED¹

Max Dingle

In the early 1980's, after acquiring my property, I had visions of being self sufficient in fruit and vegetables. The thinking started with apples and pears, lettuce and broccoli, tomatoes, corn and beans, and so started a garden regime along traditional lines. However one year after a difficult and dry winter, I managed, against all odds, to produce a huge crop of broad beans but, in the midst of this bounty, I found that so had everyone else, and broad beans were practically being given away at the markets. This was on top of the previous year's olive disillusionment—a lot of effort and time picking and pickling, against the cheaper, and to be honest, better, bulk olives available in the local Lebanese corner store.

Yes, you can comfort yourself with the knowledge that your garden produce is fresh and all your own work, but in the end it still irked me that my garden always managed to produce a glut of produce at the same time that the markets were awash with the same, fresh and cheaper.

So I decided that I would no longer compete. I would set up a gardening and cooking challenge by growing things that were not available, at least not available on a regular basis. And, because of my interest—instilled as a child—in using local food resources and, having identified the food plants that grew naturally on the property, as well as planting Macadamia nut (*Macadamia integrifolia*) and Finger Lime (*Citrus australasica*), I decided to concentrate on indigenous edible plants. Then, due to a lack of regular garden maintenance or possibly sheer laziness, I added weeds to the menu.

I had introduced a bewildering variety of weeds when I made the mistake of buying bags of horse manure from some children trying to make pocket money from a roadside stall. I compounded the purchase error by adding the manure to what I call my compost heap, which in reality is just a pile of vegetative material that slowly rots never producing any heat to kill off weed seeds. My 'lawn' is now mostly Couch (*Elymus repens*), Clover (*Trifolium repens*), Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), Kikuyu (*Pennisetum clandestinum*), Lambs Tongue (*Plantago lanceolata*), Paspalum (*Paspalum dilatatum*), thistles (*Cirsium* and *Silybum*) and other unknown weed-like plants. Of those I recognise as edible, I usually do not bother with Clover and thistles, I have a set against thistles, despite them being edible and I try to eradicate them, while Clover is left because it sets nitrogen in the soil. Some people say Clover is edible but while I have tried a few flowers in salads, and leaves as tea, I have never taken to the taste. However the young leaves of Lambs Tongue and Dandelion leaves and flowers perk up a salad and work well in a weed pie. I do like to add Dandelion flower petals to baking, they add a savoury note to cakes and muffins.

I have allowed Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*), Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*), Mustard Greens (*Brassica juncea*), Oregano (*Origanum vulgare*), Rapini (*Brassica ruvo*) and Rocket (*Eruca sativa*) to go to seed and these, showing off their inherent weed like natures, invade the garden beds on a regular basis. Purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*) just arrived and established itself, just as it does anywhere in the world, and this is why it is a favourite plant for foragers, especially in the city. After rain has revived the garden, all these self-seeded plants pop up all over the place, and I must admit that to plant anything else, such as more conventional lettuce or carrots requires the removal of wheelbarrow loads to the compost. Though at this point I have given up even trying to plant the more conventional—if I have a hunger for cauliflower or broccoli I just buy it at the market.

¹ *Hamlet*. William Shakespeare.