

THE POTTING SHED GAZETTE

NEWSLETTER FOR SCC ALLOTMENT TENANTS

2018: A RECORD BREAKING YEAR

A record breaking year and a back-breaking one in many respects too. The plot the editor works is heavy clay and while fertile enough and vastly improved over the last decade of cultivation this summer was enough to bring back memories of 2006 when I first took it on. It wasn't until researching this article that I realised that was also a record summer. At the time I remember that perhaps gardening was meant to be that hard and the improvements I noticed over the following years I put down to my own growing expertise; more fool me.

Average temperatures over this summer equalled those of the years 1976, 2003, 2006 (Source; Met Office records). However this is a UK average and the national record for England has been broken and 2018 is the hottest summer average ever recorded at 17.2C) slightly above 1976 17.0 C.

Of course this is the official record and it doesn't usually inform the discussions I've listened to among those who have experienced both. Most people take the view that 1976 was the more extreme and while I was in my early teens in 1976 I have am outside this discussion because I was then living in Australia. To get a better understanding I turned to the Met records to understand why 1976 was still discussed in almost reverential terms. What I found key to understanding this view is the

that while the average temperature record has been beaten 1976 offered extremes that influence our memories. For example 1976av included a record of 18 days above 30 C whereas in 2018 the longest run was 9 days above 30 C. There are several other key differences such as night-time temperatures in 1976 being higher than those of 2018 and of course 1976 brought with it a drought which hasn't been seen in 2018.



I think it's fair to say the spectacular highs and lows of 1976 are a reason it has been burned so powerfully into the memory of so many people. I also the passage of 32 years can influence our recollections. Who wouldn't find the world bigger, brighter, wilder and more exciting when they were young.

I sympathise with those plot-holders for whom this was their first year and particularly for those who had had no prior experience of vegetable growing. I can hope that just like for me in 2006 it will get easier. Like most of us I had mixed fortunes this year but I also found the flavour of my

crops far surpassed most other years. Personally I think this enhanced flavour reflects the extra struggles the growing plants had to undergo. For years I have raised my greenhouse grown tomatoes using this approach. I give them the minimum amount of water needed to support their growth and the development of fruit and never a drop more. Even when growing common supermarket varieties while my fruit tends to be smaller than those you'd find on the shelves they have also possess a flavour far better than any you'd find there either.

Unlike my green-house where it is fairly easy to control the climate it was a bit more difficult under the burning sun. Being an avid 'weeder' I made the best use of this activity and left the felled annuals around the developing plants as a mulch. It dried out quickly but provided shade the roots of the newly established plants and ensured the water I gave them wasn't immediately pulled back by the sun.

I have also been experimenting for several years with shading. Not a full shade but partial using scaffold netting. Initially I used them as a barrier against pigeons and butterflies attacking my brassicas but I noticed how the broken sunshine through the netting prevented the soil ever completely drying out. The brassicas flourished in the filtered sunshine and this year I

2018 Cont: deployed more of the netting over a more crops than I ever have before and it certainly helped reduce the need for watering.

Finally, although the much discussed hosepipe bans never reached this far south I did change the times I watered my crops to ensure what I did use went further and that the crops got the best benefit from it. I watered as late in the evening as I reasonably could, typically not before 6 pm or failing that pre 6 am. I never watered all my crops everyday but instead on rotation with the more delicate water hungry plants and seedlings on a shorter rotation than more established and hardy plants. Finally, and perhaps a little radically, some plants never got watered at all. I have three red-currant bushes and apart from covering them with the scaffold netting (after the fruit had formed) I offered them no support at all except weeding and yet each bush gave me in excess of 7kg of fruit.

Aware that this statistic alone might create a false view of my expertise so in the interests of balance I do need to report that while typically I store enough onions to last until the following spring this year I had eaten my entire crop by the end of October. I think sometimes I am a lucky gardener, its certain I am not a great one.

So to close this record the Editor hopes that this past year has left you with some pleasant memories, something in the freezer for the winter and an excitement for the coming season and the possibilities that will bring.

Counting on Carrots?

The Editor has always found carrots to be an enigmatic vegetable and often troublesome to grow and yet fresh carrots are a common expectation of the first time gardener. I am sure many do many to grow them successfully at first attempt. I am also sure that Monty Don's experience when confronted with just nine carrots from a seed packet of 2000 has also been duplicated by many of us. From memory Monty Don offered no rational explanation for the non-success of his carrots, just said he's always found them to be that way.

Until this year I have to say my experience of carrot growing have largely replicated Monty Don's. It has been a hit and miss affair and I the existing fruit is picked which is just as well because

mostly I missed. This year I used some well rotted leaf compost I had made, working it well into the narrow strips I planted my carrots in. My yield was in excess of 15 kg from a couple of packets of seeds. Given that this my one real success in 10 or more attempts I am not convinced it will be repeated and unless it does I am with Monty. Success (or not) in carrot growing is just one of those things



The challenge of carrots won't help any tenants that join our community this year and because early success will encourage and motivate us all the Gazette has provided a list of the ten 'Easiest to Grow' vegetables specifically

with those first time growers in mind. The list represents a broad range of short medium and longer growing times and the new plot-holder is almost guaranteed high-lights of home grown produce all season and beyond.

1: Salad leaves: A great crop for engaging the interest of children, from seed to crop in as little as three weeks. A common first time error is planting whole packet of seeds in one go and who really needs 1000 leaves at once. Planting in succession is the answer; e.g a quarter of a packet a week over a month.

2: Radishes: as above for interest but four weeks from seed generally. There is a fantastic range of colours, shapes and flavours to experiment with. For planting, as for salad leaf

3: Potatoes: Even on the smallest of plots there is room for potatoes because they grow as well in sacks as they do in the soil. The advantage of sacks (apart from land-saving) is that there is no real digging involved. Crops between 10 and 20 weeks depending on type and home-grown potatoes are the essence of allotment keeping.

4: Peas: Another crop economical in land use and so very easy to grow. Protect them from pigeons when first planting but as the plants

Counting on Carrots cont: produce fruit the more it is almost impossible to resist eating them from the pod as they are picked. From seed to crop 2-3 months.

5:Spring onions: The advent of discount shops like Poundland and Wilkos changed my whole approach to this vegetable. Until then I had always grown from seed but now I simply pick up a couple of bags of onion sets (ave contents 150) for a couple of pounds. They are quicker to reach eating size and I plant in succession plant red and white varieties over the course of the summer. From seed to crop 8 weeks (less if grown from sets).

6:Broadbeans: To this day one of my favourite vegetables and definitely my favourite bean. Apart from black fly almost completely trouble free and dependable in all years but like peas prefers the cooler start. A side bonus is that when in flower bees love the plants, this summer I counted six different varieties of wild bee on my beans alone. Seed to crop approximately two months. Early pinching of growing drop increases yield.

7: Runner Beans: The Editor professes a conflict of interest regarding this vegetable; he really doesn't like them and although grows 6 or 7 varieties of beans none of them are runners. However they crop in approximately two months and like peas they respond to picking by growing more fruit. They are useful in dead corners of your allotment to, for example they can be grown up the side of a shed saving plot space for something else. In flower they provide a wall of colour and bees love them even if the Editor doesn't.

8:Onions and Garlic: A fairly long growing period (5 months) but the reward is vegetables you will still be eating throughout the winter. Spring planting (Feb onwards); these crops need very little maintenance except weeding between the rows and snapping of any flower stalks that emerge to limit bolting. Autumn varieties of both onions and garlic are available and the editor only plants onions in the spring and garlic only in the Autumn.

9: Tomatoes: With one of the highest germinates rates of any of the seeds we commonly plant the they will be trouble free and the single biggest risk time the first time growing is over production. This is simply because most modern varieties of tomatoes grow far more fruit that the plant itself

can support. Tomatoes rarely fail and care and selective pruning should both the table full and restock the freezer.

10:Beetroot: Virtually a no maintenance crop, for over a decade I have done nothing more than empty a packet of seeds in a pre-watered drill and harvested throughout the season. Over-time I built a repertoire of beetroot recipes from wines to chutney, pickles to roast. A stark contrast to most other vegetables when initially I spent far more time learning how to grow them than I ever did eating them.

In providing this list the Gazette isn't suggesting first-timers need to restrict themselves to the known and dependable vegetable varieties but only that they consider spreading the risk of their first season and perhaps not start out entirely with the purely experimental approach.

Oh and regarding Monty Don, a neighbour of mine returned 12 carrots, although I believe he may have planted more packets of seeds than Monty did. He wasn't too pleased with his result so I tried to cheer him up by sharing Monty's experience and told him you couldn't count on carrots. He wasn't persuaded and even me pointing out that 12 carrots was 33 percent better than 9 didn't help.

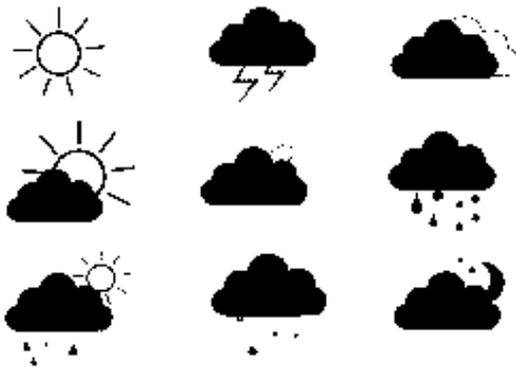
Weather Prophets:

As the Editor spent his formative years in Australia it wasn't until returning to the UK that I was exposed to our national trend of using the weather as the framework for any casual conversation. I guess it was because the perennial blue skies and sunshine of Australia really weren't that much of a conversation piece. In the UK it's different, this is a real four seasons in a day climate and the blackening cloudscape of the morning may well result in sun-burn come lunch time. As it is now nearly forty years since I returned from Australia I have grown accustomed to weather as a conversation starter though I confess that even now struggle to get excited by different species of cloud.

Perhaps understandably this fixation on all things weather is even more pronounced among gardeners than in the general population and over the years of plot-

Weather Prophets Cont: keeping the editor has identified separate classifications of weather prophets which probably doesn't help anything except help set my expectations as to the level of interest I am about to endure if one engages me in conversation.

The Traditionalists: Use a variety of weather forecasting devices. The less skilled place a heavy reliance on what their pet pine-cone is up to or how far up the tree the crows build their nests. The more skilled will rely on a few rhymes like 'red sky at night, sheppard's delight...' or 'the wind from the east blows no good for neither man nor beast'. Sometimes they'll offer truly curious items like, 'Three days of rain will empty any sky' or if you are really blessed they will have an old injury which has been successfully forecasting weather for over forty years. Despite the variety of approaches the traditionalist are bound by one agreement and that is that satellite pictures are a poor way to understand the 'personality' of the weather. If a traditionalist does regale you with their weather knowledge it is best not to protest; there is no rational argument that can counter some-ones dodgy knee.



The Scientific: They have an evangelical approach and believe ultimately in the ability of science to ultimately establish an 'absolute' standard to weather interpretation. In this belief they rarely acknowledge that science is still a long way short of that predictive accuracy and speak as if it has already been achieved. For this reason a hot summer is not an exception but the predicted outcome of global weather modelling, Bognor Regis will soon be underwater and we must take it as a given that the next summer will be worst. The best way to discuss weather with those of a scientific approach is not to and it's important to avoid creating the impression you are in any way

interested unless you have an hour or two to set aside.

The Pseudo Scientific: The prophecies of this group rely on an unbeatable combination of barometers, sea-weed and selective edits of Met Office forecasts. In conversation with them it is difficult to establish any kind of hierarchy of importance in the evidence on which they base their predictions and an anecdote their granddad shared with them always has equal value to the billions of dollars of hi-tech satellite data. Of all three approaches the pseudo scientific poses the biggest challenge to the beneficiary of the weather report. The Traditionalist are merely impossible and the Scientific a longer version of the same but the Pseudo Scientific will in all likelihood have you turning off the six o'clock news 5 minutes before it is over to avoid any possibility of flashbacks.

I think the problem with weather forecasts is rarely within its detail because unless extreme it is never more complicated than wet or dry. I think the problem is more on the interpretation and how our view of detail goes on to shape our day.

Having learned the art of weather based conversation forty years ago I do on occasion start one with words like, 'Beautiful day, warm for the time of the year,' only to find the response comes back as, 'rain later' or 'it won't last' and I wonder why.

I think when the Met office states there is a thirty percent chance of rain it is up to us if we focus on that or the 70 percent chance of no rain and prepare to enjoy our day. Weather Prophets always go the other way and deem the day ruined just in case it rains. This is something those of a scientific approach can least consider and for the traditionalist I'd suggest a wider range of pinecones. Sadly I think the Pseudo-Scientific remain beyond help, just enjoy the day for what it is and always; Happy Gardening!

AND FINALLY The editor would like to invite anyone with suggestions for the next edition please forward your suggestions to: sue.ashdown@southampton.gov.uk **FAO. Clay Potts, Editor.**

