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Some few years ago I invented a character called Mr Pimpkins. Mr Pimpkins is the archetype of jobbing gardener who, as a great favour, at considerable expense and at no little inconvenience to yourself, condescends to come and help you out in the garden 'when he can git the time'. When you rashly complain of a certain irregularity in Mr Pimpkins' appearances he almost invariably lays the blame on another employer mysteriously known as 'her'. Either he has been caught up with clipping 'her' hedge or mowing 'her' lawn or sowing 'her' carrots; or 'she's been arter me agin about that cesspool job'.



The main basis of Mr Pimpkins' horticultural philosophy is a process known as 'settin' back'. Put a pair of shears or secateurs into Mr Pimpkins' hands and he is as happy as a schoolboy riding on a fire-engine on the Brigade's Open Day. Mr Pimpkins explains and defends the process of 'settin' back' with the simple promise 'it wun arf let some light in', which indeed it undoubtedly does. In no time at all your most treasured shrubs are devastated; the flowering shoots of your forsythia, for example, are laid low in October, thus ensuring that it will bear no flowers until at least the spring after next; your prized magnolia is reduced to a skeleton; your lavender hedge is slaughtered to the ground: all starkly revealed in the blessed light that Mr Pimpkins has obligingly allowed to pour in.

Mr Pimpkins is also a law unto himself. You do not like carrots, but Mr Pimpkins insists on growing six 15ft rows of them; onions do not agree with you but Mr Pimpkins insists on having a plot of them about half as big as a tennis court, largely because, you discover, 'she' does; you love your new potatoes to be about the size of pigeon's eggs, but Mr Pimpkins insists that they reach the size of footballs before they can possibly be dug; and it is similarly a sacrilege to gather your broad beans until they reach the size of big toes, complete with the appropriate toe-nails, again largely because 'she' happens to like them that way.

Mr Pimpkins rejoices in other prejudices. He 'don't' old with artificials'; he 'don't' old with *cloches*'; he believes staunchly in the myth that fog in March will be inevitable followed by frost in May; he also has a maddening affection for all the flowers you loathe, notably those repulsive tagetes, which he invariably pronounces to rhyme with 'sweets'. He is also incurably obstinate, so that if by chance you are out for the day and you leave a note in the potting-shed saying, please mow lawn and trim edges, you will undoubtedly return to find that he

From My Garden by H. E. Bates

the well-known novelist writes about how his garden grows

Advice to Those About to Prune

has pruned your roses with such severity that they now appear like beds of matchsticks or has dug up the whole of your asparagus bed in the fond belief that he 'didn't know it was there'.

In case you may think all this to be something of an exaggeration and that Mr Pimpkins no longer exists or works his will, I must now tell you that on a recent Sunday morning I saw, in a pleasant little garden in a fashionable area of London, *two* Mr Pimpkins at work and I am bound to say that they 'wun arf letting some light in'. What had been, only the day before, an attractive little autumn plot, quite gay with hydrangeas and roses, was now as bare as a hard tennis court. With great and evident enjoyment and an utter lack of skill the two Mr Pimpkins were eagerly 'settin' back' every new flowering shoot on hydrangeas and rambler roses and every other specimen of plant and shrub they could lay hands on.

Alas, I fear there are many more breeds of Pimpkins besides those who are paid to let the light in. In other words my

point in all this is the highly vexed and misunderstood question of pruning, a question on which I firmly believe that perhaps more amateur gardeners are confused than any other. Indeed I sometimes go so far as to feel that secateurs should really be put into the category of illegal weapons.

There is one golden rule about pruning. If you don't know anything about pruning it is infinitely better to act on Mr Punch's renowned advice to those about to marry: *don't*. Let Nature alone and her rewards will certainly be richer than those of Mr Pimpkins. If however you must prune, the practical rules are simple enough. First, all spring-flowering shrubs or those flowering at latest in June, should be pruned immediately *after* flowering, and *never* in the autumn. Such pruning will give things like forsythias, philadelphus, lilacs and so on the entire summer in which to make and ripen the next season's flowering wood. Anything flowering in late summer or early autumn should, where necessary, be pruned in spring. This applies to buddleias, hibiscus, clematis of the Jackmanii type, shrub mallows, ceanothus, rue, santolina, hypericums, hardy fuchsias, perovskia, ceratostigma, penstemons and a whole host of others, including shrubs such as certain of those of the cornus family, which may be cut hard to the ground in spring in order to obtain greater brilliance of colouring in the bark during the following winter. *C. Westonbirt* will give bark of sealing-wax red if so pruned and *C. stolonifera flaviramea* branches of butter yellow.

For my own part there is a considerable number of shrubs I never touch with secateurs. Among them are those two delicious winter-flowering beauties *Viburnum fragrans* and *Hamamelis mollis*, both of which flower unfailingly and profusely in consequence; magnolias, lilacs and the summer-flowering *Buddleia globosa* and all brooms and conifers. My shrub roses receive a certain 'settin' back' every three years or so, but my huge specimen of *Rosa moyesii* has never been cut in all its life of 30-odd years and still gives its warm brick-red single flowers in regular and delicious profusion.

The moral of it all is: don't let Mr Pimpkins, his secateurs and his 'settin' back' rule your gardening life; and don't, for the sake of tidiness or letting the light in, become a Mr Pimpkins yourself. But if, of course, your specimen of *Magnolia soulangiana* has by some chance grown so huge and high as to be in danger of knocking your television aerial down, that is entirely another matter. It is for you to choose between the saga of the magnolia and that of the Forsytes.

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