

Alexander Wars

By Richard Barr



It was not as brutal as the Wars of the Roses, or those ferocious battles in the Highlands of Scotland at places like Bannockburn, Prestonpans or Killiecrankie but it was close. Here is my first report on what promises to be a long war.

Instead of the Campbells and the MacDonalds I had to go to war with the Alexanders. Last year was the last straw. They would come into the garden and spread themselves all over the place without a by your leave. Shouting at them did not help, and the police were not interested.

They just took up residence. Not only that but they then set about smothering our yearly symphony of colour: back in the 1940s, previous owners of the house planted a glorious sequence of colour and texture. It starts early in the year with a carpet of snowdrops. As

they fade away, the daffodils, which until then had been waiting as bulging green shoots, burst open in a blaze of yellow. There is then a further paler shade of yellow – clusters of primroses. This concert of colour then reaches its finale at the end of April when the bluebells open, spreading a penetrating deep blue deep into the woods.

This year all of this was threatened with ruin by the Alexanders. They were relentless in their invasion of our land. We were forced to use our own resources. Waving a big stick at them only seemed to encourage them. They only spread further and dug in deeper.

The only consolation for us was that the Alexanders are not human and, in theory at least we should be able to outwit them.

Those who know more about plants than I do will already be aware that Alexanders were introduced into this country by the Romans.

Erudite readers of Harrowing Times will know them by their Latin name of *Smyrniolusastrum*. They were brought over here for food and apparently taste somewhere between celery and parsley. I never liked celery, and a sprig of parsley is plenty for me, so I have no use for this

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invading army of plants that grow almost as tall as I am.

It is a difficult war. It would be tempting to drive our macho monster ride-on mower over the enemy and smash them into pulp, but, as the Alexanders well know, if I were to do that, then it would decimate the waiting flowers beneath. I therefore proposed a cunning plan. I dragged into service our 15 year old side bar cutter. I don't know if you have come across these lethal weapons, but they rather resemble the old Allen scythe (60+ year olds will remember) that went out of production in the 70s. It has a reciprocating blade in front and it will decimate anything in its path (stinging nettles, small trees, mothers in law – you name it). And by pushing down on the back, you can lift the blades at the

front. Holding the blades high I was able to cut the heads off the Alexanders, leaving angry stalks but at least allowing the delicate plants beneath to get some daylight – and, more importantly - to flourish and flower.

To start with, it worked well. Swathes of decapitated Alexanders suffered a horrible and painful death. I felt smug. I was winning. But I reckoned without the deviousness of the Alexanders. They had contrived to conceal a lump of iron in the ground. When the mower came into contact with it, there was an ominous grinding noise, followed by pieces of metal shooting in all directions and then there was silence.



It took only a brief look at the cutter bar for me to face the grim reality that the Alexanders had again outwitted me – and, for the moment, there was going to be no resumption of the war anytime soon.

As I wheeled away the wounded mower I am sure I heard a loud cheer from some of the still standing crowd of Alexanders.

It is going to cost £150 just for the parts to repair the mower - but....

Alexanders, I was alive (just) when Churchill was prime minister and I warn you that, like Churchill, I shall never surrender. You have been warned. Besides, at the end of the bluebell season I am going to give you such a thrashing that you will wish you had never set foot (or root) on our land.