

The
Subsistence Gardener

Celebrating THE HARVEST

I grew up in a suburb of Manchester, in the UK, and every September, or October, the local church organised a harvest festival. This basically involved everyone buying an extra packet, or tin, of something, and handing it in at church at the Sunday service. Volunteers then packaged up all the offerings into harvest baskets which they took round to poor and elderly people in the parish. At the time, I couldn't see much of a connection between all of that, and the vague idea of harvests in the countryside that I had picked up; and I couldn't see why it was taking place so late in the year, when the Manchester weather was already starting to turn cold and wet.

Since then, I have learnt that even though the harvest may start in July with the cutting of the winter cereals, it really does go on at least until the beginning of autumn. In Brittany, where we now live, most people would have grown a small patch of buckwheat until quite recently, and this was not harvested until October; walnuts and chestnuts are collected late into the autumn, and some varieties of cider apples can be collected right up until the end of the year. The aim of the long harvest season was to ensure that the home was sufficiently stocked with enough high-quality local produce to last through the lean winter months and, if necessary, to see you through a period of poor harvests if they should occur in the future.

When I was young, the overwhelming belief was that people had somehow progressed beyond the need for such stocks. The organisers of my church Harvest Festival may have been aware that the produce in the packets of sugar and tins of beans, that they were collecting, had been harvested somewhere in the world, but to us children, it seemed that they came from an unlimited supply in the shops, and that our society had outgrown the time-old rhythm of sowing and reaping.

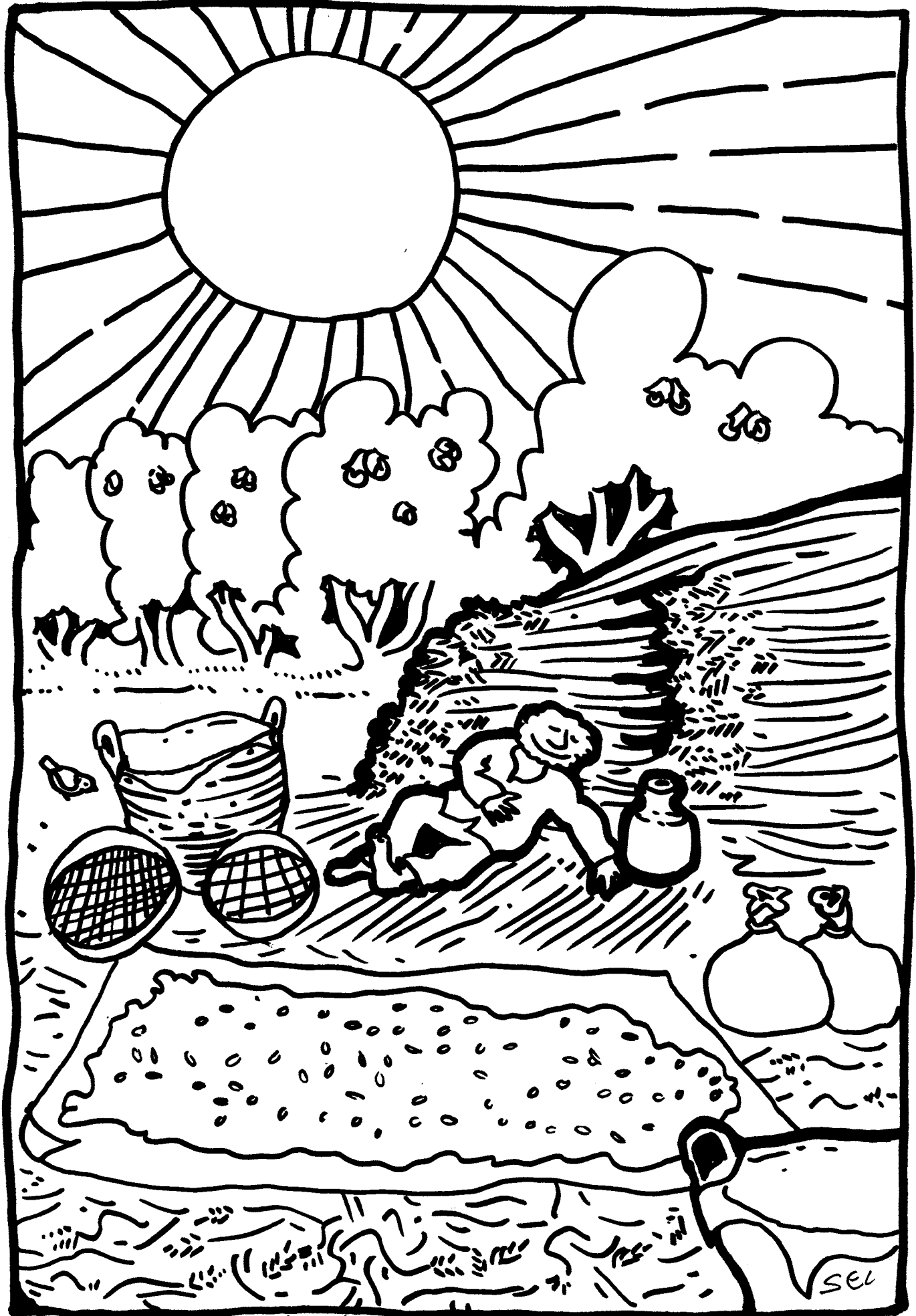
Now, times are changing again, and serious questions are being asked about the true efficacy of the food industry. There are benefits to growing and harvesting our own food, both for ourselves, and also for the wider world. In fact, given the degree of concern expressed by governments, health experts, and climate scientists, it is surprising that not more effort is being made to encourage us all to grow at least a few crops for ourselves, to take some of the strain off global supply chains, the health service, and the wider farming community.

The Importance of Storage

Something else that I have learnt since starting to grow more of my own food, is that a successful harvest is not just about bringing in a crop from the field, it is also about preparing and storing it properly, so that it is kept in good condition until you want to use it. Each crop has its own requirements, which have to be respected: for example, potatoes and root crops store well in outdoor clamps, beans and nuts need to be thoroughly dried before being put in storage, some crops from the vegetable garden, such as cabbages and carrots, can be preserved by lacto-fermentation, for example. However, the most thought has always gone into the storage of grain. If successful, a large enough stock of grain can be built up to last through one or two bad harvests. In most regions of the world, grains are the basis of the daily diet; if you have bread to eat, it is relatively easy to supplement it with other produce, and no one goes hungry. The problem is that cereals are such a rich source of nutrients that there are a whole host of things that will want to take your stock for themselves. Rats and mice pose the most obvious threat, insects, such as weevils, will multiply in the stock if it is too warm, and the grain will go mouldy if it is too damp.

Whereas in the past, people's homes were designed, at least partly, with a view to providing optimum conditions for grain storage, this is now no longer the case. There is still the assumption that the food industry has solved the problem of large-scale food storage – but the techniques used to preserve huge silos of grain from insect and fungal attack are largely shrouded in secrecy. If you want to be sure of having chemical-free cereal that has fully retained its natural vitality, you still have to solve the age-old puzzle of how to grow and store your own grain, in your own locality, in your own way. (In our case, we have found that our house is too warm (even though it is poorly insulated by modern standards), but that a metal grain bin in a well-ventilated outdoor shed has worked well for the past few years).

In retrospect, I can admire the effort made by my local church, when I was young, to keep the tradition of a harvest festival alive, even though very little was being harvested in our town; but, today, more is required, and we need to return to each household having its own harvest, its own store of produce, and, then, to be able to join in a real harvest festival.



Drying eye grains in the sun