

Drimlabarra Herb Farm – Curly Kale

It is disappointing and even a bit depressing when the people around you just don't seem to get it. I know that decisions are only difficult before you make them, but after having decided to avoid all animal products in your diet it seems so obvious and fundamentally right, it is hard to understand why the people around us continue with their old habits. This frustration is balanced by the realisation that such a decision often only comes after many years of preparation and the steady drip of information into scales that if responsive eventually tip. We are grateful that as a couple we share the same passionate reverence for the Natural world and that we hold similar beliefs as to what constitutes 'right lifestyle'.

We met through our mutual interest in Herbalism as a holistic means to promote health in people and the planet. In our opinion, you can't be a real herbalist if you are only interested in books - you have to immerse yourself in the plant world. I was born on the Isle of Arran, off the west coast of Scotland and grew up in the bounty of my grandfather's garden. Fresh peas from the pod and raspberry picking until you actually got bored of it, were highlights of my summer. Maureen was brought up in London with Irish parents and their holiday visits back to rural Ireland left a deep impression on her. I had tried to follow the family example with a career in medicine, but soon left it disappointed and disillusioned by the mechanistic view that modern medicine has of the body. Maureen had studied pharmacology but was appalled by the use of animal experimentation in its pursuit. We both found our way again through Herbal Medicine. So, we met and married and established (sometimes to the total distraction from our own relationship) the Scottish School of Herbal Medicine. This is a not for profit educational and research body dedicated to furthering and preserving the ancient art of herbal medicine, expressly without the need to torture animals. It is through our experience of dealing with human illness and our teaching and research in nutrition that has led us to adopt a vegan lifestyle. From this, we would like to propose a new term which is more self explanatory for the diet we follow as 'Plantarian'.

With the School established in Glasgow with Honours and Masters Degrees externally validated, we were able to return to Arran and fulfil our commitments to it from home alongside regular trips to the mainland and bring our kids up in a rural environment. Keith had grown organically here back in the 80's and so it was a great feeling when a house with 8 acres came up to complement the 8 acres of unimproved land we purchased previously.

The challenge was to now grow veganically. I remember vividly the first time I had used a nicotine insecticide on scallop beetles on beans. The beetle just died instantly and it certainly puts you off smoking. Now I had to accept the beetles right to live and our right to vegetables. Rotations remain the centre point of healthy crops especially the brassica family and it is a great lesson for human illness that prevention is really the best cure.



Welcome pests eating Kale

Over the years I have tired of growing cabbages and broccoli etc. Not that I don't love them but if anything is going to be targeted by hares and pigeons it is these. I was put off netting against birds as a child as they always seemed to get in and get trapped (although if you do, it does protect against the cabbage white butterfly). The solution is to grow curly kale which gives great greens and edible flower shoots which my sons refer to as lollipops (deprived or privileged? you decide). It is a frost hardy plant and is left pretty much alone by all the familiar cabbage pests. It is less likely to wake up club root but the rotations and adequate lime a year before planting should still be adhered to. We find that broadcasting is an excellent way to sow them. Then the crop is harvested as soon as there are a good crop of leaves in the autumn. The crop is then left to recover from Christmas to the spring and if large enough it provides side shoots which are broken off the main stem. The delicious flower stems have to be harvested regularly and then some are left to go to seed for the next year. Simply harvest the whole plant and hang up to dry, the black seeds are plentiful and can be rubbed out of the dried seed cases onto a sheet. Kale provides a host of minerals and vitamins including the rarer Vit K.

We use a lot of mulching and the species rich grassland is cut after it has flowered and put on the new hedge. With all the grass seed this is not used on the plots and all the grass paths and areas are cut for mulch for this. When using a lot of grass cuttings in a wet climate I find it can go a bit slimy and slippery. Adding a sprinkle of lime can help but we tried last year leaving the mowings to dry for a bit before collecting them and although this means it has less nitrogen for the crop it works better as a mulch and leaving it to dry feeds the grass to keep it cropping!

Another trick that has worked well is planting onions and garlic *underneath* a mulch. The bulbs are strong enough to push up through the mulch and this gives them a good weed free start. Careful though later on in a wet summer not to have the mulch too wet around the stems or they can rot.

To cope with the lack of animal manure in the cycle (as most of it has to be suspect from all sorts of angles) we grow lots of peas which is no great hardship really. The main pest for these is the pheasants who will dig up the newly sprouted plants and eat the seed! To deter them I'm afraid we have had to succumb to that necessary evil – chicken wire. I find the plastic pea netting a real hassle to handle after the 1st year as it tangles up. My grandfather always used 'pea stakes' cut from twiggy silver birch but I found them no protection from the pheasants despite bird scarer lines of silver paper etc. Support using the high 1m chicken or rabbit wire can make it difficult to get at the peas so another method is planned this year. The lower height 0.5m netting will keep the birds off and the pea stakes inside it will give the support. Incidentally, I found that the 0.5m high wire is much more expensive than the 1m high as the latter is more commercially used so I buy the 1m and get it cut in half - this leaves a ragged sharp edge but this can go down into the soil.



We decided to use curved beds to fit in with the landscape and as a protest against all the straight lines in farming. It is more work but give a much more pleasing aspect to straight rows and who knows it may even confuse the pests who have adapted to plants in strict rows.

More of our landscape shape shifting and recipes could perhaps follow in a future article.

Maureen and Keith Robertson founded the Scottish School of Herbal Medicine in 1992 and remain lecturers, research supervisors and Directors of Research and Education. They are active members of the National Institute of Medical Herbalists with practices in Glasgow and the Isle of Arran. Vegan volunteers to work on the island herb farm, including making herbal medicines are welcome. Contact keithandmo@tiscali.co.uk or www.herbalmedicine.org.uk