

THE POTTING SHED GAZETTE

NEWSLETTER FOR SCC ALLOTMENT TENANTS

2015: AS SUMMER PASSES THE BATON TO AUTUMN

It's been a long drawn out summer to autumn hand-over. I was still picking beans in early October and mowing the paths weekly until the end of that month. I ignored the obvious message of the weather when I began my winter dig far too early only to have start all-over again a little later, but I am not complaining about the weather; only my own foolishness.

Over-all I'd call the year a success with the notable exception of my squash crops. This was down to a poor choice of varieties and fairly awkward weather when it needed to be supportive. Like always I look for the highlights and this year that was definitely the apples, so much so that I invested in a press (See *Juicing the Sunshine*).

This is also the time of the year when our allotment society goes through changes. Some people hang up their wellingtons and hand back their tenancies as changes in their lives alters their priorities. I am sure we all wish them well and thank them for the times we shared but even as we are saying our farewells we are also welcoming new tenants who take up the vacated plots. This changing of the guard is important, something I began thinking about not long after I took on my plot nine years ago. We are custodians of the land and it probably owns us more than we ever own it. Some plots in this country must have

been changing hands a hundred years or more and I find the contrast between the eternal land and the time limited tenant gives me a better perspective. I can only do the best I can and keep the land alive and productive for my successor. If I can do that I am a good gardener, I will have succeeded.

Of course we all have different ways of measuring success and I suspect many of us cast an envious eye or perhaps pass judgement on the activities of a neighbour. Winter is a time when differences in approach to allotment keeping are most notable. Some attend regularly throughout the winter armed with ever longer to-do lists and ever shorter days to work through them. Others turn-over their plots, oil their tools and spend the winter on other pursuits or just having a well earned rest.

Personally I would miss the winter leeks and the company of my neighbours if I left my plot to its own devices during the harshest winter months but this doesn't mean my way is the only way, nor is it the best one. So while I might allow myself a little envy of what a neighbour has achieved I use this as an inspiration to do better. I do stop short of passing judgement on a neighbour whose plot isn't perhaps as clear as mine because I can't know what their plans are nor how complex their lives. As I have noted

before allotment keepers reflect society as a whole and all of us who keep allotments must find the time to do so in our different but equally busy lives. We must work within our own physical limitations as well as within our individual financial ones. We cannot all be the same nor do the same things and neither is it desirable that we should. Allotments are best when they reflect the diversity of British society. The mildly eccentric and the obsessively perfect should all find welcome and support in our community. So by all means envy your neighbours success but only to learn from it but don't condemn your neighbour for lack of energy but instead look to find ways to help them.

As for gardening through the winter; well for me the pleasure outweighs the 'pain' of confronting frosty mornings and for those yet to be tempted to journey down to their plots over deepest winter why not give it ago. The sense of satisfaction of just sitting warming your hands around a cup of tea can't be understated. Lord or Lady of all you see and it's the one time of the year you won't feel guilt at the sight of resting soil or an errant weed; you get to enjoy the view without the responsibility of working on it. Throw in a splash of winter sunshine, maybe the company of a foraging Robin and sometimes it's hard to find a life more perfect.



IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED...

Last year the gazette was pleased to carry an article from JJ concerning her attempts to recreate the memories of her childhood in China through growing peanuts. As we reported the experiment got close but in the end it didn't deliver.

Well JJ spent some time this winter planning another attempt and as can be seen from the picture opposite this time around she succeeded.

On behalf of the gazette I took the opportunity of investigating what additional preparation lead to this success. Concerned about the length of summer available in the UK JJ did plant out quite a bit earlier and under cloches giving the plants an easier start in life. She also changed planting locations and although all the soil on Borrowdale is quite heavy over the whole site the location she choose this year was noticeable freer draining than the first. Of course the British summer made its own contribution but although more drawn out this year to my mind it was also noticeably cooler. The peanuts pictured were lifted at the end of September at which point summer was still very much in evidence and so I am not quite convinced they need an extra long season to fruit. Personally I think it was more to do with a constant temperature, avoiding the peaks and troughs of spring/early summer of 2014. JJ's views are slightly different writing-up her success as luck. I think modesty plays a part with this statement, I have done quite a lot of research and as yet I can find no reference to anybody growing peanuts in the UK without special measures being in place. Of course there is a slight down-side and that is that the picture above is about 10 % of the total crop but I suspect that will only inspire JJ to greater efforts.

DIGGING FOR LIFE: This title takes licence from wartime posters seen by my grandfather and acted on by many of his generation as grass verges and common land across the country were put to the spade in support of the war effort and to reduce our dependence on expensive and riskily obtained imports. Of course that was the prime focus of these wartime gardeners and I suspect that at the war's end a great many of them found they had developed sudden and irreconcilable differences with their work tools. It would be hard to fault them for it. Long days and hard labour was the lot of many in the workforce and leisure time when it was found was best taken as rest. Things slowly began to change with the 60's and by the 90's we were living life styles that would seem like science fiction to our grandparents.

On the plus side of this our lives are more

comfortable and much safer than they once were but they are not without risk. The risks are different; the risk of too much comfort and ease. The diseases of a sedentary lifestyle are now amongst the biggest causes of death in this country and while we can all expect longer lives the benefit of that will be reduced unless we are healthy enough to enjoy our extra time.

The physical benefits of keeping an allotment are pretty clear, 30 minutes gardening will burn a 150 calories. This is about the same as a mild aerobic workout which usually costs money and lasts an hour. Increased access to low cost fresh fruit and vegetables is an obvious benefit but a less obvious one is access to the sunshine. There are various reports around but up to 10 million people in the UK do not get enough vitamin D to maintain healthy bones or in children to support bone development. The best source of this

DIGGING FOR LIFE (CONT). is vitamin is sunshine and 15 minutes a day can be sufficient for those with naturally fair skin. However remember it is only Vitamin D the body needs, not sunburn or its associated risks so do always wear adequate sun protection. The benefits of an allotment don't end there and recent research suggests that allotments have a role to play in that most modern of all ailments, loneliness and isolation.

This is highlighted in the research done by the National Allotments Society which reports that in their 1993 survey very few respondents named social interaction as a significant benefit of their allotment. In a recent survey that had changed significantly and 25% of all respondents said the chance to socialise was one of the main reasons they kept an allotment. Perhaps National Government should take a lesson from the past and reissue those wartime posters with the title of this article instead because that is what allotment keeping is all about; we are extending and improving our lives, and it's fun.



Fruit presses like that above are available from £40 delivered, simple to use and easy to maintain you can expect years of maintenance free use.

JUICING THE SUNSHINE: This year my apple crop was so heavy that I had to look to find alternative uses for some of them. There is a limit to my freezer space and how many apple pies or jars of sauce I can eat or find homes for. This year, presented with a veritable windfall of windfalls, was an opportunity to try something different. For several years I had been thinking about pressing some of my fruit with a view to trying my hand at cider making but up until now my youngish trees had not presented me with the challenge of over-supply. Like most of us I hate waste and although in the end anything that can be composted is never truly wasted it this result wouldn't be much of a thank you for my hard-working trees if their efforts ending up simply feeding the soil.

I did a little on-line research about cider making and was delighted to see that the process is considerably more straight-forward than many of the wine making recipes I already follow. At its very simplest cider making is no more complex than crushing the apples, extracting the juice and waiting. This is because apple juice naturally ferments, something to remember if you store fresh pressed juice in the fridge. Fermentation will take a couple of days longer at low temperatures but it always begins. In reality it is probably quite hard to avoid making cider but this natural method can lead to mixed results. The only way the pure apple juice can be stored is either through freezing or pasteurisation. Effective pasteurisation is beyond the means of most domestic kitchens and although freezing is simple enough freezer space limits what we can keep.

The first and probably only real challenge of cider making is in extracting the juice. On a small scale domestic juicers will be ok but as cider making requires approximately four to five times the weight of apples to the volume of juice extracted you would need approximately 20-25 kg of apples to produce 5 litres of juice. As I had over a 100kg of apples to process this was not the answer for me. Buying a juicer was already an expensive proposition and the idea that it would probably be burnt out before I worked through my crop made the idea a complete non-runner. I went back online and looked for a more traditional (environmentally sustainable) answer

JUICING THE SUNSHINE (cont). I was delighted to find that there is a range of good quality fruit presses available from 5 to 20 litre capacity all at well under a £100 delivered. Being entirely manual in operation these also have the advantage of bringing the press to the crop and not the reverse. It is far easier to transport the juice off-site and leave the apple pulp behind on my compost bin. The one draw-back of this approach is that the press cannot deal efficiently with whole or even chopped apples. They still need to be pulped before the press can work with them. There are manual mechanical pulpers available but the range is limited (compared to the presses) and the price of them was quite a bit higher than I could consider.

In the end the answer was really simple, I got hold of a short length of untreated, planed 3 x 3" and sterilised it by boiling. I then simply smashed the apples to a pulp in a barrel, this does require some effort but it is both very effective and very affordable. Of course this labour can be shared and as with so much else that is done on Borrowdale this project became a community effort, with individual plot holders bringing along some of their own apples and lending their muscles to the pulping and the press. Because the press is manual and no more complex than a pressure plate and a screw, it cannot be burnt out and has an infinite capacity for work; sadly this isn't true of its operators. Processing my neighbours crops as well as my own meant the press was put to work over four successive weekends this autumn and over twenty gallons of juice was extracted.

A great deal of that juice now sits in freezers but I followed through my original objective and tried my hand at cider. Not wanting to chance natural fermentation I purchased some cider yeast and that was pretty much all I needed to do. I did use a hydrometer to check the sugar level of the juice and was delighted that I added almost no sugar due to the incredibly high level present naturally in the fruit. My friend Pete tells me that the sugar in the fruit is simply captured sunshine; it's a poetic idea and it follows that cider making and wine making are both a simple ways of capturing the spirit and flavour of the summer.

I am following a recipe I found on-line for Kentish Cider, a choice influenced by the range of apples I had to work with. This recipe should ensure the cider has reached its best by spring but there are many other recipes and methods all of which can be followed using basic home brew equipment like brewing barrels and demi-johns. The recipe I am following requires that my brew is racked off two or three times. Racking off is the transfer of the brew from one barrel to another, leaving the sediment behind on each occasion. To date I have done this once but I took the opportunity to taste the brew (very promising) and I have also experimented by dividing the original barrel into four smaller ones and flavouring different samples. Apart from the original I now also have variations with elderflower, citrus juice and also blackcurrant.

My cider is a mix of several varieties including both cooking and desert apples (the Kentish method) but any mix of apples will make cider, a good excuse to swap crops with your neighbour. And in collecting your apples don't neglect the windfalls, even the partly rotten, they will add to rather than detract from the end result. It is an end result I am very much looking forward to, a warm spring afternoon and the challenges of that time of year lifted by a cool, sweet, liquid reminder of what it is all for. I will leave the last word on this subject to my great friend Peter Andow said told me, 'I like the idea of saving some of this year's sunshine to drink next year, it's something to work towards when the cold starts biting me this winter.' My friend Pete is 82 and still going strong and if pressing a few apples is what is needed to encourage him I live in hope of another bumper crop; every year.

SOUTHAMPTON SEED SWAP 2016: takes place 21 Feb 11am-3.30pm at Southampton Solent University, 157-187 Above Bar St. There is a £2 entry and as well as being swapped seeds can be purchased for 30p. For info: seedswapsouthampton.wordpress.com or [facebook.com/southamptonseedswap](https://www.facebook.com/southamptonseedswap).

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.**

