

Cold comfort seeds beautiful surprises (Magnar)

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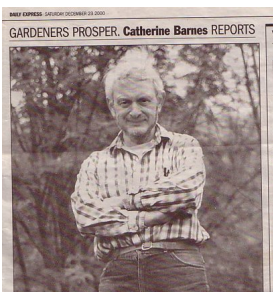
DAILY EXPRESS

WEEKEND PASSIONS GARDENING

SATURDAY DECEMBER 23 2000 DAILY EXPRESS

IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE, BUT EVEN IN NORTHERN NORWAY AND FROZEN ALASKA AVID

Cold comfort seeds beautiful surprises



GARDENERS PROSPER. Catherine Barnes REPORTS

YOU probably haven't noticed, but the days are already getting longer. Yes, Thursday was the shortest day of the year, so at least when the excitement of Christmas is over, we will have a good three minutes a day longer to spend in the garden in the New Year. Last week also saw the first winter frosts in some parts of the country, but if you think the British winter is bleak, then spare a thought for those who garden in sub-arctic conditions.

It sounds harsh and it is — yet some gardeners just will not be put off by small matters like snowdrifts and only 96 growing days per year.

By the time you read this, it will be pitch dark in teacher Magnar Aspaker's garden in Harstad, in northern Norway. In fact, the sun left town around the third week of November.

"We won't expect to see it again until about the same time in January," says Magnar, who lives with his wife Toril on the outskirts of town, 125 miles inside the Arctic Circle.

The garden is big, even by Norwegian standards, and stocked with the hundreds of perennials that Magnar has grown from seed. "I have gardened more or less all my life," he says.

My father grew annuals, which I don't find all that exciting. We built the house in 1973 and I started to look around for plants, but the garden centres all had the same sort of things and I got a bit bored.

I read in a book about all the plants that you haven't supposed to be able to grow in northern Norway. But nobody had ever tried. So I found some gardening clubs, because perennial seeds are hard to get here and expensive."

The club Magnar joined were not local. He knows of only a few other gardeners in his region of

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TOUGH SPECIES:
Far All, Corpius, Cammianum, left; Douglas-Isaragata, right; Lushia, trendy

Norway who are as passionate about experimenting with plants — a situation that's hard to imagine in garden-crazy Britain.

ONE organisation he joined was the Scottish Rock Garden Club in Edinburgh. "The main reason was that it had a seed exchange. Christmas you sit and at the list and do the what to grow the next season."

Magnar started by growing 100 species a year from seed. "Because the seed is collected by amateurs, you can never be quite sure of the

viability and whether it will germinate," he explains. Spoiled for choice when he discovered the Internet, he grew 600 species after his first year online.

Now I'm back to around 400. Some of the plants are quite long lived, but others have only a short life span... it depends species to species.

"I don't cover anything with a mesh over winter, as there are too many to care for. So, if they survive they do, and if they don't come the following spring, I'll try something else."

Perhaps the blankets of snow, which can be up to a metre thick and can last until April or May, act

as a much because Magnar often has better success with his plants than gardeners in the sector south of the country. "The blue peppy, macrocarpa grandis, grows so well up here that everyone asks what we do to make them stay in flower. We do nothing, but every year they get bigger and better."

As for British gardens, one of the first flowers to appear in Magnar's garden following the thaw are the crocuses and ranunculus, which are called Winter Blooms in Norway.

Despite being within the Arctic Circle, the ground is not permanently frozen because blanket is quite close to the mountainside. Although crocuses grow very well, but some of the bigger perennials just do not like to grow within the time limits of the Norwegian summer.

Although in the summer months it is broad daylight for almost 24 hours, by the time some plants are ready to flower the first frosts have come.

One of his best surprises was a geranium from China. "I didn't have a name — it was just labelled Geranium sp.," says Magnar.

It was very small the first year, so I left it in the cold frame and forgot about it. The next spring, I was looking around to see if anything new had come up and there were these wonderful little flowers. A friend from Sweden later told me it was G. Barveri."

It is claimed that the cool summer temperatures, coupled with the copious amount of light, make the colours of flowers more intense.

But having visited gardens in England, Magnar is not so sure the rumors are true. "I didn't notice much difference," he says.

Yet there is always an element of surprise in the gardens for Magnar. Quite often, when he sows a packet of seeds, he has no idea what to expect when they germinate. "It's exciting not to know what will flower," he says.

Yet often he acquires when the seed where he has planted something, he adds. "I find a space and I'll put it there — but I will have no idea what it will look like. A friend told me I have a collector's garden — it's certainly not a designer's garden."

Even vegetables do not pose a problem to the determined grower in countries with long harsh winters. Pat Bateock lives in Fairbanks, Alaska. By

day she works at Fairbanks University but most of her free time is spent gardening — or thinking about it.

"Gardeners here delight in seed catalogues received from December onwards, with the varieties to dream about growing in the summer season," she says.

Pat grows herbs and vegetables, as well as flowers, all from seed in her garden which she calls the Cabbage Patch. During the winter months the maximum amount of bright daylight in the garden is three hours and there is a permanent carpet of snow.

THIS is compensated for in June, July and August when, as in Norway, the sun rises shortly after midnight and sets after 10 at night. But the first frosts can arrive by the end of August. As in Britain, Alaskan gardeners sow their vegetables and flower seeds indoors in March and April, hardening them off and planting them out towards the end of May.

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The Georgetown Botanical Gardens at Fairbanks in Alaska tests thousands of different kinds of vegetables and flower seeds to see what grows best in our subarctic conditions," explains Pat. "There are Alaska seed companies that carry the university's recommended kinds of seeds."

Giant varieties of vegetable are an Alaskan specialty and Pat grows potatoes outdoors and under glass colony carrots, subergines and a wide range of herbaceous perennials and biennials that feature in the British herbaceous border.

Another Alaskan gardener, Bob Hirt, who is well known to Pat, harvests his first carrots in early June using an ingenious solar heating method. He grows the carrots in a raised metal bed his down, made out of old corrugated aluminium roofing. Over it, he has a removable "greenhouse" made of a wooden frame and heavy duty polythene.

The bed sits on a number of six gallon metal drums, lying on their sides and filled with water almost to the top, which conserve heat better than the ground.

"Bob starts his carrot patch when the snow is still on the ground in early April," says Pat.

"The water in the barrels thaws the beds early - much earlier than the type of raised beds that sit on the ground - and he maintains that there is enough air space above the bare soil to allow for water expansion in the depth of our sub-arctic winters."

He grows Emperor 608, Scarlet Nantes, Emperor Special 58 and Spartan Bonus in his patch.

"There can't be any gardeners in the world that delight more in growing things. We have only 90 growing days to produce a beautiful garden that will add to a very long winter's larder."