

THE POTTING SHED GAZETTE

NEWSLETTER FOR SCC ALLOTMENT TENANTS

2012: A YEAR THAT OFFERED MORE IN EXPERIENCE THAN IT DID IN SUCCESS

It's been a difficult year for growing vegetables. The more seasoned of us will have shrugged our shoulders, put it down to experience, salvaged what we could and readied ourselves to try again. For those for whom this was the first year we should spare a thought and offer some encouragement; It isn't always this rough.

On Borrowdale Road the longest serving plot-holder's memory goes back to the mid 60's and the good gentleman cannot recall anything quite like the 2012 season. For the benefit of the first timers it might help to know that this gentleman has high hopes for next year.

Poor as the year was there were some successes. For the Editor it was the best ever year for carrots and broad beans while the cabbage crops are also doing remarkably well. On the downside a greenhouse full of tomatoes did not yield a decent salad and better than half of the potatoes were wiped out. The weather was a cruel combination of early drought and cold wet summer.

Most of us have heard scientists reciting their doomsday scenarios over the airways; global warming and the shape of things to come. There is no doubt these predictions are based on sound scientific models; they're certainly supported by lots of pretty charts.

In the short term there isn't much we can do to affect these predictions except re-use and recycle where ever possible to reduce our own environmental impact. With even the best will in the world that isn't going to change things quickly.

What we can do is scour the seed catalogues, hunt out blight resistant potatoes, more resilient (often heritage) varieties of vegetables. What is key is to spread the risk which means planting several different varieties of the same crops. To avoid increasing costs this can be done through seed swapping with your neighbours. Frequently when one variety does poorly another will still thrive. In the Editor's experience there is no universal answer, no perfect variety and even a tried and tested variety

can still fail if the weather gets to perverse.

Something we can improve on is the soil we grow on. Making better use of mulch helps water retention, using bulk organic compost works more humus into the soil and improves drainage. Winter green manure will have the same effect. On the Editor's plots there were noticeable differences in crop production and these directly related to how much manure has been applied. Land that was poorer when first leased now out-performs other areas which have not benefitted as much from improvement.

In the end difficult as the year was been we still have vegetables for our table. If they are not quite what we hoped for their value is higher than we could have anticipated. Across the country food prices are rising as farmers harvest poor, sub-standard crops and the small victories we have realised taste extra sweet because of the efforts they have cost us. So let's all accept the lessons of the year and put it behind us because it's time to get ready for coming season.

PORTRAIT OF AN ELDER STATESMAN

The last few years have seen a resurgence of interest in allotment keeping, reversing the trend of many years when the number of unworked plots gave many sites the air of neglect and disrepair. The influx of new allotment keepers has seen many younger people pick up shovels and on many sites the sounds of happy, laughing children is again a feature of our communities. There are however many Elder Statesman who have worked their land for years. Stepped in lore, experience and hard earned knowledge thier valiant efforts have kept many sites alive through difficult times. The Editor has been fortunate enough to meet many of them and values the time they so generously offer to his requests for advice. Bill Davies of Witts Hill Allotments has similar views and offers the Potting Shed Gazette the following portrait of Dave Harrison of whom he writes in admiration (cont.)



For the last forty-six years Dave has worked hard at attending his allotment plot providing vegetables and flowers for family, friends and close plot

holders. For a lot less years I and other plot-holders have been Dave's close neighbours. We have all gained something from Dave's planting skills and knowledge that is always so freely given and other plot holders have always looked to his plot for guidance on how things should be done.

At seventy-six can still keep his plot looking good and this also includes the upkeep of his pathways. The work is all done manually, his mower being the push type. He will normally work for two hours each morning and will be on his plot early to avoid the heat of the day in the summer time. Dave has a standard size council shed on his plot and interestingly this is never padlocked, not like my own and other plot-holders sheds. His shed door is opened each morning to start the day and will remain wide open until his work is finished. Dave will then close the door, pull the latch over and stick a piece of wood in to prevent the door coming open. As soon as I arrive on my own plot in the morning I can look over to the far end of Dave's plot and know he is about when I see the shed door open. I must add to this that over the years Dave has learned not to padlock his shed only to have it smashed off again when vandals invade the allotment.

There are some who would say that Dave can only do it because he is so fit. This is the very point; Dave is fit and active for his age because he has always eaten his own vegetable and has had the benefit of daily exercise to produce them.

Dave has an easy going nature and will often discuss with me how much better he feels after the mornings weeding and digging. He is also always looking forward to his next year's planting and what he might be growing. This is a focus for his mind and is a lot better than other things he could be thing about.

Bill also offers us a caption for the photograph opposite that it is Dave digging with his brand new stainless steel fork, Bill inherited the old bent twisted one from Dave who understood that he could repair; Bill is without doubt a true son of the make do and mend generation.

The Editor would like to thank Bill for his touching portrait of a man who he so obviously admires and as always offers up the pages of the Gazette to any and all plot holders who have a story to share.

OFFERS TO SCC ALLOTMENT TENANTS

This edition the Potting Shed Gazette is pleased to bring news of three great offers available to SCC plot holders. All three have been offered by tenants who have tried and tested the suppliers detailed and are happy to recommend them to others. The Gazette is happy to publish any other contacts and suppliers that some of you may be using and wish to share. If submitting please be aware that this isn't a classified section and we shall not be considering advertisements form for profit businesses and individuals unless there is a pressing reason to do so, as you will see those listed are not-for-profit or free of charge suppliers. The idea behind this section is to pass on savings and that will remain its guiding principle.

FRUIT TREE OFFER

Southampton's residents are once again being offered the chance to buy bargain price fruit trees to help create a city-wide 'virtual orchard'. The offer includes a selection of apple varieties for only £7.50 each, plum and pear trees at £9.50 each and blackcurrant bushes at £5 each

In the last two years, 200 fruit trees have been distributed by TREEmendous Southampton as part of the bulk buy scheme. The initiative is being run by volunteers from Transition Southampton, a not-for-profit community-led organisation, who buy the fruit trees in bulk and pass on the savings to local people.

Having more fruit trees in Southampton will not only help lower food miles and benefit wildlife, but also provides fresh, tasty and organic fruit right on your doorstep! (Cont. Over)

(Fruit Trees Cont.)

Order details are available online at: www.transitionsouthampton.org and trees will be available for collection at Ropewalk Community Garden in Southampton in February 2013. When you pick up your tree, TREEmendous Southampton volunteers will be available to give advice on how to plant and care for it. For more information, email treemendous@transitionsouthampton.org

Deadline for orders is 31st December 2012, although there is a limit on order numbers, so order early to avoid disappointment.

Transition Southampton is committed to working with local communities, organisations and local government to help develop positive solutions that meet the imminent challenges of fossil fuel scarcity ('Peak Oil') and Climate Change. Above all, Transition Southampton has a positive vision of a resilient and sustainable future beyond the age of abundant fossil fuel energy.

(Thanks to Polly Whyte)

MANURE AVAILABLE TO SCC ALLOTMENT TENANTS

Horse manure is a fantastic source of essential nutrients, it improves moisture retention and will break up heavy clay soils. Unfortunately although manure is readily available for collection all around Southampton it is heavy and useful quantities can often require many trips and often involve back-breaking labour.

The Editor of the Potting Shed Gazette has for several years relied on a single source in North Baddesley and is pleased to announce that his supplier is now able to offer delivery to allotment sites in Southampton for the cost of transport. The manure supplied is fresh and will be delivered on a 1.5 tonne trailer. The charge for delivery starts at £20.00 although this may increase according to time and distance travelled. The supplier will advise on contact. The contact number is 023 8073 0463 and your call will be returned by either Wendy or Brian.

Please be aware that the manure will be delivered on a Land Rover towed trailer, overall length approximately 25 ft (8.0 metres) and so access maybe a concern on some sites. The manure will be delivered subject to the following conditions.

- The manure is fresh (well-rotted is not available)
- Delivery is subject to availability
- Manure is not available for collection
- Part loads and multi-drop orders will not be taken
Supplier will off-load either into compost bins or onto tarpaulin/sheeting from hard-stand only. The vehicle will not leave the road and the manure will not be carted onto a plot.
- Delivery is subject to cash on delivery so if place an order you must attend your plot to receive it.

It is worth noting that as the manure is green considerable shrinkage will occur as it rots however as it is not mixed with either straw or woodchips a full load is very good value for money. Please also be aware that although the supplier will produce many tonnes of manure over the winter months the supply is finite and orders will be processed in order of receipt. Finally as the supplier runs a busy and successful riding school you can expect a delay between requesting a load and receiving it so please be patient.

HEAVY DUTY MULCH SHEETS FREE TO COLLECTOR

Jerry Stampfer was looking for polythene sheeting and placed a want Ad. He was contacted by a local company who provided free of charge a swimming pool cover. It is very heavy, very dark plastic and is an ideal mulch sheet. The one Jerry obtained was 5m (15ft) by 15m (45ft) and loading it was a two man job. It also required a decent sized car. They supplied for collection and Jerry has wisely with-held the companies address because he is uncertain of availability and offers instead a contact e-mail so the company concerned can control who calls to collect and when. The size is not guaranteed as swimming pools do vary of course. Sue Ashdown has also had the opportunity to examine the product and has pronounced them of high quality and environmentally sustainable.

To take advantage of this please contact Paul bigbadborris09@yahoo.co.uk for further details. Supply is expected to be limited and will no doubt be on a first come first served basis.

ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY PEST CONTROL

In response to a reader request for the issue of pesticides to be covered. The Gazette is pleased to publish a few hints and tips to get us all more involved in chemical free growing.

Environmentally friendly pest control is letting nature take care of itself. All the vegetables and fruit we grow have a common origin in plants which have evolved as part of a very robust and self-regulating food-chain. With very little effort we can re-establish a similar system on our plots. We have begun the process with our rows of cabbages, beans etc; laying out a larder drawing in pests from far and wide to feast on the benefits of our labour. What we need to do now is complete the chain and encourage the predators.

There are many attractive ways of doing this, a bird table being the most obvious. It's even better if you can find room to hang a nesting box as growing chicks have voracious appetites. Soon your plot will enjoy the protection of a host of pretty and colourful predators. Another option is to encourage hedgehogs, something the Editor has done successfully. English Nature among other others provides simple plans of a nesting box that can be put together from scrap wood and with a little creativity these can be incorporated in or under your shed. A little more labour intensive is a small pond. Do bear in mind site restrictions if you decide to do this and ensure it is secure. Even the smallest pond can and will attract frogs, newts and toads all of which will gorge themselves on slugs.

Predators can also be attracted by companion planting; the planting together of different crops that enhance each other's growth, beauty or flavour. There are numerous combinations like cucumbers and sunflowers and any decent reference book will list them. Of most interest to us are those plants that attract predators or repel common pests and three are highlighted here picked for their culinary benefits as well as their role in pest control.

The Aniseed plant has a strong smell which masks the scent of brassicas (broccoli, cabbage,

AND FINALLY The editor would like to thank all those who wrote in with articles of suggestions. The Gazette is the richer for the contribution received. The next publication will be in the summer so please forward your suggestions to: sue.ashdown@southampton.gov.uk **FAO. Clay Potts, Editor.**

kale, etc) and deters pests. If it is left to flower it offers a pretty display that attracts predatory insects. the seeds can also be used for cooking.

Coriander is known for helping spinach but it also repels aphids, spider mites, white flies and is a staple herb in most kitchens.

Chives, (all the the allium family) help to deter aphids. They are used to improve the growth and flavour of carrots and tomatoes and of course are staple vegetables and herbs themselves.

Another alternative is physical barrier e.g carrot mesh. This is not a cheap option but good quality mesh comes with a ten year guarantee and will cover its own costs. For cabbage crops the Editor uses scaffold netting which is a far cheaper proposition, it also has the side benefit of providing a micro climate, moderating the effects of the turbulent weather we experience, the partial shade it provides means the ground is less likely to dry out between watering in even the hottest of weather.

Finally there is the manual method. Keep a close eye on your crops and act when warning signs appear. Sow carrots thinly to minimize the effect of carrot fly and dispose of thinning's well away from the crops. At the first sign of holes in the leaves of your cabbage inspect the underside and remove any caterpillars and eggs you find. Leeks suffer from moth and apart from physical barrier there is little that can be done to protect them however if at the first sight of leaf damage you cut the top of the leek off down as low as you can stopping just short of the thicker shaft you will prevent the larvae burrowing down into the leek. Leeks like this treatment and will burst into growth. Leek moth has been particular problem this year and so far the Editor's leeks have been trimmed three times and are currently doing better than most others on site.

In cutting down on chemicals, we keep costs down and improve the flavour of all we grow. Any readers with ideas they wish to share are as ever invited to share their thoughts through these pages