

# THE POTTING SHED GAZETTE

NEWSLETTER FOR SCC ALLOTMENT TENANTS

## A Little Something Extra

Along with the invoices November marks the launch of this quarterly newsletter reflecting the views and supporting the interests of Southampton's allotment tenants. The Potting Shed Gazette is different from previous newsletters published by SCC Open Spaces because it is written solely by a plot holders for the benefit of other plot holders and it is hoped future editions will include contributions from its readership .

The community of allotment keepers is both rich and varied. This was demonstrated in the now concluded series of meetings which agreed the future funding of our pastime. These discussions were lively affairs driven by our common desire to share both of our knowledge and experiences. It was this enthusiasm that provided the inspiration for this publication which will provide a forum, accessible to all, so the wider discussion of 'Allotment Life' can continue.

The aim of this newsletter is to provide a mix of topical discussion and useful tips covering all aspects of our activities. You are all invited to submit comment, ideas and photographs on any theme that is important to you and join me in bringing you 'The News'. So until the next issue, forget the invoices, put your feet up and enjoy a little something extra.

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and write **FAO. Clay Potts, (Editor) in the subject line.**

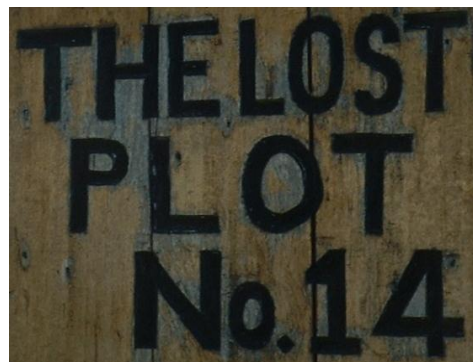
## Your Site Needs You!

While SCC supports the cost of printing this publication it cannot fund the cost of postage. Instead the bulk distribution to a single point/person on each site will be provided. Are you able to help with this? Whether you wish to undertake the duties of distribution among your fellow plot holders or simply offer to provide a weather-proof collection point please contact us.

## Say It With Numbers.



We have all been reminded about the need to number our plots to assist prospective tenants and SCC work teams but it is also an opportunity for us to say something about ourselves. In the example above it's pretty clear the plot holder keeps chickens and there is little doubt who bosses the arrangement.



The inspiration behind this sign is less clear. Perhaps it reflects the plot holders desire to escape the trials of their workaday world or maybe it simply tells of their frustration in trying to locate the plot it when first viewing it as a prospective tenant.

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This example suggests the owner views their plot as the chance to create their own private sanctuary. A feeling I'm sure a great many of us share.

What does your sign say about you? Simple understated brass letters screwed to the side of your shed or a wild slash of paint covering the wall of it announcing to the world 'I am here.'

If you haven't already numbered your plot or perhaps you are thinking of renewing your efforts why not take the opportunity to say something about yourself and share it with us all.



## Let Nature Take the Strain

November is the month we welcome new tenants as they take on plots which have been returned to SCC and some of these plots may have been neglected over the preceding season. It can be a daunting challenge particularly for those who are taking up gardening for the first time but a little more planning and a bit less effort can yield great rewards.

The best first step any of us can take is to provide ourselves with a compost bin. Shop bought moulded plastic bins are relatively affordable but perhaps an even better result can be obtained using readily available waste or spare materials that cost nothing.



A multi-chambered bin allowing for regular turning of the compost.



A moulded plastic bin and an allotment classic, corrugated iron. Note all three bins are covered to maintain heat.

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Having provided ourselves a bin the first question is what can go into it and the answer is pretty much everything. Composting should not be seen as either one of the dark arts or complicated science project. It's true the biological process of decomposition is complicated but we do not have to understand it fully to use it successfully. Good compost is provided simply by a balanced mix of waste types and the retention of heat within the bin. In addition the bin should be in a sunny position, directly onto the soil and away from water courses.

Compost can be made from all organic material however meat, fish, dairy and other processed food waste should not be added as these will attract vermin. Suitable compost material falls into two main groups:

Green (Nitrogen Rich): Grass clippings, soft weeds, comfrey, animal manure (e.g. horse), poultry manure & bedding, vegetable peelings.

Brown (Carbon Rich): Cardboard (Cereal packets, egg boxes, cardboard tubes), tough hedge clippings, woody prunings, newspaper, bracken.

The greens rot quickly (activators) but without browns which rot slowly and add 'body' to the end product the compost will decay into a smelly mess. Greens and browns should be added to the heap in more or less equal amounts which isn't difficult to achieve because that is what most of our plots produce as a by-product of our cultivating them. In adding waste the best results are obtained if it is mixed rather than added in layers. The decomposition is more even and the whole process is quicker.

It is for this reason that tougher woody waste should be chopped into shorter lengths, rough chopping with a spade is usually enough. If you are able to provide yourself with two bins and are able to rotate and turn your heap between them good compost can be achieved in a couple of months. In most cases we won't do this because we simply don't need to. The average allotment compost heap will provide a reasonable to good quality compost over the course of a growing season and will be ready for spring the following year. With uncovered bins there will be materials that haven't completed composting. This doesn't matter, simply set them to one side and when your bin is empty use them to start your next heap.

Don't be afraid to add weeds to your compost, some like nettles & comfrey have very high levels of nutrients but most soft weeds have some benefit e.g. dung weed, chick weed etc. Do not add weeds like docks & bind weed. These can be killed by drying out in the sun, or burnt and the ash added to the heap. A compost heap temperature of 65 C will destroy seeds and this temperature is readily obtained in a well-mixed compost heap. If you are concerned about weed seeds regular hoeing is the answer. Cut the weeds down before the flower buds form. These soft plants can then be either left to dry out on the surface of your plot and feed the soil or they can be raked and collected for your bin.

This is simple composting and will retain valuable nutrients for your plot that would otherwise be lost if you disposed of your waste off-site. It will also save you wheelbarrow miles and reduce the expense of any plant feeds you may currently rely on. If you wish to take it further and improve your results there are many free to access points of reference including on-line, libraries and television.

## **Do & Don'ts: Not just Rules but Sage Advice**

We have all been reminded of the Do's and Don'ts of our tenancies. Some, like the ban on keeping cockerels, ensure we are good neighbours while others protect the environment e.g. no carpets or car tyres. The motivation behind these Don'ts is clear, we are all custodians of the land we work and the responsibility for its future productivity is ours.

The thinking behind other rules is less clear, particularly when we first find ourselves confronted with an overgrown plot and our enthusiasm to make a start is greater than our understanding of the 'art' of gardening. We are told 'Don't strip and tip your topsoil' and yet it seems this is exactly what we need to do to get started. Time for pause and reflection; this rule is there to help.

My first plot was in this condition & since then I have seen new plot-holders adopt the 'strip' approach. Like many of us I offer polite advice where I can and the verges and common areas of our sites breathe a sigh of relief as a consignment of green waste and soil is redirected back to its home plot.

The topsoil is the growing medium; it is what will ultimately fill your dinner plates with fresh produce. Across sites and plots the depth of the topsoil is variable; sometimes there is very little of it. Often this is because an earlier, over-enthusiastic tenant has cut away and disposed of the weed mat and grass and in doing so has removed topsoil that would have been their best route to success.

This approach is labour intensive and wasteful. Verges don't benefit when delicate eco-systems are swamped with tons of soil. The cost of clearance is incurred and that's paid for by us through our rent.

Dinner tables don't benefit as crops struggle on the remaining sub-soil nor do our backs as we rack up unnecessary wheelbarrow miles hauling waste.

We should always retain on our plots everything that grows there the exception of the produce we eat and a limited group of weed like bind weed and docks however even these should not be disposed of while still attached to large clumps of your precious topsoil but instead dried and killed by the sun before being burnt and the ash added to your compost bin.

If you find yourself breaking new ground quite a lot of what grows there will be killed by the coming winter if you simply turn your soil and let the frost get at the roots of the weeds and grasses. You can also easily remove docks and other perennial weeds as you go. If there is a lot of top growth cut it down before you begin digging and add it to your compost bin; dung, weed, chickweed and long grasses all contain valuable nutrients best returned to your soil.

If you do have turf to remove cut it off in strips, removing as little soil as possible. This can be laid in stacks upside down and covered to exclude light. By the beginning of the following season you should have some pretty good compost for your plot. Most importantly take it steady, particularly if you are new to this; there is plenty of time before winter closes in

I wasn't long on my plot before I saw the benefit of the mounds of waste which then polluted the site. Armed with a sieve I reclaimed several cubic yards of decent topsoil from the verges and in the process improved both my plot and the appearance of the site. Look around your own site; can you help yourself and the wider environment.

**And finally** included with this edition is a simple diagram showing the basic principles of crop rotation which we will cover in the next issue along with a look at 'labour-lite' weed control. Now it's over to you. Let us know what you enjoyed and what you'd like to see next