

# The other occupants

By R. W. Sidwell

Gardens and gardeners are of many kinds. The nature of gardens and the aims of gardeners will vary with the end in view. The grower of exhibition-quality produce will have little toleration for intruders, whether they be weeds, insects, birds or mammals. Perfection demands their elimination. There is room only for "Me and My Onion". To achieve this, an array of poisons, traps, scarers, protectants and various other devices will be called into use.

My idea of a garden is not quite like that. I like to think of a garden as a place where we all live together in a more or less — and now listen carefully while I use that very "in" phrase — *stable ecosystem*.

Absolute stability is, of course, never achieved. What we can hope for is slight fluctuations around a fairly constant norm. At one period a lot of aphids. Later on a lot of ladybirds. And it all comes right in the end.

Such a state of near stability can only happen in a mixed community. There must be a great variety of everything. Commercial production demands a permanent state of imbalance. To produce top grade fruit from a hundred acre block of dessert apples there is no alternative to spray programmes and specialised cultural methods. Monocultures create their own problems but they are inevitable. We would starve without them.

In the private garden we need have no such constraints. We can accept something slightly below perfection and save a great deal of work. Let us take aphids on roses, as an example. I have fewer than a hundred rose bushes spread around the garden. No sprays have been used for 25 years. Rarely are aphids seen in quantity. Watch with binoculars in the early morning. Sparrows feed their young in the nest with soft-bodied insects. They will scoop aphids up by the

beakful when they are available and are particularly partial to those big rose aphids which coat the buds in early summer. I think that any spraying puts them off and they will turn their attention to the unsprayed hedgerows.

This, of course, raises the problem of black spot and mildew. If we do not spray, how do we control these? Birds will not feed on these parasitic fungi. The only answer I know is to scrap varieties very subject to these diseases. There are plenty of disease-resistant roses if we look for them.

I find difficulty in combating the popular anthropocentric attitude to living things in general. The idea that birds, beasts and insects can be classified as harmful or beneficial seems nonsense to me. It is usually assumed that insect-eating birds are beneficial and plant-eating ones harmful. The robin is beneficial. Watch the feeding of robins during digging. If they are not short of food, they like things with a bit of kick in them. Centipedes are great favourites. But centipedes are, according to the garden books, beneficial because they are insect-feeders. Robins love ground beetle larvae. Ground beetle larvae love cabbage root fly larvae and they are important in the control of this pest. Robins do not like cabbage root fly larvae. Yet robins are beneficial. The truth is that each species exists to perpetuate its own kind, not to serve the interests of man.

We must not get too sentimental about these things. Rats, rabbits and wood pigeons do little harm to their fellow creatures in small doses but when they become overabundant things get out of balance. And something must be done. It is undesirable for any species to become overdominant. This is why I like my garden to contain the greatest possible range of plants well mixed up, as they would be in nature. Nothing becomes overdominant.

Such a garden becomes more than a place where we grow plants for our use. It is a place where life of all kinds goes on. The little problems one faces are interesting and even amusing. Does one allow a few sowthistles and groundsels to seed, so that one can watch goldfinches feeding on them? What about moles? Does one leave them alone, as I do? In dry spells most of the moles in the neighbourhood finish up in my garden with its rich, spring-fed, soil and plenty of earthworms. One could avoid moles by poisoning the earthworms, known as an indirect control method. One could poison the moles but I have seen dogs with strychnine poisoning. One could trap the moles, if one is clever enough and enjoy it, but I prefer to do nothing.

The common field vole is a constant occupant of my garden. Overfat and short-legged, it always seems a badly designed creature with a poor turn of speed. My cats tell me they are very good eating and there is no doubt that owls and kestrels like them. They spent the winter in my artichokes and parsnips. Their ability to eat the middle out of root vegetables, leaving only a shell, is interesting. By sowing a few extra I have enough for myself also.



Voles' ability to eat the middle out of a parsnip is interesting.