

The Greenhouse: a modern fairy tale

Once upon a time, children, in a land far, far away, there was a beautiful garden where all the plants and insects and birds and other creatures lived happily together in perfect harmony.

The garden belonged to a couple who were very fond of gardening. They loved it so much and they grew so many plants that they needed a new greenhouse. They were growing such a lot of little seedlings that all their greenhouses were full. But the local Greenhouse Building Company (GBC) that had built their other greenhouses couldn't build any more. So the couple googled "greenhouse suppliers" on the internet, and discovered the Greenhouse Funding Agency (GFA), based in London.

To their delight the GFA offered to build them a new greenhouse for nothing, under the new Free Greenhouses scheme offered by the Horticultural Management Group (HMG). But the GFA told the couple they had better hurry, because HMG's 5-year AGM was due soon and the shareholders were starting to ask where all their money had been going. So the couple quickly agreed, and a GFA man came to look at their beautiful garden and decide where the free greenhouse should go.

The GFA man walked around the garden with his clipboard, and he found a rather small plot in a very quiet corner. It was only just big enough. The greenhouse came in partly assembled sections, all ready to build. He was just about to start when the couple returned from a shopping trip to Waitrose.

"You can't put it there," said the wife. "Those are very expensive, exotic plants, which might not survive with a new greenhouse so close to them. Find somewhere else."

So the GFA man took another walk around the beautiful garden with his clipboard and he found somewhere else. It was in just the right spot, and this time there was plenty of room. He went back and told the couple, who agreed it looked perfect. It was in a part of the garden they didn't use much, and the only thing already there was an old shed which needed replacing.

The GFA man had just rolled up his sleeves to start work again, when the husband's elderly mother came out of the house.

"You can't put it there!" she cried. "That lawn's the part of the garden I love best. It's so peaceful. I sit there beside the shed all day and watch my dog playing in the sunshine. I'll save up and buy a new shed, if that's what's bothering you. Find somewhere else."

So the GFA man took another walk around the beautiful garden with his clipboard to find somewhere else. But he had learned from his previous mistakes; this time he took the whole family with him. He was pleased to see that they had as much trouble finding a place for the new greenhouse as he did. They were all getting nowhere, when suddenly Warren the dog spoke up.

No one was the least bit surprised, children, because after all this is a fairy story.

Warren was not a large dog, but he had a loud, sharp bark and big, shiny teeth, and a lot of the other creatures who lived happily together in the beautiful garden in perfect harmony were afraid of him. He had spent so long playing by the shed in the sunshine that he was friends with all the elves and fairies who lived there. They had taught him to speak.

“Put it there!” he barked. “Put it down there. It’s all untidy. Nothing grows there.”

They all went down the hill to where Warren was pointing.

“You can’t put it there!” cried the wife. “That’s not untidy, it’s my carefully managed wildlife area. And you’ll damage my wildflower meadow. Besides, it’s much too close to the other greenhouses, and if you think I’m carrying all my seedlings up and down this hill you can think again. Find somewhere else!”

As they all toiled back up the hill, they agreed that perhaps she had a point. But where could the new greenhouse go? Suddenly Warren the dog spoke up a second time.

“Put it there!” he barked. “Put it over there!”

He was pointing at a heavily cultivated part of the garden. All the existing plants would be lost, or have to be moved, if the new greenhouse went there. This time the husband put his foot down.

“You can’t possibly put it there!” he shouted. “I know it’s in quite a good spot but think of the damage it will do! There are lots of seedlings there already! This is the heart of the garden! Find somewhere else!”

By now the GFA man was fed up with the lot of them. He also knew that one of them (he wasn’t sure who) had called up HMG, so now there was someone in HMG Head Office breathing down his neck and asking where the greenhouse would be built. So he stood aside with his arms folded around his clipboard and said nothing as they surveyed the beautiful garden.

It was a lot less beautiful now, children, because they had been trampling around for hours all over it. Flowers had been crushed, branches were broken. And mysterious spells, written in strange elvish tongues, had appeared on trees and gateposts everywhere, casting an evil enchantment over the creatures who had always lived happily together in perfect harmony, and forcing them to fight each other. Warren dashed among them, snarling and snapping and egging them on. In the west, dark storm clouds were gathering.

But the old lady cared nothing for this increasingly desolate scene. She still feared that her peaceful lawn was under threat, even though the new greenhouse would only occupy a teeny, tiny part of it. And what would happen to the shed she loved so much? She stared around the garden, seeking another alternative. Suddenly Warren spoke up a third time.

“Put it there!” he barked. “Put it over there!”

He was pointing over the hedge.

The wife peeped through a gap in the ancient hedgerow. Beyond it, she could see their neighbours’ garden. A green and unspoiled landscape stretched away into the misty distance. She couldn’t help comparing it to her precious little wildflower meadow. “How lucky they are to have such a lovely big garden,” she thought to herself. “Oh, if only we hadn’t gone in for so much hard landscaping! We wouldn’t be in this mess now.”

Her husband, meanwhile, was peering over the hedge. “I’m not so sure,” he said doubtfully. “That’s our neighbours’ garden. We don’t see much of them but we’ve always been on very good terms. They let us walk in their garden whenever we want.”

“Nonsense!” said his mother. “I know the gardener who grows turnips in that part of their garden. I’ve already asked him and he’ll give us a corner of his plot. They’ve got loads of room - their garden’s much bigger than my poor little lawn. They won’t miss a teeny, tiny part of it. Put it over there!”

Everyone had forgotten about the local greenhouse building company, the GBC. The manager had been listening quietly to all their arguments. Suddenly she spoke up, and made them jump.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” she asked. “My company doesn’t get on with your neighbours. They say we’re always trying to move that hedge and steal a bit of their garden. If they find out about this, they’ll think we’re behind it, and they won’t like it at all.”

“Rubbish!” shouted the old lady. “I know you, you just want to get your hands on my shed and knock it down and put nasty cheap polytunnels all over my lawn. Well I’m not having it. We’ll wait until it’s nearly dark, then we can sneak into the neighbours’ garden through that gap in the hedge and build the new greenhouse before they notice. Once it’s built it’ll be far too late for them to complain!”

Warren barked loudly in agreement, and bared his teeth.

To be continued