

## **The King's Garden: and the wonders and mysteries of compost**

Once upon a time there was a King who had a most beautiful kitchen garden. The garden was tended with care and thoughtfulness by an ancient Gardener, himself the son, the grandson and the great grandson of Gardeners that had gone before. The kitchen garden was set within fine and high stone walls and it was the pride and joy of the King and the Gardener, both of whom spent as much time as they could, in the late sunshine of summer's evenings, sitting beneath the spread of a magnificent pear tree. The King and his Gardener knew every plant in the garden and at such times they would talk of the weather and of the work that needed to be done. And, in particular, they would talk of the wonders and mysteries of compost and of the compost boxes that were the particular delight of the Gardener.

But this state of peace and harmony was soon to be lost. For one day, the King was visited by the Minister of Progress on what he declared was 'urgent business'. The King received the Minister with his usual courtesy, although he had never felt altogether comfortable in his presence. And it soon became clear that the 'business' had to do with the kitchen garden.

"Forgive me for saying this, Sir," said the Minister of Progress, leaning his head to one side and smiling a little as if he were addressing a small child "but you must see that the way in which the Gardener is managing your garden is far too old fashioned and sets, how shall we say, well sets a bad example. The Gardener does not in any way take advantage of the very many modern procedures and devices that have been developed and produced by my colleagues in the Ministry of All Things Modern. If you will forgive me, Sir, I have to say that his ways are, how shall I put it, well his ways are unacceptable."

"It is most important," continued the Minister, now in full flow, "that Your Majesty is seen to be thoroughly modern, that you are, shall we say, seen to be part of all that is best in the modern world. Our focus groups have confirmed that this is so. Indeed, the very latest findings show that the people require you to be what we call a 'now person'."

The King reflected to himself that in all his long years of meeting people nobody had ever asked him to be a 'now person'. But he let this thought pass.

“The ways of the Gardener,” said the King, “are the ways of his father and of his father’s father. They are the ways of one who has learned to live with nature and one who has reverence for the plants and the soil.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” interrupted the Minister, “so you say and so you have said many times. But, Sir, if you will forgive me, we have to be realistic, we have to move on, we can hardly be expected to...”

“I am most unlikely to forgive you,” thought the King. But he knew that whatever he said the Minister of Progress would not hear for, after all, he had long ago stopped listening. And so, once more, the King kept his thoughts to himself – which is more than can be said of the Minister.

“We have therefore decided,” continued the Minister, “that we must get rid of the Gardener and replace him with someone from the Ministry of All Things Modern. Indeed, we have selected just the right person. He has a degree in Business Studies and has undertaken a course specialising in the economics of garden produce and leisure-management. You can be sure that before long, Sir, he will have significantly reduced the costs of your garden and increased its revenue potential. He will have at his disposal the very latest knowledge and techniques, replacing the low productivity of the hopelessly extended variety of plants at present in your garden with a more appropriate number of genetically modified species designed and engineered to give the maximum rate of return on capital employed.”

And so it was that the King’s garden was taken over by a Manager from Ministry of All Things Modern. The Manager arrived, with two Assistant Managers, in three very smart vans from which they took a number of sealed boxes and several large plastic containers each one marked with a label saying ‘Dangerous. Treat with Care. Keep out of the Reach of Children’. Following them came a truck from which emerged a gleaming new tractor and trailer of the very latest kind, together with an assemblage of additional parts for every possible task that the Ministry could imagine. There were cutters for cutting, diggers for digging and, most especially, sprayers for spraying.

Putting on their special protective clothing, including goggles, masks and gloves, the Manager and his Assistant Managers mounted the tractor and its trailer, now loaded with parts, and, having consulted their management plan, drove towards the kitchen garden. It took hardly any time at all to cut down

the pear tree and before long the garden had been reduced to a most satisfactory state of complete flatness, which was then sprayed thoroughly with the Ministry's latest weed killer 'Stop It'. Unfortunately, some of this drifted over the wall of the kitchen garden and onto a rather beautiful clump of primroses, killing them at once. But nobody noticed. At this point, the Manager and his team, having again consulted their management plan, withdrew to their vans for tea – and then left in order to be home in time to watch their favourite gardening programme, *Gardening for Profit*.

That evening, the King and the Gardener met at the spot where the pear tree once had stood. Neither one said a word but both understood the sorrow that they shared. Slowly anger rose within the breast of the King and he strode off to his woodshed where, picking up his sharpest axe, he rapidly reduced several large logs to kindling, after which he felt a good deal better.

And so it was that the King hatched his plan. Calling his Gardener to him he made his way to a secret and secluded place, which had long lain untouched. "Here," he said, "is where we will recreate the kitchen garden. For the moment, no one will know about it but in time, when they need it, it will be here for them." The Gardener was, of course, delighted and, with the help of his grandson, who had always liked to help his grandfather in the garden, he at once set about the task of collecting together his packets of seeds, even managing to graft a slip from the old pear tree so that it, too, would be restored. Not least, of course, he prepared his compost boxes and the magic once more began.

The next day, the Manager and his Assistant Managers returned and once again sprayed the ground of the now flattened kitchen garden, this time with a fertiliser called 'Pop-Up' that had been especially manufactured by the Ministry of All Things Modern. Following this, they began to open the sealed boxes which contained the Ministry's genetically modified seeds, including, of course, 'Big Boy' tomatoes, 'Super-Growth' cabbages and 'Speedy' beans. Each planting was meticulously recorded in the Manager's lap top computer under its defined number and with a precise record of the regime of fertiliser and pesticide to which it would be subjected. All 'creepy-crawlies' were eliminated which, of course, meant that the garden was soon silent of the hum of bees and the song of birds. This very much pleased the Manager and his Assistant Managers who noted that it was an example of the efficiency of their system. "After all," they said, "we cannot have the bees and the birds robbing us of our harvest". Indeed, nothing moved in the

garden apart from the automatic sprinkler system that from time to time switched itself off and on, again according to the Manager's master plan.

Meantime, in the secret garden, the Gardener and his grandson, lovingly prepared the ground. They double dug the new beds, feeding the bottom of the troughs with organic waste and with well-rotted manure from the King's stables. Then they sowed their seeds, including in their planting companion plants such as marigolds and borage that would encourage the butterflies and other insects. Rather pleasingly, the birds that had been evicted from the old kitchen garden soon arrived to add their song, and water butts were put in place and so that each evening the watering could be undertaken. This gave the Gardener and his grandson the opportunity to look carefully at the progress of each plant, where necessary putting in pea sticks for support or removing the occasional weed. And, day-by-day, with grass clippings and vegetable waste, the compost boxes began to fill, promising in time the return of more and more goodness to the ground.

In the old kitchen garden, now firmly under the management of the Ministry of All Things Modern, everything at first appeared to be going well. Following the strict regime of the sprays of all kinds and with extensive watering, the vegetables, such as they were, grew large and shiny. As part of the newly formed business plan, trips were organised bringing busload after busload of people not to see the garden itself but to enjoy the 'garden experience' in a newly erected dome-like structure to be called The Virtual Garden Centre and Shop. Here many different computer-simulated rides and games were constructed, each of which enabled the visitor to see what it would be like to enter into the growing plants or indeed the soil itself and experience the process of plant growth. At the end of the 'experience', visitors found themselves disgorged into the café and shop where, of course, they enthusiastically purchased a great variety of products based upon the idea of a garden. Most popular of all was the rose-scented oven glove. They were also able to purchase garden produce, each vegetable wrapped in its seal-clean plastic wrapper, impregnated with the very latest taste enhancer developed, of course, by the Ministry of All Things Modern.

And so it was that one season and one year gave way to the next. Whilst the secret garden slowly began to blossom, the Ministry's garden not only met its profit schedule but, indeed, exceeded it. As the Minister of Progress said to the King, "You see, Sir, in the real world, price and profit are, if you will forgive me, the measure of success. Our spreadsheets show that the return on capital in this garden is now at or above the level that can be expected for

this kind of garden based upon a ten year time series adjusted both for climate and for geographical difference.”

The King was not at all sure that the Minister had any idea of what it was that he was saying. But he was far too courteous to say so and, in any event, before he could reply the Minister had spread out on the table several sheets of computer printout that, he informed the King, were evidence of the financial success of the venture.

As it happened, that meeting took place only a day or two before the Great Catastrophe. One morning in late August a plague attacked the Ministry’s garden. To the considerable astonishment of the Manager and His Assistant Manager, the cabbages began, one by one, to shrivel as if attacked by an acute case of blight. They consulted their business plan but could find nothing that would help them. And so, they consulted the Disease Control Specialists at the Ministry of All Things Modern, who were quite sure that they knew what to do. “We must start,” they said, by a cull of the cabbages. All the plants must be destroyed and burnt – NOW!” And so the Manager and his team pulled out all the cabbages put them on a pyre and set fire to it. It burnt with black smoke and a foul smell. That they thought was that.

The next day, however, the blight had attacked the runner beans and the next day the tomato plants, the marrows and the salad crop. All visits to the garden were stopped. The sale of rose-scented oven gloves plummeted and the manufacturer went out of business, as did the companies making seal-clean plastic wrappers and taste enhancers. As day followed day, the crisis deepened and despite all efforts the garden was soon nothing more than a wasteland, flat, barren, putrid and soaked with chemicals.

The Manager and his Assistant Managers were transferred to a small monitoring office in a rather remote part of the Hebrides and the Minister of Progress stepped down from office to spend more time with his family. Whilst it was decided that the Ministry for All Things Modern should no longer concern itself with matters horticultural. And after something of a flurry in the newspapers, the matter was forgotten.

When they had all gone away, the King, the Gardener and, of course, his grandson, who had now become a most able Under-Gardener, met in the secret garden. They sat beneath the now spreading pear tree and looked over the garden that they had created. They talked of the weather and of the work to be done but, most especially, they talked of the wonders and mysteries of

compost and of the compost boxes that were the particular delight of the Gardener.

David Cadman, 2003

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