

A Year at Kew

The garden guru in horticultural paradise.

I'm leaving, in fact by the time this goes to print I will be settled into my new digs or as the British say 'flat' in Brighton, England. No I have not escaped Canada completely, only for a year. This I consider to be my mid-life crisis and not being able to afford a sports car I am off doing what all middle aged college faculty do; I am on sabbatical.



The very word sabbatical is interesting and not being sure what it meant I turned to Mister Oxford (being British I have to use Oxford as opposed to Webster) for an explanation. Realizing that my edition of Oxford is a little out of date (1934) it tells me that a sabbatical is "the seventh year in which Israelites were to cease tilling and release debtors and Israelite slaves". Since I am not an Israelite and slavery was abolished many years ago there are only two options left to me. However I did offer my dog his freedom. He preferred going to the resort however where he has two home cooked meals a warm bed and rides in the golf cart. Thus the two remaining items according to Oxford's definition of a sabbatical are the debts and rest. Since I owe money, I now ask my creditors for forgiveness, I wonder if the bank will pay the mortgage in my absence; I doubt the bank is as understanding as the Israelites.

The only option left open to me then is rest (the cease tilling part which is quite appropriate for a horticulturist), remember the word rest? Fanshawe College allows a select number of faculty after a tenure of nine years to take a professional leave at partial salary; hence the term sabbatical. Who changed the week into nine days I don't know but alas that is how modern society works.



My year of 'rest' will see me on the other side of the blackboard so to speak as I return to the classroom as a student. It is a little known fact that the worst students are teachers. We quiver at the thought of tests and assignments; term papers and exams cause anxiety attacks and we rebel at 8:00am lectures (especially when we feel we can do a much better job).

That said, I will spend the year completing an MSc in Plant Conservation (seed banking) and a foundation year for a PhD. Hence the term sabbatical and rest again. However, there is that old cliché 'a change is as good as a rest' and my change will be quite dramatic. Going from teacher to student will present a huge challenge. I have new admiration and respect for those 'mature students' in my own classroom who return to college with such enthusiasm and dedication.



The big change will be however where I am resting, not England specifically since I was born and raised there but the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew and Wakehurst. If you're a horticulturist worth your salt you know about Kew and if you're the passionate dedicated plant nut you've, like me, put a proviso in your will that your ashes will be scattered in the Rhododendron plantings (quite illegal I'm sure so it must be done covertly). Kew is the centre of the universe for plants and plants people, it is for a horticulturist what a trip to the moon is for an astronaut. Thus even though I will be back at school working hard I will in fact be resting.

I promised my editor Jill Worthington whom I call the comma remover (she is trying to break me of my bad habit of using too many commas) that I would give periodic updates of the English gardening scene and the trials and tribulations of "being on the other side of the blackboard". So, look forward to more drivel from the Garden Guru on the other side of the pond.

Michael Pascoe NDP, ODH., CLT., MSc

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