

Obituary – The Independent, by John Archer

Thursday 29th April 1993

Ronald William Sidwell, gardener, teacher and writer: born 5 October 1909; married 1939 Marjorie Hickman (died 1977); died 19 April 1993.

Ron Sidwell's most significant horticultural work was in the identification of plum varieties by their stones.

It is hard now to imagine the importance of plums 50 years ago to the national psyche. With no imported fruits and a great diversity of homegrown plums, they were an essential wartime fruit. There was a rigid price-structure for plums based on four standards of quality for the different varieties. Unscrupulous growers would try to pass an inferior plum off for a superior one - say a Purple Egg for a Victoria. Sidwell realised that the stone acted as a fingerprint: thereafter he was sent plums to identify, and took on lucrative work as a court witness. He was awarded the Royal Horticultural Society Lindley medal for his science work for agriculture. His collection of plum stones remains intact in old tobacco tins.

Ron Sidwell started his horticultural and garden work in the greenhouses of the publisher and newspaper proprietor the first Lord Iliffe at Allesley near Coventry in 1924, aged 14, producing flowers for the conservatory. One of four gardeners, by the age of 16 he was acting Head Gardener. He taught himself botany and horticulture from the shelves of the library in Coventry. In 1930 he went to work for the second Lord Aberconway at Bodnant in North Wales. He stayed only a short time because he was made to wear a hat and to doff it to the Head Gardener and to call him Sir. Instead he returned to Coventry, to work in his father's engineering company.

From 1935 for three years he worked in Edgbaston, where he did odd private gardening jobs and excelled as a vacuum cleaner salesman, before becoming Head Gardener in a house in Cropthorne in Worcestershire. In 1939 he married Marjorie Hickman and moved to Chippenham, in Wiltshire, but his plan to do a teacher-training course as a rural science teacher was interrupted by the outbreak of war. He studied for the National Diploma of Horticulture, which he gained in 1941 - the year he moved to Evesham, Worcestershire, the heart of plum-growing country, to spend the rest of the war as a District Horticulture Officer in 'War Ag' (the precursor to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries). From the end of the war until 1954 he was a technical adviser to the Vale of Evesham growers co-operative Littleton and Badsey Growers - a position that was to establish his name and reputation amongst the market-gardeners of the vale, with his advice on what to plant where and which herbicides and pesticides to use.

In 1948, after studying the isobars and frost patterns of south Worcestershire, Sidwell bought a cottage in a hamlet on Bredon Hill called Paris, an ancient settlement around a good natural spring, where he judged severe frosts would be rare. For the next 40 years

he developed a unique idiosyncratic garden from amongst the old fruit trees and wire-netting from hen coops, 'Bredon Springs'.

His aim in the early days was to plant as many plant families as possible, then he opted for the greatest geographical range, suffering a serious setback in the frosts of 1981/2 with the ruination of plants from New Zealand, Australia and California. There are no herbaceous borders in his acre and a half of garden, and no island beds; no path is straight: the whole is designed to be as wild as possible, planned to look as if it was not planned. He had a tolerant attitude to pests and weeds - hardly recognising the latter, judging the success of a garden by the wildlife it supports. He believed that the diversity of plants would discourage the build-up of pests with a limited host range.

From 1954 to 1960 Ron Sidwell was a lecturer at Pershore College of Horticulture, where he gave the first lecture and eventually became Vice-Principal. To his students he was an inspiration - they found that he knew something about everything and above all taught practical horticulture.

'Bredon Springs' was open to the public through the National Gardens Scheme but visitors with time to spare found the gardener as admirable as the garden. He was an independent thinker - way ahead of fashion on green issues, conservation and self-sufficiency. With his conversation he would offer home-made biscuits (he baked all his own bread after his wife's death in 1977, treating cooking as an extension of chemistry) or his own wine, made from unexpected garden plants. He shared his knowledge and wisdom of the natural world freely - never impatient at others' lack of knowledge where he had so much.

In 1981 he published his garden survey West Midland Gardens and just before his death he delivered the manuscript of a book on weeds to his publisher.