

THE POTTING SHED GAZETTE

NEWSLETTER FOR SCC ALLOTMENT TENANTS

2014: ENDLESS SUMMER

The British are renowned for talking about the weather but in our defence there is quite a lot of it to talk about. This year's discussion would have ranged far wider than comparisons of cloud formations as we emerged dripping wet from an atrocious winter into one of the best and longest summers many of us can remember for a very long time. For once we didn't have to harbour secret envy for those lucky enough to holiday in the sun and our allotments were very pleasant places to be.

It wasn't only weather records that were broken this year and the editor set a new personal milestone in growing a crop of broad-beans over six feet high and loaded with fruit. The almost complete absence of black-fly until much later in the season meant their tops didn't need pinching out, the spring air was still and they grew onwards and upwards untroubled by the wind; I suspect it will be a decade or more before I get to repeat the same feat.

Potato blight was noticeable by its absence, when it did eventually show up in late September it was a half-hearted effort and my out-door tomatoes grew on untroubled into the first week of October. There were other records of a less desirable nature; slugs. Any hopes that my plots being under six inches of water all winter would have drowned them were to prove baseless

and the day my climbing beans emerged from the soil marauding tribes of slugs ate them to the ground. Of course there was a fight back but the slugs had the taste by then and when I did finally coax a crop out the ground the long dry summer had set in and they never really recovered.

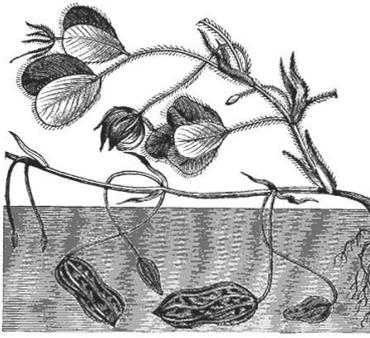
For the editor this was the eighth year as an allotment holder and the variations in our growing seasons continues to both thrill and frustrate. Whether this variation is part of the natural weather cycle or if it is an indication of global warming is a matter for debate, usually conducted clasping hot mugs of teas in the slower winter months. There won't be a consensus, there rarely is but it doesn't matter because we can agree to disagree in-between sharing our plans for the following year.

There is one thing we can all agree on and it's that variation is the key to some success. Crops that really shouldn't work frequently do and occasionally old favourites fail completely. This year my plots provided homes for green aubergines developed in China which were a runaway success despite their late season planting while the more traditional purple varieties struggled and failed. My neighbour's banana plant continues to go from strength to strength but my apple crop took exception to the summer and offered no reward for my efforts. This I think was down to

the variety because across the site other trees staggered under their heavily laden boughs.

In this Indian summer as I complete my winter dig my mind drifts toward the following season and my plans for it. As the experienced among us understand the next season has already started, the slugs are still active and I am taking advantage of that to reduce their numbers while they hunt the bare ground for food. Like a lot of allotment keepers there is as much wishful thinking as science in my practice. Slugs can lay up to a hundred eggs several times a year and I have convinced myself that for each pair I destroy at this end of the season there will be a couple of hundred less the next. A cheering thought even if a slightly daft one but if I gave up the fight it would feel as if I am also giving up on my allotments.

So the winter digging comes to an early and relatively dry end. I clean tools and pack away them away I wonder what's next. I do hope this winter might see a traditional cold snap, a month of good hard frosts would be great preparation for the next season and while that wouldn't do my neighbour's banana plant any favours pretty much everything else would benefit. So I'll raise a glass of last season's pea-pod wine and wish us all luck in the season to come.



GROWING MEMORIES.

JJ who hails from Northern China has lived in the UK since she first came here to study over ten years ago. 2014 saw her complete her first year on the allotment and she has kindly shared her experiences with the Potting Shed Gazette.

Since my birth I have always lived in the crowded city without much green space but every summer holiday, I had the opportunity to visit my grandparents who live in a relatively rural area. They were wonderful summers, I got to run around the fields for whole days without any real supervision, the countryside offered none of the ever present traffic risks that the city did. In that part of China peanuts (ground nuts) are a staple crop and my cousin used to take me along to help the adults during the harvest which was terrific fun. My memory recalls how sweet and crunchy the nuts were, it also reminds me that I ate quite a large percentage of what I gathered and that very few of them made it into the baskets the adults were all busy filling.

This year having recalled the memory with such fondness I have planted a few peanuts in the potato patch; not too many, the summer climate in the south of the UK is both wetter and cooler than that where my grandparents live and so from the beginning the whole exercise was no more than a hopeful experiment. It was no real surprise then that the weather wasn't warm enough and two months after planting no shoots had appeared. Sadly I dug the peanuts up to plant some aubergines instead. However to my surprise I noticed that about half of what I had planted had begun to shoot and so to continue the experiment I immediately placed a single nut back in the ground to see what, if anything, would happen next and to my delight a week or two later the peanut plant broke through the soil.

Peanuts, if you have never seen them, are a very pretty plant with their opposite pairs of leaves but for several months that is all they had to offer. The plant was much smaller than that grown in China but as my seed was purchased from a supermarket (Grocery Section) I have no idea whether this was due to variety or the vastly different UK climate. After a time I concluded that the peanut had done its best and although I left it where it was I had all but forgotten about it until one day my husband called me across to admire its pretty, delicate yellow flowers. These flowers are almost identical to pea flowers in shape, unsurprisingly as peanuts are members of the Legume family.

For several weeks the flowers have held firm but are yet to drop. At the time of writing it is early October and the long and beautiful summer looks like it is finally packing its bags to leave. Peanuts are annual plants and mine I think will soon follow summer, never having dropped its petals and burrowed the growing tips under the ground but I am not disheartened.; quite the opposite.

I have discussed this with plot holders with greater experience of UK growing conditions and given how close I got to success this year it is definitely worth another go. This time around I will sprout the nuts indoors around February time and get them outside under cloches by mid-April adding a couple of months to the growing season. I cannot guarantee success but the pull of my childhood memory is strong and the taste of freshly dug peanuts is so incredibly sweet.

This editor was privileged to witness first-hand JJ's experiment and applauds her succeeding as far as the season allowed. We also thank her for sharing her story with us and invite you all to share yours.

DID YOU KNOW: The Allotments Act of 1908 provided framework to promote allotments in the UK. At its peak during World War Two there were approximately 1.6 million plots in the UK and currently there are approximately 300 000 active plot holders. The history of Allotment is important enough to be in the Government issued handbook *Life in the UK* essential reading for all new citizens.

GROWING TO IMPRESS

Just over a year ago this Editor was privileged to attend the Annual Pumpkin Weighing Competition at Sydney House Allotments. I wrote at length on the event itself but I didn't write that seeing all the contending pumpkins in serried ranks awoke in me the desire to grow something impressive just because I could. I suspect similar secret desire hides within most of us and that quietly, year after year we nurture favoured specimens of various types of vegetables in the hope that later in the season we get to delight friends and family with our unusual success. Unlike fisherman gardeners never get away with the tale of the one that got away; success must be evidenced to be agreed.

Occasionally I grow pumpkins and enjoy a particularly large specimen but I've never been inspired to put any special effort into growing a huge one but I confess to a secret vice; Elephant Garlic. I have been growing it for a number of years now and regular produce bulbs exceeding a pound in weight (dry), they can weigh up to twice as much when first lifted. To date my biggest bulb has been nearly two pound in weight. Quite impressive because as near as I can find out the world record is/was just under three pounds in weight. However growing for world records is not my intention, delighting/amazing my friends is and over the years enthusiasm for growing these monstrous bulbs has increased across the site. This year three of us embarked on a friendly contest to see who could do the best. Modesty prevents me from naming the winner who also provides cloves for the runners up for the following season but next year they are all planting my seed. This season there will be four of us competing and I harbour the hope this may yet become a site wide event.

When I first arrived on site Elephant Garlic had a poor reputation, no-one recalled it producing anything but large, non-splitting bulb resembling an onion. Hoping to buck this trend I purchased some certified stock but my efforts lived up to the vegetables local reputation and I decided not to bother again. It was Peter Andow, then the site rep, who brought the vegetable back to my attention. He'd found it while clearing up an abandoned plot to make a new tenant feel welcome. What he found had split and a decent size. He gave me some to cook but I planted it instead and those few cloves are the origin of nearly all the Elephant Garlic grown on-site. The secret to guaranteeing a splitting bulb is to plant in time for over-wintering, a spring planted bulb in a good year will split but they always need a long growing season which isn't something we can guarantee.

Elephant garlic isn't true garlic but a stem leek, milder in taste and versatile. Used raw in salads or baked used as a puree to spread on bread. In grows and stores just like traditional garlic but for me one of its biggest assets is that it looks exactly the same. So after drying when I am giving away my excess stock I have the rare thrill of offering someone garlic and then astounding them by handing over a bulb up to five inches across. The looks on their faces are a treat; that is growing to impress.

BUILDING A BUG PALACE

One of the draw-backs of a well managed plot is that wild-life can struggle to find a foothold amidst all the order and this can work against the gardener's own best interests. Frogs, toads, lacewings, ladybirds, hedgehogs and wild bees all have something to offer the gardener and our plots, sadly too often over-run with aphids and slugs have plenty to offer them in return. One of the best ways to restore nature's balance while still maintaining a neat and orderly plot is the construction of a Bug Palace, sometimes referred to as a wildlife hotel. Well built and suitably located they will be an attraction in their own right and apart from the benefits they bestow upon the allotment they will also



provide hours of fascination for anyone interested in nature and idle times can be spent watching the comings and goings of the various guests.

BUILDING A BUG PALACE (CONT:)

One prime attraction of this approach is its zero cost as it can be constructed entirely from recycled materials; a good excuse to have a litter pick around the site. Old timber, plant pots, canes, cardboard, straw, leaves and bark will provide a wide variety of guest rooms to attract even the most choosy of species. In the picture on the preceding page a stack of pallets has been used but the Bug Palace could be constructed on a much smaller scale using similar principals. This should mirror the space available and could result in a Bug Stately Home or maybe even a Bug Bungalow.

The 'model' illustrated incorporates broken tile and stone in the base to offer shelter for toads, upturned flower pots to attract wild bees, old timber/wood for stag beetles and rolled corrugated cardboard in water proof sleeves (short lengths of down-pipe) for lace wings. Crevices and holes are back filled with straw and leaves to home centipedes and ladybirds who need somewhere to over-winter safely.

You might also consider planting around the hotel with wild-life friendly plants. This will add some colour but even more importantly will attract wandering bees to your plot where they will also lend a hand with the pollination of your own crops.

Most, but not all, wildlife prefers to be out of direct constant sunshine so think carefully about location. If building on the scale of the pallet stack both full sun and dappled sunlight is easily obtainable but if your hotel is on a smaller scale then you should prefer dappled sunlight, perhaps built against a wall or a shed for stability. Why not give it a go? At the very least your allotment site will be the tidier as timber and bricks are rescued from the hedgerows and it's an opportunity for nature to work a little harder in our favour.

DID YOU KNOW: well worked soil can have up to 150 earth worms per square metre but slug numbers can reach up to 200 per cubic metre. Organic methods will increase the number of worms but slug numbers can only be reduced through active and constant campaigning. Unlike snails they never rest and remain active when the temperature is above 5 degrees Celsius.

EDITORIAL: IN FAVOUR OF COMMUNITY

The dictionary defines of a community as: *A group of people living in the same space or having a particular characteristic in common.*

The 2nd part of this definition describes allotment holders. Our passion unites us, gives us common purpose and a shared interest in preserving our way of life. Sometimes this can lead to passionate debate; the Editor recalls the discussions that preceded the move towards Southampton Allotments becoming self-financing. They were great debates, a frank exchange of views led ultimately to better decisions being made on our behalf. Better decisions because freely discussed and they illustrate how disagreements can become the route to finding consensus.

Regrettably sometimes this passion can have negative impact and minor disagreements between neighbours on occasion escalate to a level requiring council intervention.

In every respect Allotment life reflects our lives in the wider community. There are neighbours we love and others we have less to do with. This is both perfectly natural and perfectly human. We are all individuals and a consequence of pursuing our individual desires is that on occasion we will cross with others pursuing theirs.

Outside of our allotments there are more rules and more officials to hear our appeals. On site we are subject to light-touch regulation. This means that we need to do more to govern ourselves. The self-funding debate shows we are equal to it. So if your neighbour lights a bonfire on a drizzly winter evening and you are caught in his smoke it may inconvenience you but before you put pen to paper and scribe an outraged letter to the council perhaps consider the time your neighbour chose to light his fire. It shows consideration for the wider community. It isn't possible for anyone to always please everyone but it's always possible to live and let live. That's community and it's worth defending.

AND FINALLY The editor thanks those who wrote in with articles or suggestions. If you would like to be considered for the next edition please contact: sue.ashdown@southampton.gov.uk
FAO. Clay Potts, Editor.