

West Countryman's Diary



With **LES DAVIES MBE**

AS I write this month's edition, the frost is still on the roof, but the sun is shining. Only in the last couple of days have I felt the first cold of winter, and realised that I can no longer wander around in just my shirt sleeves.

My weather memory is always very short and the days of wet weather have been kindly removed from the memory bank. In

its place will be this cold frosty morning, when a steaming mug of tea makes the perfect companion for two slices of toast (with plenty of butter) two free range eggs and two rashers of smoked bacon.

I have to resist the temptation to continue the line of English breakfast items purely because of time, but a 'set up' meal like this is a good investment if you intend to get out and about on winter days. Exercise will burn off any excess calories and there is both protein and carbohydrate content to keep me going, possibly even up until mid-morning!

Food is the first essential in staying warm through the winter months, especially if you are going to be outside working or enjoying the countryside. There is a lot of discussion about diet in our modern lives. It's true that fewer people do physical work these days, but fat is a fuel that we need, providing there isn't too much of it.

The wildlife will have been building up body reserves through the autumn period in preparation for an expected leaner winter. The trees held onto their leaves so much longer this time, drawing down as much food as they possibly could and there are lots of berries on the bushes, much to the delight of the birds. No, there won't be any winter weather predictions from me!

My orchard work really gets underway in January, but begins in December with the trip to Cornwall. Trenderway Farm is near the tiny fishing village of Polperro and just down the road from Looe. Their 2,000 young trees start the work that will dominate my life for the next couple of months – pruning. The trees here are still manageable with secateurs and saw.

Formative pruning to get the right branch structure has in the main been replaced by branch removal in order to keep an open tree structure and prevent overcrowding. Later in the season the secateurs will be replaced by the power pruners and air saw, as bigger trees are dealt with. This year I will not be carrying out any restoration work in Devon.

Although I will NOT miss the early starts and late finishes during those last three years, I will miss being in the old orchard at Worth Farm and the feeling of a job well done at the end of each day. There are other orchards that still need my attention and even though pruning is a relatively repetitive job, I thoroughly enjoy my work.

For those of you who would like to have a go at your own apple tree here are a few 'pointers'. Firstly only prune apples and pears in the winter months; stone fruit such as cherry and plum need to be cut when there is still some growth in the tree that will aid the healing. These trees are prone to a disease called 'silver leaf' that can destroy the tree. Its method of entry is through tree wounds and there is a lesser risk if they are pruned when sap is still moving. I have found that September is



a good month.

So let's stay with the apples and pears: firstly remove any dead wood from your tree, then turn your attention to broken, damaged or diseased branches. Don't remove any more than 25% of living wood from the tree in any one year. If you still have room in your 25%, tackle crossing, rubbing and very strong upright branches that threaten to take over the tree. Finally (if there is still room in your 25%) you can add low branches that cause you problems when you are cutting the grass. No need to paint the wounds, just don't cut them too close to the main branch or tree trunk.

As for the tools you are going to need, they aren't complicated. As always, you get what you pay for and cheap tools are not an investment, so buy the best that you can afford. Forget the chainsaw as I doubt that many will be dealing with lots of trees. Buy a good quality hand pruning saw with hardened teeth. These can't be sharpened, but hold their edge for a long time, and cut on the pull stroke with a curved blade that helps hold them into the cut.

Always put an undercut below the branch to prevent the wood tearing, and reduce branch weight by cutting back in stages. Secateurs can cost a lot of money, but always go for the by-pass type. These act like scissors and with a sharp blade cause less damage to the branch. Don't attempt to cut anything greater than the thickness of your finger with these and be careful because they can cut through fingers as well! If you need any more advice visit my website westcountryman.co.uk.

With the closure of Glastonbury's Somerset Rural Life Museum for a couple of years, there will be no wassail in the orchard this time. I shall watch with interest the effect that this lack of encouragement will have upon the crop next year. I have however been taking a look at what might be happening through the amount of fruit bud showing in the local orchards. Initial inspections show 'potential', but it will depend upon the blossom season and the willingness of the pollinating insects to get out and do the job.

Again like the weather forecasting, no firm predictions from me. In political speak: "I'll give you a definite maybe some time within the next few months."

This month I've gone back to a photo taken in the orchard at Worth Farm near Cullompton during January 2013. The air lines are running out from the compressor on the back of my old Bucher Alpine tractor (which still waits patiently for me to re-fit the gear box after gear failure). The weather was dry and all was well with the land. I hope it stays that way this year – I hope that someone has pulled out the plug, so the water can drain off the Levels this year.

You can always contact me through my website: Westcountryman.co.uk