

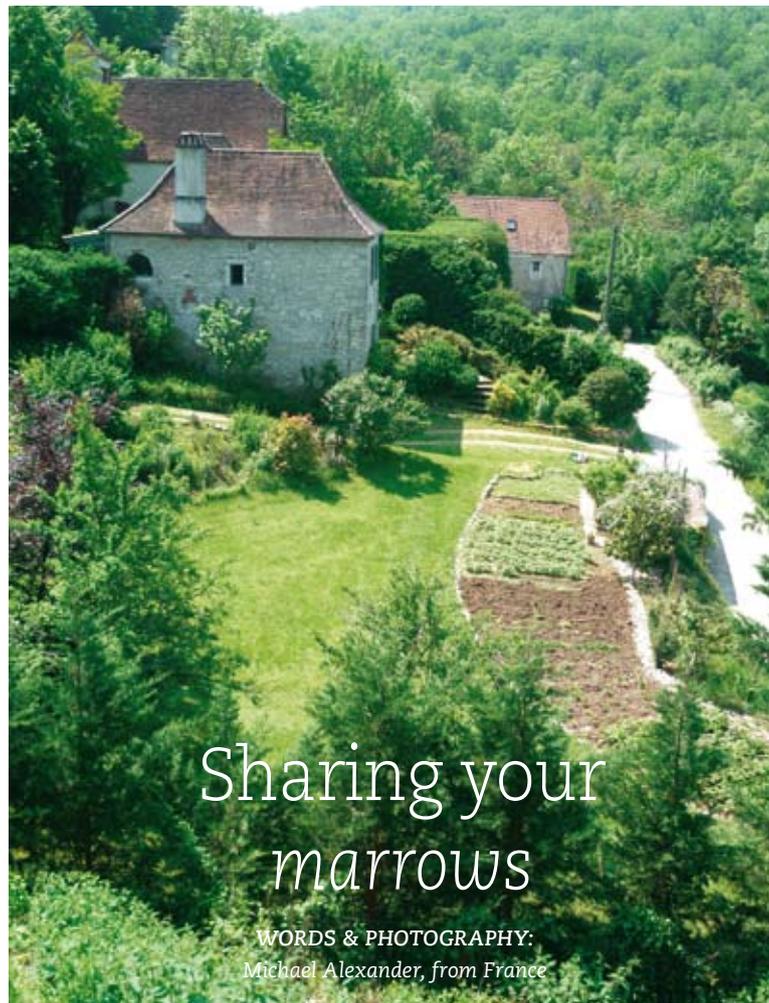
back porch chat

The differences between running a gardening business in rural France and South Africa are many. Let us ignore for a moment the language difficulties, the freezing winters and sweltering summers and the fact that the locals insist on driving on the wrong side of the road. The main enterprise here is definitely agriculture and I would hazard a guess that few, if any, of those farming have travelled far and even fewer abroad. Not that travelling is necessarily indicative of gardening experience, but it does increase your exposure to other gardening methods.

There is a large orchard on one estate on which I work. Here, I like to get my apple and pear trees pruned quite soon after Christmas as this is a quiet time. On the first occasion I did this I was no sooner secure in a tree, snipping away, than a tut-tutting farmer told me how it was too soon and I would lose the whole crop.

It is a similar thing when planting ornamental plants. The locals are highly reluctant to plant any tender plants before the famous *Saints de glace*, which ends on 14 May and is a tradition that has its roots in medieval times. I find this gives me too short a growing season so I get things into the ground a few weeks earlier. It is true that there is a risk I may lose plants to a late frost, but I have got away with it up until now. You can be sure, though, that the first time I suffer losses there will be a delighted chorus of people saying, "I told you so. Our great granny always said to wait for the Saints."

My successes gambling with the frost have not gone unnoticed entirely. In a tiny village not far from here, I maintain a small courtyard garden that also has an exterior section where I garden on the road right in the town square. Here there is no hiding what I do or when I do it, so I was not surprised when the locals started lining up with gloomy predictions



Sharing your marrows

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY:
Michael Alexander, from France

as to my garden's future. When the summer came and a colourful effect was achieved, there was a definite air of disappointment, not so much at my success but at the Saints' failure to punish the impudent foreigner.

Although the farmers might not take their ornamental gardening too seriously, the vegetable garden or potager is a different matter altogether. Toward late summer there is always a surplus of produce and people frequently arrive at social gatherings with a bag of tomatoes or a basket of fruit to give away. On one occasion, when I had so many giant marrows I was afraid I would turn green if I ate any more, I tucked one under my arm and stepped outside into my narrow street meaning to give it to my neighbour. He must have found himself in a similar predicament because at the same moment he stepped from his adjoining house, also armed with

a giant marrow. We could hardly swap marrows so we both sheepishly nodded to one another and then headed off in separate directions trying to look as though that had been our intention all along. We were both then forced to prowl the town looking for some other poor individual onto whom we could offload our excess produce. Vegetable gardening anywhere tends to produce these feast or famine scenarios, but the sharing aspect here makes it somehow more worthwhile. 🐦

