

EVESHAM JOURNAL

1983
HORTICULTURAL
SUPPLEMENT

COXS KEEPING APPLES



BETTER
MARKETING

1983 17V 244/RS/4/ED/N



Mr Frank Jelfs examines a freshly pulled leek.

Lifelong grower

By R. W. Sidwell

We have been considering the changes over the last 70 years in Vale of Evesham market gardening. My own memories of the sub-

ject go back a little over 40 years. Who could I find who could cover the whole period? My thoughts naturally turned to

Frank Jelfs, Badsey's oldest inhabitant, now 88 years old and still remarkably fit mentally and physically. I was not quite sure which was his house. I looked for the tidiest garden, every inch cultivated and weed-free, the kitchen garden crumbling with the recent frost. This was his house.

He talked of the changes in growing methods. Sprouts were of little importance before the first world war. Between the wars, in order to get early sprouts, autumn sowings were made in outdoor beds. These produced plants often rough at the bottom, and some went to seed. The first big advance was the raising of plants in cold frames and later cold glass-houses from December/January sowings. Local strains were always used. Present day strains produced by specialist breeders are much more uniform and higher quality visually. He doesn't think the flavour is equal to the old strains. I wonder if this is the view of other people.

Asparagus was a crop he was closely involved with throughout the heyday of this crop. Changes in packing and presentation are worth noting. The old "hundred" consisted of 120 buds in a flat pack of 8 x 15. Earlier in the century the pack was 6 x 20. The round bundle was slowly accepted but for a long time the flat hundreds and half-hundreds made a better price on the market. The round bundle was, of course, a "size" bundle, not a "count," and the smaller the buds the more were needed. The practice of "topping" of market packs was such an established thing that it was taken for granted. In asparagus it took the form of "facing," hiding the poor buds in the middle.

Plum picking was, for many years, the highest paid job among market garden workers. This was due, in part, to the fact that they worked very hard for very long hours. As long as the crop was

wanted, pickers could work as long and as hard as they liked. There were cases of workers making enough on plum picking to pay the "ingoing" and get started as growers in their own right. When one considers that piece-work rates were often fixed at about 6d to 8d per pot, i.e. around one old penny per 12lb chip, it is obvious that it was not easy money. Present picking rates, in spite of lower prices are about 80p per 56lb.

Other changes in growing methods were recalled. The early radish crop, grown outside on warm sheltered borders, was an interesting item during the first half of the present century but did not long survive the second world war. The variety grown was Wood's Early Frame. The seed was sown in December, broadcast, and the beds covered with straw. Sparrows, and to some extent chaffinches, were often destructive, and boys were employed as bird-minders. The quality of this crop was not equal to the modern varieties grown under glass and, although very profitable in earlier times, progress brought about its end.

Special circumstances create the need for special crops. I have frequently spoken to Frank about the growing of medicinal herbs during the first world war. In those days botanical drugs were much more important than they are today and, with normal supplies cut off, other sources were sought. Belladonna, Henbane, thorn apple and blessed thistle were all grown around Badsey. I should imagine that there were enough of these to poison most of Worcestershire. Today, if a solitary thorn apple shows its handsome head, as like as not the police will be sent out to destroy it. And monkshood, even more poisonous, is left unmolested in many a cottage garden. They are, of course, only poisonous if eaten, although some can be skin absorbed to some extent.