

WELL, WELL, WELL.....

Most plants prefer an alkaline soil, that is a soil with a pH (hydrogen ion concentration) of over 7.0. On my allotment the soil pH is 7.4 which is very good for most types of vegetables, which require a slightly alkaline soil. However, some plants are acid-loving and must be planted in ericaceous (ie lime-free) soil. **THEY MUST NOT BE WATERED WITH TAP WATER**, especially the tap water here in the Chilterns which is as hard as nails. So we collect rain water for them, from the roof of our greenhouse into a water-butt. However, in 2011 we had virtually no rain from mid-March to mid-July, and the water butt ran dry. We had no alternative: we had to use tap water. Our expensive orange and lemon bushes in large tubs then promptly died. Most sad, most annoying.

Now on to part 2 of this story. In Naphill and Walter's Ash in early 2012 we have just experienced the wettest drought on record, with a hosepipe ban and sodden soil. There has been little risk of residents watering their gardens with hosepipes and sprinklers – the clouds provided more than enough. However, after two very dry winters the overall drought has been so bad that the Government minister responsible for droughts has warned that we may have to obtain our water from standpipes in the street next year if we do not have a lot of rain this coming winter. The mind boggles at the task of frequently carrying buckets of water to flush the loo or fill the bath (with cold water). Washing machines and dishwashers would not work. The end of civilisation as we know it.

Here is a little history. Mains water did not come to Naphill and Walter's Ash until 1935 (courtesy of the new Bomber Command Headquarters) so all houses built before then collected water from the roof and stored it in large tanks or cisterns sunk into the garden. The tanks were called wells. I knew our house must have had a well but there was no sign of it. Then, in 2010, there was the worst drought here I have known – and a 2 foot by 2 foot square patch of lawn near the front door became very brown indeed. I poked a crowbar into the soil and, 6 inches down, felt something solid which went “clunk, clunk” when hit. I knew I had found the well cover at last. I carefully measured where it was so that I could find it after the rains made the grass green again.

In March 2011 I decided to explore. I took the turf off the square, then soil to a depth of 6 inches, exposing a large paving slab, which I removed. Then I extricated a piece of corrugated iron sheet to reveal a circular hole 30 inches in diameter. Gloom. The well was filled with mud and water.



Having gone thus far I thought I must carry on, so I started to remove the mud in a series of bucket-loads. It was a very heavy, very muddy and horrible job. Below the 30-inch circular top the hole widened (the top of the well was a dome with a 30-inch hole in the middle). The diameter increased until it measured 4 feet then the walls went vertically down into the bowels of the earth, or so it seemed at the time. I was using a ladder to get down and ropes to pull buckets of mud out. Eventually I was at 8 feet below ground level. The bottom of the well was slightly dished so that the final amounts of mud and water were in the centre. I must have moved over 4 tons of mud, plus 190 full bricks, large stones, sections of earthenware pipes, etc. I then pressure-washed the walls and marvelled at the construction – very careful brickwork, rendered with cement on the inside. A perfect tank, completely undamaged.



I connected-up the downpipe from the roof of our cottage at the end of March 2011, supported the hole with pre-stressed concrete lintels then placed a large paving-stone over to seal the hole and started the search for a hand-operated pump for the well, which took many months. Meanwhile, each rain shower was filling my well. After finding a new pump came the big moment – it worked! And the well by now was completely full. The capacity of the well/tank/cistern is 2,500 litres, so we have more than adequate rainwater for acid-loving plants, and for garden watering generally. And just in time for the hosepipe ban, so we have been doing our bit!



I then decided to do some sums, and worked out that 2,500 litres would be enough to keep us going for **only 8 days** in our modern household with a flushed toilet, showers, baths, washing machine, etc. So what of the people who lived in our village for thousands of years before 1935? (There are traces of settlements here from 4,000 years ago.) There are no streams and the water table is 300 feet down, too deep for a real well. The people must have reserved the well water for drinking only, bearing in mind that one could have dry summers. (About 100 years ago wells in Naphill and Walter's Ash ran dry and water bowsters had to be sent here.) I then realised that people in our village for the past 4,000 years did not wash. Of course it is not necessary to wash, as any small boy will tell you. Most people who live in the Arctic or in deserts today do not wash because water is not available for such use. Nevertheless, it is quite a shock to realise how primitive life here in the Chilterns was as recently as 1935, which is not that long ago and certainly within the memory of some residents.

So that is the story of how gardeners can obtain almost unlimited quantities of rainwater, ideal for lime-hating plants. Of course, if your house was built after 1935, you may have to take out your spade.....and dig!

Good gardening!

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