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Spring At Last

At long last winter is behind us here in southern UK. The duration of the cold weather has been quite long and the usual intermittent periods of bright sunny winter days have been much less frequent than might be expected. There comes a point when the novelty of snowy weather wears off, especially when I see my spring bulbs, crocus and daffodil, putting out their buds and even one or two trying to open when there has been a break in the icy weather. Even when cold, a sunny day makes up for the lack of warmth, and it is always more pleasant to go about one's daily business with the maximum amount of natural light and not have to make up the difference with artificial light sources. Spring may arrive on the calendar on 21 March but in my mind cold weather is still winter and spring should mean milder days and the beginning of the growing season. As spring here is rarely entirely warm and mild, I think I will have to redefine my expectations by saying that I am looking for warm weather in hopeful anticipation rather than going against previous experience and insisting that the weather live up to an unrealistic definition of the word spring.

Every creature in my garden seems to be well fed at the moment. The pairs of blackbirds and robins continue to follow me around as I move pots, pull up weeds and sweep up the debris of winter. As soon as I move away, they are quick to come down to look for the meals that suddenly become available. The "critters" in the compost bins are the best fed, and are getting a few fresh green items to supplement their winter rations. Many of the earthworms have climbed to the top of the bin and congregated under the rim of the lid and so I relocated them to the soil roundabout where they will be able to continue their good work. I believe that the worms are probably escaping the excess warmth of the decomposing matter, and so this is a good sign that the process is working well.

Unfortunately the donated frogspawn, from a friend's tiny boggy pond that is about to be dug up, has somehow dispersed rather rapidly. I am sure the goldfish have been helping themselves to the free snack, despite our efforts at making a straw barrier. They come up underneath and push themselves into the raft and any other clumps of vegetation, in order to flush out anything edible, and the larger ones certainly have the strength to make a dent in the greenery. This reminds me of the wildlife films where the killer whale rams itself into the shallow water at the shoreline, and almost onto the beach, as it hunts the unsuspecting seals. Fortunately there is a crowd of wriggling tadpoles on a much safer shallower part ready to disperse to safety. There are a few clumps of eggs that seem to have been killed by freezing but these will soon end up as more goldfish titbits.

I have finally discovered how the pond has acquired a small island at one end. I thought it was just an exuberance of weed, but found out that the low spreading branches of an evergreen shrub (*Ionicera piliata*) have all rooted into the water and formed a thick mat, on which the pond weed was growing. Having pruned and teased them apart, there are now several large new shrubs that will fill in the gaps along that edge and provide extra shelter and protection for the inhabitants. This plant is described as drought tolerant ground cover, but it was growing (at least part of it) quite happily in the water, obviously doing very well on the abundance of nutrients. The replanted pieces will now have to work a bit harder at getting their requirements from the soil, at least until their own branches re-enter the water and this is something which I will encourage in order to form a canopy for the frogs to hide under. Water covered by overhanging vegetation also remains free of ice when the rest of the pond is frozen, benefiting the birds as well in winter.

Spring At Last

I think of the primrose as the definitive flower of spring but I have one that has been flowering continuously since November, and has survived through all the ice, snow and slush. This brave little plant deserves the best flower bed in the garden, but as it is growing in a tiny crack in the path, it is impossible to move it to a safer place. It obviously benefits from having its roots under the paving where the soil never dries out. It is spreading by seed though and as long as I look before I pull when weeding, I can look forward to seeing more of these little treasures popping up around the garden. (821 words)