



A batch of cuttings rooted on heated bench under cloches.

Answers to gardening questions

The bell that came from France

By R. W. Sidwell

There are few cloches in use in gardens today. In saying this I am being a purist in the use of words. For, as any schoolboy will tell us, a cloche is a bell and the true garden cloche is a glass bell. To call such things "bell cloches" is mere tautology.

Earlier in this century a certain Mr Chase devised a means of holding sheet glass together with bits of bent wire. This enabled a continuous strip of ground to be covered and for this device he coined the contradictory name "continuous cloche." He was

not the first to use sheet glass in this way. A century earlier, cast iron and earthenware were both used to support sheet glass. Each age exploits the materials to hand. Various names were coined for such structures. An attempt was made to popularise grape-growing under them and these were called "ground vineries." What Mr Chase did was to transfer the name "cloche" to such strip cover systems.

Between the wars many thousands of the true cloches were in use at Evesham, chiefly for growing early marrows, and, when they were profitable, outdoor cucumbers. A few survived into the post-war years but the commercial use probably finished in the 1960s.

The story of how the cloche came to Evesham is an interesting one and I will retell it as well as I can from scattered information given to me from time to time by several older growers.

It appears that some time before the First World War, world war, probably around 1910, a certain Mr McKay, then a representative of a London seed house, thought he would be rendering a service to the Evesham growers by introducing them to the French intensive system of gardening. He therefore organised a trip to the market gardens around Paris and from that visit the French cloche became an accepted part of Vale horticulture. Mr McKay later joined a Mr Edwards and traded as McKay and Edwards, Covent Garden wholesalers. I believe that the late J. N. Harvey, that highly respected and very able founder of Fibrex Nurseries, was in some way involved. Probably the last survivor of the party was Mr Frank Andrews of

Cheltenham Road, who died a year or two ago.

While there is no doubt that the continuous strip type of covering is the best for intensive vegetable growing, the tighter seal provided by the bell is most suitable for rooting cuttings where the primary object is to prevent the cutting drying out before it can produce roots or at least an absorptive callus to assist in water intake. Commercial nurserymen had for years used tightly-fitting glasses before modern mist techniques took OVER. I find that the old methods still work well and for small-scale propagation are probably unequalled.

For slow rooting cuttings, such as the sweet bay, the cuttings inserted in the autumn can remain covered for 18 months, provided shade is given in hot sun. If the cloches are sited under a north wall, no shade will be necessary. Improved rooting of hardwood cuttings, normally inserted out-of-doors, can also be obtained. Soft wood cuttings of many plants root easily but, here again, shade must be provided in bright sunshine.

The use of cloches on heated benches is a practice I have followed with great success. Electric soil-heating cables should be used, giving a loading of seven to ten watts per square foot. In cool weather these will remain on all the time but a thermostat may be fitted to cut out at about 75 deg F should the sun shine. Although the old glass bells are not now replaceable, there are many modern plastic contraptions which perform the same function and give excellent results. The price sometimes seems excessive, but that criticism can be levelled against most manufactured goods.