Andy Shepherd

The Boy Who Grew Dragons

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Piccadilly
PRESS

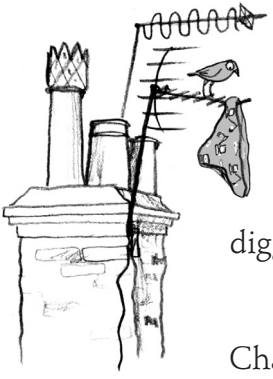
When people ask me what we grow in Grandad's garden, I think they expect the answer to be cucumbers, tomatoes or runner beans. I don't think they expect the answer to be dragons. But there it is. We grow dragons. And I can tell you this – they're *a lot* more trouble than cucumbers.

Things cucumbers do *not* do:

Poo in your dad's porridge

Singe your eyebrows

Make a really cosy nest by shredding *all* your mum's alphabetically ordered recipes

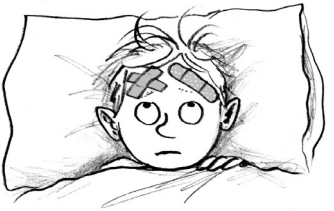


Leave your pants (the embarrassing ones covered in diggers) hanging from the TV aerial

Chase your cat

Drop cabbages on your cat

Try and ride your cat like
a rodeo bull



Wake you up at 4 a.m.
every morning by digging
razor-sharp claws into
your forehead

Set light to your toothbrush
WHILE IT'S STILL IN
YOUR MOUTH.

Of course, they also don't have scales that ripple and shimmer like sunlight on the sea. Or have glittering eyes that can see right into the heart of you. Or settle on your shoulder, with their tail curled round, warming your neck, and their hot breath tickling your ear.

Nope, none of these are things you can expect from a cucumber. Well, not any cucumbers I've ever come

across. Maybe a mutant radioactive space cucumber, but not your average garden variety. But dragons? Well, they're a whole other story.

So, who wants to grow dragons? Daft question, yeah? I mean seriously, who in their right mind would say no? Not me, that's for sure. And not you by the looks of it.

But *if* you want to grow dragons, you need to know what you're getting into. Sure they're fiery, fantastical and dazzling, but dragons are not all fun and games. Not by a long shot. And it's not just the fire and the flammable poo I'm talking about. Oh no!

Which is why, my dragon-seeking desperados, I'm writing all this down, so at least you can go into it with your eyes open. Because, believe me, you'll need them to stay wide, *wide* open.

1
Battle of the Bongle

It started about a year ago. And it was all Grandad's fault. Well, his and the jam tart's. I was just licking the last of it off my fingers when he said:

'We should grow our own, Chipstick.'

'Jam tarts?' I asked.

'Raspberries.' He grinned. 'Then we could make our own jam for Nana's tarts. We could mix them up too. Strawberry and blackberry, gooseberry and raspberry – just think of the possibilities. *Deeeelicious!*'

It did make a pretty good picture in my head, a vast

plate-sized jam tart with different-coloured sections like a multi-topping pizza.

'And more too,' Grandad went on, before I could dive further into the jammy dream. 'Radishes, beans, onions, cauliflowers . . . You name it, we could grow it.'

Suddenly I wasn't so sure it was a great idea. Strawberry and cauliflower jam? Ew! Anyway I had enough fruit and vegetables to deal with, what with Mum shovelling in my five a day. I mean she even sneaked dried fruit into perfectly good flapjacks – as if I wouldn't notice!

But Grandad wasn't one to let go of an idea once it had fluttered down and settled. So on Saturday morning there we were at the end of his garden, up to our ears in mud, digging away at what looked to me like a monster jungle. In fact, I was beginning to realise why Mum had offered me provisions for my 'trip to the Amazon'. Without the nettles and brambles, my grandparents' garden was probably half

as big again and ran all the way down to the fields beyond.

'I've been wanting to get stuck into this since we moved in,' Grandad told me, pausing to catch his breath, 'but what with one thing and another, I just don't seem to have found the time.'

I stopped digging and scraped my spade across a clod of mud. I know *you* have no idea what he was talking about, but I did. I knew *exactly* what he meant by 'one thing and another'.

'Sorry,' I muttered. Because I really was.

He rested his arms on his spade and leaned towards me. Now, there's something you should know about my grandad – he twinkles. That might sound weird, but he does. There's a phrase 'to have a twinkle in your eye', which means to be bright or sparkling with delight. Well, my grandad has the biggest twinkle of anyone I've ever known. And right then he was shining that twinkle down on me, till I felt its warmth flooding every bit of my body. It was like I'd sat

down in front of the toastiest marshmallow-toasting fire.

'Now then, Chipstick, how many times have I told you? What's the deal with families?'

I smiled. 'They stick together.'

'Exactly,' he grinned. 'Not unlike jam tarts. Now get digging!'

So I did. The worst thing to dig up was this stuff Grandad called bongleweed – it wound itself around everything, clinging to roots, shoots and shrubs for dear life.

Soon enough I was in an almighty tug of war: boy against plant. And for a moment there it really looked as if the evil Bongle-Plant Overlord might win.

But I dug. And scraped. And pulled. And heaved. Until all that was left was a patch of earth . . . and the strangest-looking plant I'd ever seen.

It was taller than me, and my blistered hands would have only made it halfway around the trunk. Except it was hard to see the trunk, because of all these long green cactus arms that draped down.

'It looks like a giant upturned mophead,' declared Grandad. 'But you know – green and spiky and knobbly too.'

Bizarrely, he wasn't far wrong.

Sprouting from some of the cactus arms were vivid yellow and orange tendrils, like bursts of flames. And on each one of those nestled a fruit. Some were large and red and looked fit to burst, others were small and green and looked new. But all of them had weird spiky pineapple-like leaves. They were so unlike anything I'd ever seen in our fruit bowl at home I found myself reaching up to touch them.

I noticed one of the smaller fruits had already turned red, but the tendril it was attached to was being pushed down by the weight of a few larger fruits hanging above. I gently lifted it and moved it to one

side to give it some space. And as I did, I saw something even weirder.

'Hey, Grandad,' I called, 'it's glowing. Like those fireflies, do you remember? Dad said it was bioloonynonsense or something. He said some jellyfish do it too.'

'Bioluminescence,' Grandad corrected. He peered at the red fruit and rubbed a finger across it. 'Reckon it's just mould,' he said. 'Come on, Chipstick. I'm famished.'

'But what is it?' I asked.

Grandad wrinkled his nose. 'No idea, but we can pull it out tomorrow.'

I looked at the red spiky fruit that was glowing in my hands. And whether I pulled it a little too hard, or it just chose that moment to fully ripen, one way or another, the fruit dropped from the vivid tendril. Looking at it in my palm, somehow

I didn't feel like throwing it into the bonfire pile. So I tucked it under my arm before following Grandad inside.

Later, when I got home, I put the pineapple-y sprouting fruit on my desk and typed 'strange spiky fruit' into the search box on my computer. Pictures popped up and there it was, right next to 'durian' – which smell like poo apparently, so it was dead lucky we didn't find those! No, here it was: size of a mango, red, spiky pineapple-like leaves. Definitely what I had sitting in front of me. I clicked on the picture and read the caption.

Pitaya – 'Dragon Fruit'

Yup!

Now, it's easy for *you*. Because you *know* there's about to be a dragon. But I was clueless back then. I mean if someone gives you a fairy cake, you don't expect Tinker Bell to pop out, do you?

So I didn't jump up and down screaming, 'Whoopee I'm getting a dragon!' I just left it on the desk and went downstairs for tea.

And that probably wasn't the best idea. You know, because of what happened next.