

Urban gardener Cleve West

We shall fight them on the allotments



BEFORE I tell you about Ted, for those of you who read last week's column, all is well with the Great Tits. The parents returned, the eggs hatched and by the time this goes to press the fledglings may well have flown the nest.

Anyway, Ted's coming to lunch tomorrow at the allotment and we're keen to put on a good spread. It's his first visit to the plot, which is looking reasonably good at the moment largely due to the flowers rather than the vegetables. The herb bed in particular has already seen *Allium* 'Purple Sensation', borage and *eschscholzia*s provide the first flush of colour. Pot marigolds that survived the winter have also given the plot a lift blanketing one corner a clear orange. Now drumstick heads of *A. sphaerocephalon* with that edible green to wine-purple transition providing edge-of-your-seat anticipation, will combine with self-seeders such as fennel and *Verbena bonariensis* to provide one enormous feeding station for nectar-hungry insects.

Incredibly, I've known Ted for 25 years but can't remember talking to him about growing vegetables. He taught me just about everything I know about hard landscaping and kept me working during a difficult period when I finally became self-employed. At 78, and with 50 years landscaping behind him, he's starting to take things a little easier these days. His Ford Thames van with a Perkins diesel engine, a familiar sight around Leatherhead, Surrey, is symbolic of his reliability and facility to keep going at a steady pace (though there were plenty of winter days when I cursed the fact it had no heating). His collection of mowers and other garden machinery and his ability to fix or customise them is legendary. My favourite, a



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behemoth rotovator like some ageing dinosaur that would have to be cranked into spluttering life, would carve up a plot in minutes if you were strong enough to reign it round corners.

His disciplined manner belies his patience, trust and an ability to let things go when I made mistakes with levels or took infernally long to put down the first course of a brick wall. Clumsy habits with tools were ironed out and techniques for cutting and dressing stone without power tools saved numerous trips to the hire shop.

I did think him slightly mad using hedge trimmers on roses and restoring a laurel hedge by cutting the whole thing almost to the ground. Both responded with grateful vigour. I winced at the tacky choice (on the part of the client) of

DIGGING FOR VICTORY
Schoolboys from Hornchurch, in Essex, in October 1941. Home-grown produce was vital to the war effort

fibreglass columns for a folly that had to be filled with concrete and was secretly pleased when a large cedar fell on it during the Great Storm of 1987. We shared the disheartening experience of having to re-build it, again with more fibreglass, despite having sourced reclaimed-stone columns at a bargain price.

At my first show garden at Hampton Court, ten years ago, Ted was there, reliable as ever, ready to build, plant and give the moral support that's vital to see you through such an event. Celebrating the then-50th anniversary of the D-Day landings, I expressed my relief that he'd been too young to be involved, joking that he may not have been around to help me if he had. His response that, aged 18, he'd served with the Royal Marines landing at Sword Beach came as a shock. I had known him for 14 years and this was the first time he'd mentioned it. It's not uncommon for those who've experienced the reality of war to keep it to themselves and Ted, matter-of-fact as ever, brushes it aside as he would leaves off a path. No stories of valour, hardship or sorrow. "It was a job that needed to be done and I was just fortunate to come back that's all."

So, together with his wife, Iris, some family and friends, we'll celebrate his return at our plot, a suitable venue in many ways. Apart from the obvious "Dig for Victory" connotations of providing food during the two World Wars, plans for the Normandy landings were drawn up by General Eisenhower just a stone's throw away in Bushy Park. To cap it all, having planted our first earlies three months ago now, there's an outside chance I'll be able to serve up a bowl of new potatoes, the first of the season garnished with fresh mint and a generous knob of butter. What variety? Blow the sentiment, 'Winston' of course. *