

Keeping us all even and regular at Hodnet Hall (and more besides!)

Ross Underwood gets things moving in the peach house

Like many of you I have been watching the comings and goings of the Crawley family in TV's "Downton Abbey". Yet I am left with just one question, 'where are all the gardeners?'. Every large house was supplied with fruit, vegetables and flowers. Hodnet Hall still retains its kitchen garden.

Our acre is surrounded by wonderful red brick walls and still does everything that it always has. Vegetables are grown on organic principles which go to supply the house whilst orchids, peonies, sweet peas and chrysanthemums in succession fill the rooms with colour.

This past winter we have been concentrating on the fruit grown in the garden. This also finds its way to the kitchen in the 'big house' where much is used for jam making and other preserves. We have removed some unproductive plum trees that had been trained on the walls. These were probably planted 50 years ago and had come to the end of their productive lives. After cutting down the trees a cubic metre of soil was removed and replaced along with copious amounts of manure and compost. Of our new trees one is a green gage, one is of course 'Victoria' and another is 'Marjorie's seedling'.

We have also been making strenuous efforts in the peach house. This was originally used for vines but at some point in the past these were removed and replaced with peaches. This must have been some time ago as they had grown into venerable specimens. Recently these trees had been suffering from bleeding canker, a bacterial disease, which had encircled the main trunks and killed the plants.

They obviously had to be removed but replaced with what? In the end we decided to go with figs. Figs do not need to be grown under glass but they will produce an early crop if given protection.

Figs are generally pest and disease free but they are vigorous. Naturally they come from areas of the world where drought, poor soils and aridity are features of the climate. In cultivation those conditions have to be replicated as far as possible otherwise the plant produces growth at the expense of fruit.

The traditional method (which we adopted) is to plant figs in a box that contains the roots. We used 3ft x 2ft concrete slabs reclaimed from one of the houses on the estate. We made three such boxes into which we will put brick rubble and loam. This will restrict the roots and concentrate the plants efforts on fruit production.

In nature figs are pollinated exclusively by a species of wasp which completes its entire life cycle on the plants. However figs do not need a pollinator. The flowering parts are actually contained within the fruit (that is what you eat). 'Brown Turkey' (the variety with an AGM) which we have planted has all female flowers and can produce two crops per year by parthenocarpy or without sexual reproduction.

Syrup of figs anyone?



"The traditional method (which we adopted) is to plant figs in a box that contains the roots"

