

# THE POTTING SHED GAZETTE

## NEWSLETTER FOR SCC ALLOTMENT TENANTS

### 2016: TRIUMPHS AND SADNESS

As the last of my meagre crop of apples is pulped in preparation for pressing I recall wistfully the excesses of last year. The mixed fortunes of allotment cultivation continue to amaze, delight and occasionally disappoint us and it seems that renewing our tenancies in many ways is akin to buying a lottery ticket. The rent costs us a bit more than a lottery ticket of course and ultimately all we guarantee is that we are going to have to work hard to walk away with any prize. But on the plus side the prizes are more varied and in ten years of triumph and failure I have pretty much always covered the cost of the ticket.

Last year's main prize was a brace of Apricots. Eight years in the growing and the pair of them were as big as peaches. I shared them with my dear friend Pete (Andow). They were beautifully sweet and juicy and it seemed to us it was worth the eight years of patience and hope. This year, after another eight year wait I harvested my first crop of quince. Five kilos in all but I didn't get to share with Peter who sadly passed away in May of this year.

Ralph Puddle of Sydney House Allotments also left us this year and the thoughts of the gazette go out to the friends and families of these two much loved and experienced practitioners of our craft. 2016 has been a challenging time for so many across the globe but our plots have remained for us a place of escape.

There is a sense and logic in the natural rhythms of nature that is too often devoid from the world presented by newspaper headlines and the loss of my friend Pete was an illustration of that. At 82 years old he'd seen much of life and spent much of his own life giving back from his rich store of experiences to the benefit of those who knew him.

Before he left us Pete saw enough of the year to share in its early triumphs. Over the course of the winter we'd changed our wild bird seed and location of our bird tables and all the way up into March we were sitting under my porch entertained by as many as two dozen goldfinches, queued and squabbled over the bird feeders. Until we made this change then these birds were rarely seen and only then in the tree line that abounds the site. Sitting there we drank of the cider Pete's apples had contributed too. Eighty-two years old and always looking forward Pete never did say goodbye to me, he said instead see you on Saturday. I am pleased for that, there is a sadness in goodbye.

So we must all follow Pete's lead and look forward to the next season even while still clearing away the remains of this one. The hole in my life left by Pete has been part-filled by the influx of new tenants and many of them are young families with children. A great many children and it is a joy to

Hear their laughter and excitement as they explore the wonders of their plots. New life and renewed energy.

I approach winter with a to-do list that adds to itself even as I reduce it. Encouraged by Pete's example each year I plan for something new. At least one new crop or variety previously untried. I will build an additional bird box should I find a choice location or a perhaps small stack of logs out of anybodies way. It's nice to give nature a leg up. Once in a while I see a chance to offer up a longer lasting memorial to my time spent working the land and a fig tree has found a gap in the tree line in which it can flourish. In years to come, long after I have joined Peter in his rest, I take comfort from the thought that this tree could still be providing sweet delights for the generations that follow me.

I was fortunate enough to meet Ralph and Pete I knew very well. My desire to put something into our shared world of allotment keeping is inspired by their example and both of them will live on in our hearts. Their wisdom will continue to help us navigate the unpredictable nature of the gardener's calendar. We can though look forward to 2017 with some certainties; at least one crop will fail spectacularly but something else is sure to turn out the best we have ever seen. Happy Gardening.



*An image of a cabbage root afflicted with club root. The noticeable swelling diverts the plants energy away from the top growth.*

This price reflects the greater challenges (and therefore probable losses) that can be expected in following organic methods. It is also true that for some of the challenges we encounter there is no chemical method available. To a large degree this has been brought about by recognition of the risks involved in using some of the chemicals our fathers or grandfathers may have relied on. These have been withdrawn from the market and in some cases there have been no alternative (chemical) solutions available.

One of the earliest lessons we learn when we take on our plots is that sometimes nature shows no mercy. About eight years ago I recall a mini-plague of cabbage white butterflies and the utter devastation they left in their wake. There are cabbage white butterflies every year of course but most years they are no worse than an annoyance but Club Root, another challenge to our brassica crops, is perennial. It is something most of us have inherited as part of our plots. It is fungal infection and it leaves spores in the soil that can survive up to twenty years. The cabbage whites I can keep at bay with netting but the Club Root will always be inside any protective enclosure I build. So conscious of the fact that this November will again see the change in occupation of these small parcels of paradise (allotments) the length and breadth of Southampton the gazette offers an insight into control methods for two of our common adversaries where there is no permanent solution.

**Club Root:** If you are fortunate enough not to have the problem your best option is to keep it that way. To do this is to regularly rotate your crops ensuring that subsequent plantings of brassicas on the same piece of ground is separated by as many years as your rotation schedule allows for. Even more importantly never accept cabbage seedlings from a source you cannot identify as disease free because once it is there, club root is there to stay.

For the rest of us the usual rules of rotation apply but we should take actions to limit the impact of the three principal aggravators of club root and these are:

**Poor drainage:** the 20 year life expectancy of club root spores has been established in soils with poor drainage and poor drainage also supports more vigorous club root attack. Seek to improve drainage through soil improvements but where this isn't practical raised beds may be the best way forward.

**Club Root resistant stock:** Many growers now offer resistant varieties and choice is increasing. It is important to note that these only offer resistance to attack not protection from it so success will still be dependent on attention both of the details above. With these varieties you will notice that while you can and

## THE WAR OF ATTRITION: Control of Pests and

**Diseases:** We all share an interest in wanting to get the best from our plots and in the main we also share the ideal of organic produce. After all there is little point in growing your own fruit and vegetables if they are subject to the same heavy pest control methods as is so much of the produce we find in our supermarkets.

**(Club Root cont)** should get a reliable crop the roots will still show signs of classic club root attack. Burn these roots and do not be too concerned after all it is only the top we wish to eat.

By following these simple rules you should see success year after year. Cabbage White and pigeon attacks should then be the only barrier to success.



*Typical signs of Moth Larvae damage higher up the leaves on a leek. This is an early sign and needs acting on.*

#### **Leek Moth:**

Given the two full breeding cycles per year these pests can seem to be ever present however it is generally only the second cycle that causes most of us grief. That is because the 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle builds on the success of the first (an increased moth population) and it coincides with our planting out of overwintering leeks.

The adult leek moth is barely noticeable, small 6mm (1/4") long and light brown. They over-winter in sheltered places and begin the first cycle in April to June. All members of the allium family (onions, leeks etc) are potential targets for these pests. The first cycle can, and often does, go unnoticed and it is mainly with the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation (July-August). Early signs of infestation is leaf damage either in the form of white patches or in lines of white dots. These are followed by splits appearing in the leaves (see image) as the tiny caterpillars eat their way down through the foliage into the centre of the leek. Some yellowing and die back can be noticed. The tunnelling of the caterpillars allows for secondary infections to set in which will may rot and kill the leek.

The caterpillars pupate in tiny silken cocoons hatching in time to seek shelter to overwinter. With leek moth (or the similar leek miner) there are no chemical protections available to the allotment keeper even if we should seek them.

The best method of protection is netting but this isn't always a cheap option and you must use mesh of a size smaller than the moths themselves. However given that the infestation of leek months varies with the seasons it is usually possible to grow them successfully without barrier protection provided you follow a few basic rules.

Plant out only the strongest stock. I grow my leeks from seeds in drills planted just after I put out my early potatoes. By August when the potatoes are all cleared I plant them out, the best of them will be by then finger thick and because I sow a couple of packets I can afford to be choosy in the stock I retain. This is important because most leeks can and will outgrow pest infestation if they have enough of a head start. Leeks can also be pot grown initially for later planting out or purchased directly from a grower at the same stage.

Always rotate the leek crops as part of the wider rotation plan and keep the ground around them clear at all times.

Keep an eye on the leaves for early signs of infestation. This will show on the newest leaves and at the first sign cut the top of the leek to below the lowest point of the infestation. If the leeks are inspected regularly you will always catch it in time to have enough leaf below the infestation to work with; if you find you have to cut through the centre of the leek it is already too late. The first time I did this it was more out of respect to the elderly plot holder who gave me this advice rather than through expectation of success. I was confident I was killing my crops but a strange thing happened. The leeks put on a surge of growth and quickly grew back stronger than they were before the barbaric haircuts had been administered. It is because of the harsh pruning that strong stock is so important. It is always the weak and the feeble plants that are most likely to succumb to moth attack.

## **PRESERVING THE SUMMER**

Most of us grow more than our needs with one crop or another. We are generous with our bounty to friends, family and neighbours and our freezers can take up some of the excess but in the end frozen everything can get a bit tedious.

In pursuit of holding onto the summer in more interesting and varied ways I have over these last years experimented with different approaches to pickling and preserves. This has expanded the range of what I can store and as importantly how I can get the best from in during the long winter months. This year for the first time I laid down a dozen bottles of parsnip wine. I had been intrigued by the idea after I read an account from Roman times extolling this drink as one of the few highlights of the then recently conquered Britain. I also made my first attempts at salt pickles rather than staying with the tried and tested vinegar based method. I admit I need some refinement to my technique, principally around temperature control, but I did eventually get it right and some wonderful Dill pickles were a feature at a late season barbecue.

These days most of my soft-fruit ends up as either wine or jam although this year I did divert some into a Rumtopf which should be perfect come Christmas. Sadly much as I may have anticipated my various jams sustaining me through the winter my generosity proved to be bigger than my available stock and until last weekend I was looking forward to little but plain buttered toast this January but then the quince tree decided to surprise me.

I brought the tree as a half standard (3 years old) some seven or eight years ago. Its location isn't ideal, under the partial shade of a giant oak tree but does pretty well for sunshine and I hoped for big things. It never happened; the quince quickly established itself and by its third year was regularly producing what should have been a fairly decent crop of fruit. Unfortunately year after year it shed its entire crop a long time before they'd swelled to anything more than walnut size. A couple of years ago I finally identified that it was a water problem, competing with the oak tree I suspected the roots of the quince had not kept pace with its growth above ground. I had always kept it pruned to a manageable size and even now it is no taller than eight feet (2.4 metres) but the roots still hadn't kept up. Over the last couple of years I have been more careful to water it if we go much longer than a week or ten days without rain during the fruiting period. Last year I saw my first ever quince, only the one, about as big as an apple and given all the extra effort I had expended it felt like poor reward at the time.

This year I again used the same approach but it was a little easier given the wet start to spring we had and if I am honest I think I put less effort into the task this year anyway; after all the tree hadn't thanked me.. I think the extra watering did still help but I also think also that the root systems of the quince had finally caught up with its top growth because my harvest was five kilos in weight and the biggest fruit was well over 250 grams itself.

Quince are an unusual fruit to modern eyes; looking like cross between a pear and an apple they are inedible until cooked. Forewarned I didn't taste mine assessing their ripeness through colour and smell alone. I had a recipe for quince jelly I'd found year I'd bought the tree and I was excited at the prospect of replenishing my depleted jam stock at this late stage of the season. As at the time of writing the quince jelly is cooling in the jars, it remains to be seen if I got the setting point right but I am hopeful. I now have a fair amount of experience in jam making and quince and because of the huge amount of natural pectin in quince on the whole they seemed easier to deal with. Of course I have a few extra jars as well as it doesn't matter how satisfied I might be with my own produce it always, always tastes the better for sharing. As for next year, well I think I might try drying fruit to preserve it and you can be sure any success I find I'll happily come back and share 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.**

