



The Subsistence Gardener

NOVEMBER The Sickle.

The sickle is one of the oldest and most versatile tools available to the gardener. It has fallen out of popularity in recent years, which is strange. One long-standing use of the sickle is to cut the cereal crop at harvest time; the sickle is also the ideal tool for cutting long grass, bracken, nettles, and brambles.

Historically, a garden for most people was an area around where they lived, where they felt at home, grew things for themselves and their families, and which they were able to manage with the help of a few simple tools, most of which would have lasted a lifetime. Something went wrong with this ancient model in the industrial revolution: people in towns were deprived of having any garden at all, and gardens became status symbols for rich people, in which they showed off their ability to employ gardeners, purchase plants from around the world, and maintain large areas of closely-cropped lawns.

In more recent times, when more people have been able to afford to have a garden again, it is this latter form of garden that they have tried to emulate, rather than the simpler cottage-style gardens of before. In order to keep these new gardens looking tidy, there is a whole range of electric, and petrol-driven machines, including lawn mowers of various sizes, trimmers and hedge trimmers. None of these machines are fun to use, they are expensive to run (and replace when they break down), they are not good for wildlife, and are not really very environmentally friendly. Furthermore, the jobs that they do can be done better with a sickle, albeit with a slightly different result.

When you decide to keep your garden in order with a sickle, you automatically scale it down to a size that you feel

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able to manage, so the garden is on a human scale from the outset; the area of grass cut regularly is kept to a minimum (maintaining a lawn is not the task to which the sickle is best suited); other areas of grass are cut once or twice a year, which is ideal for wild flowers and wildlife in general; hedges can be trimmed once a year - so that bird's nests are not disturbed; and banks and verges are cut in the autumn. The garden looks tended, but not manicured. Working with a sickle is good exercise, it is quiet, it doesn't produce fumes, it does not use petrol or electricity, it allows you to craft your garden plant by plant, and the sickle itself is easy to maintain. Vegetation cut with a sickle can be gathered up and used as a mulch, or can be added to the compost heap. If the cutting is done in the autumn, large piles of compost can be built, which will start to break down slowly over the winter months, and can be turned in the spring. In this way the garden will start to generate large amounts of high-quality compost, which can be worked into the soil in the vegetable plot and in crop-producing areas.

Working with a Sickle

Cereals: If you are growing cereals for your own needs, you will be working on quite small areas, and there is no need for a scythe or a mechanical cutter for harvesting.

You can hold a handful of stems with one hand, and cut them off at the base with a sickle, held in the other hand. In this way, you can avoid mixing the weed plants in with the cereal plants, making it easier to clean the grain afterwards.

BANKS, HEDGES, AND AREAS OF GRASS: When cutting grassy banks, brambles, bracken, etc., you should work with a forked stick in one hand, and a sickle in the other.

Maintaining the sickle: Generally, a sickle will not be sharp when you buy it, and, therefore, will not be enjoyable to use. It can be sharpened on a grindstone or on an anvil, and kept sharp with a whetstone. It has a thicker, more robust, blade than a scythe, and does not need sharpening so often.



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In 2023, I had good crops of most things, particularly rye and dried beans.



Crops of 2023

I store my grain in a metal bin... but I am dreaming of an iron-age storehouse.



600 m²
RYE
119 kg



200 m² Spring wheat
30 kg
200 m² Winter wheat
27 kg

250 m²
dried Beans
60 kg

480 m²
Buckwheat
40 kg

330 m²
Potatoes

100 m²
amaranth
20 kg