

'My gardener has persuaded me to part with vast sums – so charmingly I never really noticed'

Heidie's back. It must be spring. Heidie the heid gardener (pronounced heedie and heed, as in the Scots "heid", head, meaning boss) has been a bit slow to get going this year – the weather has rather knocked the stuffing out of those who know their *Pyracantha* 'Saphyr Rouge' from their *Cornus kousa* 'Satomi'.

But the sun's been spotted in the frozen north, and Heidie messaged me this week to say she's made it as far as the potting shed, where she's nurturing cuttings from last year and getting the seeds in order. Every year she works her magic and brings me unassuming little smidgens of green in tiny pots, which by high summer have turned the patio into a kind of riotous florist's shop.

She's a most fantastic persuader and quiet enforcer. Plants for her are like children. In the summertime, at shops and petrol stations displaying wilting annuals, she goes inside and chames the staff into watering. She adopts other people's poorly and unwanted plants and nurses them back to life. Before she retired, she ran a highly acclaimed residential school for autistic children, and I can see why she was so good.

Over the past few years she's persuaded me, so charmingly I never really noticed, to part with vast sums for giant pots, bags of compost and Miracle-Gro. She persuaded Dave, never the greatest finisher of tasks, to complete a dry stone wall to create a raised flowerbed, where the hellebores – my new vocabulary – are doing their best to show off flowers the colour of exquisite mother-of-the-bride outfits.

Alongside the pots and the raised bed I can wheel my chair and peer and smell and touch. Last year, she even got me at the garden table, potting on tiny cuttings from thimble-sized containers, as if I were back doing hand therapy. Right now some of the urns are vivid with crocuses, miracles from the cold soil while the snow still lies in the field rows, and other pots show the promise of wary daffodils. In my wooden herb bed, in the shelter of the house, the chives are 2in high. The rose bushes – well, some may not survive the deer. Heidie will be so sad when she sees them.

The simple magic wielded by building



a wooden box and filling it with soil is intoxicating. You lift up plants to the height at which it's easy for the less-abled to access them, and in doing so offer something hugely benign and therapeutic. Gardening gives solace. When people have limited mobility, be they crocked or frail or elderly, they are forced to co-exist with the stillness around them – and there is no more life-affirming way to fill that stillness than watching plants grow.

In fact, gardening's just mindfulness with all the cobblers removed. Cures all ills. Causes no harm. Creates quiet joy and eternal hope. (And the odd disappointment, granted; my lupins have never yet outgrown the rabbits.) Stimulates physical health; rescues poor mental health. Vitamin N for nature. Gardeners as a result are a bit like musicians – in my experience you hardly ever meet a nasty one.

What's particularly sweet is that there are Heidies everywhere: kind, quiet people with green fingers who want to give the pleasure of plants to those who can't access them.

I'm lucky enough to have Heidie, but for those who don't there's the Gardening for

Disabled Trust, a voluntary organisation based in Kent dedicated to helping people get back into their gardens. In 2018, 50 years on from the original hippy era, they're still giving away flower power. The charity awards little grants all over the UK – small gestures whose benefits far outweigh their capital worth. Paving slabs and a raised flowerbed for someone with MS; gravel replaced with artificial grass to allow a wheelchair user back into the fresh air; nonslip steps and handrails to let a devoted gardener into her garden after a stroke; a shed for an elderly person unable to walk far. A raised bed and gravel for a man with an amputation to put his pot plants on. Diddy stuff, but life-changing.

Post-Oxfam, I get asked which charities to support. Well, here's one. A tenner buys a long-handled weeding fork; £50 buys a raised planting table; £100 makes a garden accessible again. It's spring. Buy some Dr Green for someone who needs her. ■

gardeningfordisabledtrust.org.uk. Melanie Reid is tetraplegic after breaking her neck and back in a riding accident in April 2010