

# THE POTTING SHED GAZETTE

## NEWSLETTER FOR SCC ALLOTMENT TENANTS

### 2017: CAUGHT NAPPING

A busy few weeks of bottling, pickling and preserving; warmed by the autumn sunshine I stop occasionally with a cup of tea and muse on the year to date. I can't have been alone in falling victim to the late frosts. Now in my eleventh year as a plot holder I have for every one of the previous ten years been cautioned about late frosts by older, wiser heads than mine. Despite all that well meant advice I was lulled into a false sense of security by a succession of warm balmy springs. Of course over the last ten years late frosts did occasionally occur but when they lacked teeth and until now I hadn't lost a single plant to them. This year more than made up for that.

Potatoes coped with it well enough, most of the haulms were burnt to the ground but potatoes are resilient and it wasn't many weeks before they had recovered and more besides. The end result was the largest crop I had lifted for over five or more years, with one exception. Red Duke of York didn't offer me much but for me it was a new variety and I have no comparison against previous crops. Charlottes I grow year after year and these are my benchmark and this time around they really did do me proud.

Sweetcorn was a little more problematic. On first inspection I thought I had had 100% wipe out so invested in a new variety only to see the initial plantings partially recover and about a quarter of the original crop was

saved. This variety was Lark and it was just as well because the replacement variety while they grew strong and vigorous and produced good size cobs didn't offer me anything much in flavour. It could have been that cross-pollination was a factor but I am not sure. They were sold specifically as a high germination variety and they were indeed that but I suspect this was their only selling point.



And finally my climbing beans. I have a strain of purple climbing beans, I am not at all sure what the variety is as they are something passed onto me by my friend Pete Andow who'd been growing them ten or more years before I took up a plot. They have been grown from saved seed for over 20 years and must by now be completely acclimatised to the site and when the frosts came down they presented a few scorched leaves but nothing worse. In contrast my climbing Borlotti and Cobra were wiped out and needed replanting.

It was a very poor start to a year that turned suddenly brighter in

so many ways. After the early set-backs the year unwrapped itself into sunshine and plenty. Following the lead of the Charlottes my soft fruits, apples and cabbages all achieved bumper proportions. It wasn't all good, it never is and I suppose if it was some of the fun of our hobby would be lost. The fine weather has stayed with us and even now the leaves seem a little reluctant to fade and turn their backs on summer but it is the beginning, the slow descent into winter.

Personally I like the autumn; there is a flurry of work but unlike the spring I am not working to any particular deadline. It is the one time of the year I have rather more time available than work to do. I enjoy the last of the warm sunshine days, eleven years now and I am still learning. I have thought long and hard about the late frosts and what I should do in future seasons. Maybe it is the year of plenty that followed this set-back influencing my thoughts but I can't feel too upset about late frosts at this distance in time. In retrospect I think the eight or nine years I got away with early plantings more that outweighs the one time I didn't.

I am pretty sure that will raise a few eyebrows and I've no doubt at all that at

**2017: CAUGHT NAPPING (CONT)**

some point next season someone will warn me of the dangers of late frosts. Of course they will be right, maybe not for next year but at least eventually and until then I will be riding my luck but that's part of the pleasure of an allotment; making your own mistakes. As we complete our clearing and tidying, preparing bonfires and labouring over the winter digging we will all be planning for the next year. Some of our plans will turn out to be mistakes but others will delight us. Whatever the result our hobby keeps us in touch with our ancestral heritage and the eccentricity of nature; safe in the knowledge that our livelihoods are no longer completely dependent on unpredictable weather

**New Tenant:** I discovered a new tenant had taken up residence on my plot late this summer. It was small area I'd left fallow and I was busy clearing the light growth of annual weed that had stealthily covered the ground while I dealt with more pressing tasks earlier in the year when I saw it. It was hard to miss as it had a large body (17-18 mm (2/3 of an inch)) and was resplendent in the bright colours of a wasp. It was camped in the middle of a web which had a white zig-zag woven through the middle of it. I had never seen a spider quite so striking since my childhood in Australia. I am not an arachnophobe and any fear I had of spiders was solely based on the real risk of deadly poison that some spiders in Australia possessed. Therefore even though this type of spider was new to me the certainty and safety of UK wild-life reassured me and I studied it closely.

That evening when I returned home I went online to see what I could learn. I found it quickly enough because the only description I could think to give it turned out to be its proper name; wasp spider. What I'd found was the female, I doubt would have noticed a male as they are a quarter of the size and light brown in colour. It turns out that Wasp Spiders were part of an earlier wave of migration to the UK from Europe and were first recorded in this country around the 1920's. Since then they have slowly extended their range and are increasingly found along the south coast. The white zig-zag in the centre of the web is peculiar to the species and it is believed to play a role in attracting insects.

The males have a dangerous time of it as occasionally the females will consume their partners if hunger strikes them. However it has been observed that males will often stay at the margins of a web waiting for the female to complete her molt because at this period her jaws are still soft and the risk to them is reduced. I wasn't fortunate to have seen

anything except the spider paying me no attention. If I am lucky to see another next year I will keep a closer eye on things.



I chuckled as I did my research. I found an old Daily Mail article from 2007 warning of the Wasp Spiders northwards march in huge numbers and a Sun article from earlier this year placing the species on a list of Britain's poisonous spiders only to declare they weren't poisonous. I suspect they were only included it to brighten up the list of poisonous species which appeared all to be rather drab black and brown in colour.

I did find a web-site which lists the species as one of Britain's most poisonous but this is contradicted by dozens other references. I think I'll go with non-poisonous; it suits me better. That's the joy of the internet; a range of views often untroubled by facts. The spider was fact & one of the joys of gardening; Discovery

**OVER-RUN WITH RICHES:** Most years, like many of us, I produce more than my own needs of the crops I grow. For years I have been driving around making gifts to friends and family and I always enjoyed the smiles and satisfaction I receive in return for my produce. However as time has passed and my proficiency as a gardener has improved my circle of friends is more spread out; moving out of the district following work or new relationships and the road miles I need to travel to distribute my excess made less and less sense. I needed new homes for my produce.

I work for a large Bank that has partnered several charities, both local and national. I checked out the Internal Web Listings and found a hospice called Forest Holme that is local to where I work and contacted them. I was fortunate as they already had an existing programme of turning donations of organic produce into items for sale. For example the Friends of Forest Holme regularly ran stalls selling among other things home-made jams and chutneys and they were only too happy to take what I had to offer. It has worked out very well for me to because I travel to work every day anyway and there is no additional environmental (or financial) cost. This year they informed me they have managed to raise several hundred pounds by using my produce and the money raised will be spent supporting the day-to-day running of this much needed facility.

In preparing to write this article I was pointed in the direction of Mervyn of Muddy Bottom East and learned he has been doing something very similar for several years supporting the Rose Road Charity. In his case he has arranged collection from the site and reports the money raised by them to be similar to the figure my own donations have realised.

Having discussed the subject at length with him we are both of a similar views in that the compost bin should be the last place we should choose to dump our excess. The pleasure of gifting cannot be understated and both Mervyn and I would hope that others producing more than they and their family need will find other beneficiaries and share the wealth. I know from personal experience that care homes and homeless charities are open to such gifts and with care homes I also know that many of the residents welcome the visits anyway. I've been offered many a gardening tip during my visits although admittedly the ones

that gave me guidance on growing sugar-beet and building haystacks were of limited use and a few of the others struck me as decidedly too experimental in nature.

So perhaps this autumn when we are all pickling and persevering a couple of extra jars for sale a charitable events may cut down on what's composted and when the new season starts look around a little for somewhere your excess produce might in some small way give someone else an improved life.

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### **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 for your the allotment they will also entertain.

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 plots to attract wild bees, old timber/wood for stag beetles and

**BUILDING A BUG PALACE (CONT)**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 you plot where they will also lend a hand with the pollination of your own crops. provide hours of fascination for anyone interested in nature and idle times can be spent watching the comings and goings of the various guests



**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

**NATURE'S GYM:** A friend of mine recently joined the Gym and inspired by her own example or perhaps looking for support and applause for her efforts she was extolling the virtues of the various and complicated bits of apparatus designed to burn away the calories and tone the body. Of course I encouraged her in her efforts but I admit I was little

rolled corrugated cardboard in water proof shocked to learn the cost of gym membership which worked out about three times as much as my allotment rent over the year. Admittedly my gym equipment, a rake and a spade, were nowhere near as sophisticated as the bikes that went nowhere my friend had use of. However I suspected the calories I burnt off using them was probably about as high and so I looked into it. Following on are common garden activities and the energy used for each: (all per hour)

**Heavy Digging:** 400-600 kCal

**Raking leaves:** 350-450 kCal

**Mowing the Lawn:** 250-350 kCal

**Weeding:**200-400 kCal

**Watering:** 120 kCal

The benefits of gardening aren't limited to enjoyable physical exercise and other key benefits are:

**Exposure to vitamin D. ...**

**Decreased dementia risk. ...**

**Mood-boosting benefits. ...**

**Helps combat loneliness**

When next I met up with my friend we compared notes on our choice of exercise. She was impressed and thought the comparison a fair one but in the end the I had the winning argument because at the end of my gym work I was left with a larder full of vegetables, preserves and pickles while she was left with an annually renewable subscription, artificial lights and rowing machines that saw neither water nor sunshine. For the time being she will be continuing with the gym however she has now put her name down for an allotment near to where she lives and is looking toward the time when she can cancel her subscription and spend the money on seeds.

**And finally** the gazette wishes all plot holders the very best of the season to come and wishes you the best of your rest this winter; we've all earned it.

**AND FINALLY** The editor welcomes any articles or suggestions. &If you would like to be considered for the next edition please contact: [sue.ashdown@southampton.gov.uk](mailto:sue.ashdown@southampton.gov.uk) **FAO. Clay Potts, Editor.**

