

Toby Mercer

41 Example Street, Millford, Freedonia

Happiest at a potting bench with a tray of cuttings, or out on a wet afternoon planting bulbs, after a working life spent on farms, in glasshouses and in public parks. Keeps bees on an allotment at home and grows sweet peas every summer, sowing them in pots each October, later than the books say.

Skills

- Propagation from seed, softwood cuttings, grafting and careful division.
- Glasshouse growing, including ventilation, shading and watering with a can.
- Pruning of fruit trees, old roses, climbing plants and formal hedges.
- Compost making, leaf mould and patient soil improvement on heavy clay.
- Pest and disease recognition, treated without sprays where possible.

Experience

Westmere Farm

Salad Grower

Eastbrook, Freedonia

1995-2001

- Grew salad crops, brassicas and cut flowers in the open ground and under glass, through every season, in sun and rain alike.
- Sowed the early crops in the cold frames each spring and hardened them off before planting out.
- Mulched the rose beds each spring with leaf mould from the garden's own bays.
- Tied in the climbing roses on the walls every autumn.
- Cut the yew hedges once a year in late summer.
- Sowed wildflower seed along the orchard edges.
- Saved seed from the border plants each autumn and dried it in paper bags.
- Divided the hostas and day lilies whenever the clumps grew crowded.
- Cleared the gutters of the glasshouse roofs after the autumn gales.
- Staked the tall delphiniums before the early summer winds.
- Raked the gravel paths smooth after every heavy rain.
- Lifted and stored the dahlia tubers before the first frosts.

Oakfield Park

Park Gardener

Riverton, Freedonia

1988-1994

- Mowed, edged and weeded the formal lawns and flower beds around the bandstand, and swept the leaves from the paths every autumn.
- Planted the spring and summer bedding displays twice a year, lifting the tulips and storing them for reuse.
- Laid a new hawthorn hedge along the east boundary and trimmed it every summer.
- Dug a new wildlife pond by the orchard and planted its margins with irises and marsh marigolds.

Ferndale Plants

Glasshouse Keeper

Hartwell, Freedonia

1981-1987

- Grew the bedding plants and pot plants for the plant shop from seed and cuttings, and watered the benches from the rain butts.
- Rooted cuttings under upturned jam jars on the potting-shed sill.
- Scrubbed and re-glazed the glasshouse panes each spring.

Lindenhall Estate

Kitchen Gardener

Ashcombe, Freedonia

1975-1980

- Worked in the kitchen garden in all weathers, digging, sowing in rows, thinning the seedlings and bringing in the crops.
- Pruned the espalier pears and the fan-trained peaches on the south wall, and tied in the new growth.
- Laid a new cobbled path through the kitchen garden, bedding each cobble in sharp sand, grading the camber so

that rain ran off into the borders, and edging it with old roof tiles so that it would last for years without weeds pushing up through the joints, then lining both sides with low box hedging grown from cuttings.

Elmstead Orchards

Orchard Worker

Wexley, Freedonia

1970-1974

- Picked, graded and stored the apples and pears through each autumn.
- Cut the long grass between the trees and cleared the ditches each winter.

Education

Brambleton College of Horticulture

Certificate in Practical Horticulture

Brambleton, Freedonia

1969

Favourite plants

- Old shrub roses and ramblers, especially the ones that flower once and then set hips.
- Hardy ferns of every kind, from the tiny wall ferns to the big royal fern by water.
- Alpines grown in troughs of grit, where they stay small, tight and long-lived.
- Espalier pears and fan-trained peaches on a warm south-facing stone wall.

Tools kept close at hand

- A worn border spade and a digging fork with an ash handle.
- Bypass secateurs, a folding pruning saw and a sharp budding knife.
- A long-handled hoe for the vegetable rows and a short one for the frames.
- A wheelbarrow with a pneumatic tyre and a split wooden handle bound in twine.

Vegetables grown for the table

- Broad beans sown in late autumn for an early crop.
- Parsnips left in the ground until the first frosts have sweetened them.
- Runner beans on hazel poles cut from the hedge.

Grown at home

- Sweet peas, runner beans and too many courgettes.
- Early potatoes in sacks and salad leaves in old fish boxes.
- A small bed of alpines raised from seed in a cold frame.
- Rhubarb forced under an old chimney pot at the end of every winter.
- Strawberries in a raised bed, netted against the blackbirds.

Interests

- Fell walking, beekeeping and painting wild flowers in watercolour.