

The Plot So Far...

A Newsletter of the South Harpenden Allotments and Gardens Society - Spring 2023

From the Chairman..



Well, well after a hot and sunny summer we have had to endure a wet and cold winter but we have the prospects of an early spring with snowdrops, crocus and daffodils well advanced already. On my recent visits to our eight sites there seems to be lots of activity under way, despite the soggy ground. Overall the sites are fully let, although as rent renewal time comes round inevitably a few ploholders decide to give up.

The Society is run by volunteers, the Committee and the hard working site reps. On some of our sites we do need extra help, in particular Churchfield, Sibley Ave and Topstreet Way, so if you feel you could spare some time to help out chat to the current site rep.

In 2022 we started on phasing out some of our older machinery and looking at battery operated equipment, with two battery mowers and a battery strimmer. The results have been encouraging, but the drawback is that only at Piggottshill site is there mains electricity, making charging a problem. At present site reps from other sites take the batteries home to recharge. During 2023/24 our 2-stroke petrol strimmers will be replaced with battery powered machines. A reminder with our current petrol machines the only suitable fuel is E5 – at the pumps it is marked as ‘super’ and has the lower ethanol content.

The Society shop continues to flourish and we have recently been able to appoint Steve Case as our new Shop Manager. The seed order was due to be delivered at the end of January and we have tried a few different varieties this season. The seed potatoes, subject to weather conditions usually arrive in February but the hard winter in Scotland may have led to delays. The shop is open January – November on Sunday mornings, 10 am to midday.

Best wishes for a prosperous and productive growing season in 2023.

Mike Cobley

Wildlife



Muntjac fawn at Aldwickbury, awaiting its mother's return, May 2022



(photos: Roger Glanville)

Awards and Competitions

Allotments were originally intended, of course, to produce supplementary food. Nowadays I suspect that purpose comes third after having fun (enjoyment of growing plants) and taking healthy exercise. The fun part can include taking part in competitions, for those who have a competitive streak, even though gardening is not really a competitive sport. Information on the society's competitions and awards can be found on our website.

Well-kept plots were again considered for awards in 2022, and expertly judged by Linda Gahagan following RHS guidelines. Results, and photos from the awards presentation evening in October, are available on the website. Here is my photo (right) showing one view of 2022's "most attractive plot", winning the Percy Bradbury Cup for Vanessa Olney and Mark Neal.



As in some previous years, scarecrows were judged from photos shown at the awards evening. Below is Clare and David Calle's "Crow family", judged to be the best entry in 2022's scarecrow competition.



The annual photo competition continues to flourish. All 2022 entries, including the winning photos, can be found on the website.

If you enjoy the added fun (or stress) of competition, don't forget to enter your best allotment photo or make a scarecrow for 2023. And, if you would like your plot to be considered for an award, check on RHS rules (again on our website). With a little effort (or better still, a *big* effort) your plot might win you an award in the gold, silver, bronze, or special categories.

Editor

Cover crops: are they of value on allotments?

What are they?

They are crops which are not planted for harvesting, but for 'protecting' or 'improving' the soil environment. They are sown in periods between the harvest of one crop and planting another. The duration of a cover crop can vary from a few weeks to many months, depending on the situation and objective.

Why the interest?

These have become very widely used on conventional arable farms in the last 10 years, although they have been an integral part of 'organic' systems for decades. There are now financial incentives for farmers to sow cover crops as part of initiatives to promote 'regenerative' or 'conservation' agriculture. One key objective of such systems is to minimise the amount of bare soil by integrating commercial crops with cover crops to achieve almost continuous plant cover.

What are the benefits?

Claimed benefits include: building soil fertility and organic matter; improving soil structure; reducing soil erosion; weed and pest management; creating habitat for wildlife; reducing nutrient loss; improving water quality. Many of these benefits require a long-term commitment – cover crops are not a 'quick fix' and there is little evidence that they improve crop yields in the short-term.

What sort of species are used as cover crops?

The following are often used, usually in mixtures: mustard and other brassicas; vetches and clovers; oats and rye; buckwheat; phacelia. They all have 'pros' and 'cons'. For example, brassicas grow rapidly but may encourage pests, legumes fix nitrogen but tend to be slow growing, buckwheat establishes very quickly but is short-lived and phacelia produces nice flowers and encourages bees but, if allowed to seed, can become a weed. There is clearly a cost issue with sowing cover crops which produce nothing you can utilise directly.

How do I destroy a cover crop?

This is a key consideration for allotmenters. Farmers will usually either spray glyphosate or use cultivations to destroy cover crops although 'crushing' plants when frozen using specialised machines can also be effective. So, on allotments, the willingness to use glyphosate or apply physical effort to destroy cover crops may be **THE** most important consideration. In contrast to most farms, the use of black plastic sheeting to cover plots on allotments is a realistic alternative to cover crops and can achieve some, but not all, of the benefits.

What is my experience?

I have sown buckwheat, vetch, spring oats and phacelia on different plots on my allotment, as well as using black plastic sheeting. My allotment neighbours have used 'natural regeneration' (I call it 'weedy'). The following photos highlight some of the issues about cover crops on allotments.



Buckwheat was sown on 17 Aug 2022. Photo above taken on 25 Sept 2022 demonstrating rapid growth and good weed suppression. Photo on right taken on 31 Dec 2022 showing 'natural' frost kill. A good choice for allotments due to its ability to 'self-destruct'. Aesthetics? Very Good.



Spring oats sown in August 2022. Photo on left taken on 22 Oct 2022 demonstrating rapid growth and good weed suppression. Photo on right taken on 31 Dec 2022 showing partial frost kill. Frost kill cannot be guaranteed so a poor choice for allotments unless happy to spray off with glyphosate or enjoy the exercise digging it in. Aesthetics? Mediocre.



Vetch sown in August 2022. Photo on left taken on 16 Oct 2022 demonstrating rapid growth and good weed suppression. Photo on right taken on 31 Dec 2022 showing partial frost kill. Frost kill cannot be guaranteed. N fixing ability useful but need to be happy to spray off with glyphosate or enjoy the exercise digging it in. Aesthetics and 'feel-good' factor? Good.



Phacelia. Photo on left taken on 15 Dec 2018 demonstrating good weed suppression. Flowers are attractive – see photo above. More frost-tolerant than some other cover crops – this can be considered a 'good' or 'bad' trait. Needs to be destroyed before shedding seeds – timing can be tricky. Aesthetics and 'feel-good' factor? Excellent.

Black plastic sheeting. Photo on right taken on 25 Sept 2022. This is a thick, durable 3 x 4 m plastic sheet (damp proof membrane grade) from Toolstation (about £15). The black plastic sheeting sold in most garden centres is too thin and does not last. Some people prefer the woven plastic material which is permeable to air and water. Personally, I am not convinced of the benefits and the plastic shreds it produces are a menace to lawnmowers. Plastic sheets are effective – as long as well weighted down. Aesthetics: poor.



Natural regeneration (aka 'weeds'). Photo on right taken on 31 Dec 2022. Letting land simply 'green up' does achieve some of the benefits of cover crops but risks letting weeds produce more seeds and you still have the issue about how you destroy the vegetation before sowing your crops. The 'no cost' option. Aesthetics: poor.



Conclusion: Personally, I am not convinced that sowing cover crops on allotments provides much benefit apart from 'making you feel you are doing the right thing'. However, this 'feelgood' factor tends to 'evaporate' rapidly when faced with digging in a mass of wet, green vegetation in spring. That said, buckwheat is a good option for sowing in late summer due to its ability to establish rapidly and to 'self-destruct'. It has the added benefit of not being related to any of the major crops so poses little risk of encouraging pests and diseases, which may be an issue with brassica and legume cover crops.

Stephen Moss (Topstreet Way)

Growing Crimson Crush tomatoes on the allotment

I have tried to grow tomatoes on my allotment over the years but they all eventually succumbed to disease, either when the fruits were green or shortly after the fruits ripened.

The last varieties I tried were Roma and Big Daddy. Big Daddy is a beef steak tomato and is described as being disease resistant but, after some of the fruits had ripened on the allotment, the plants succumbed to disease. However, the Big Daddy tomatoes held out against disease longer than other varieties that I have grown.

I then searched on the internet for disease-resistant tomatoes and came across a variety called Crimson Crush, which was bred for its blight resistance. Descriptions of Crimson Crush state that even if a plant develops blight the plant is meant to fight it and still produce fruits.

The Crimson Crush plants are described as being high-yielding, with the fruit described as being juicy and sweet, with a slightly acidic, full flavour. They are also described as having medium size tomatoes that grow to be about 200 g each on average, making them perfect for slicing and as salad tomatoes. The plants can grow to over 120 cm tall.

I bought Crimson Crush tomato seeds and found that they easily germinated indoors, where I transferred them to my conservatory. In May 2022, I planted them on the allotment in a raised bed, with compost mixed in, using grow pots and each plant was supported by a single cane. I planted the tomato plants deep so that the roots were below the soil level and then filled it with compost.

As the plants grew, they developed into very large, heavy plants that needed better support. I increased the number of support canes but they should have been supported by a wooden frame. The fruits were so sweet that my granddaughter ate them like apples!

In summary, the Crimson Crush tomatoes were a great success and yielded a large number of tomatoes per plant. None of the plants became diseased, although 2022 was a very dry summer. After this experience I plan to grow them again in 2023, but I will make a wooden support frame to fully support the plants. I recommend trying them for anyone who has had problems with diseased tomatoes.

Pictures show the tomato plants in the grow pots.



Tomato food goes in the centre ring and water goes in the outer ring.

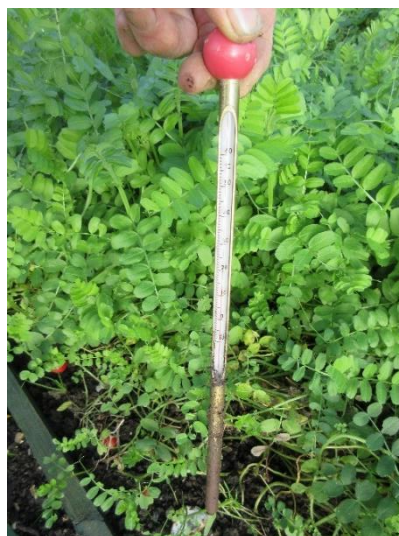
Rod Cooley (Oakley Road)

Allotment Inessentials...

The following items are by no means essential for 'allotment success' but can be useful. Ideas for presents for those people who already have 'everything', perhaps?

1. Soil thermometer.

It is generally not worth sowing seeds outdoors in spring until the **soil** temperature reaches about 8 °C (or 10 °C with sweetcorn). Farmers traditionally used to sit on the soil with their bare backsides and, if it was not too uncomfortable, reckon that the soil was warm enough for seed germination, so would start sowing their crops. I doubt this technique gets the approval of SHAGS. Far better to use a soil thermometer, as shown, in which a metal sleeve protects the more delicate part of the instrument when pushed into the soil 10 cm or so deep.



2. Clever Net.

The benefits of a fine mesh net to keep out pests will be recognised by all plot holders. This Harrod net is attached to the frame by 'clever clips' (see photo) which allow the net to detach itself in strong winds or after heavy snow thus preventing damage to the lightweight frame - but still giving protection to the plants beneath. Worth having if only for the smug self-satisfaction you get when seeing how other plot holder's frames have collapsed or been damaged by the recent heavy snow, for example. (Apologies here to unfortunate fellow Topstreet plot-holders for my unworthy thoughts....).



The main downside is that the 'clever clips' can get detached from the net and are then, being black, hard to find on the ground. My suggestion to Harrod to supply them in some easier-to-spot colour was met with the feeble excuse that this would 'not be as aesthetically pleasing'. Pathetic.

Harrod's (like Harrods') market is clearly 'top end' with prices to match (£250 for a matching fork and spade – don't make me laugh!). Their stuff is good – but pricy. See:

<https://www.harrodhorticultural.com/>



3. Plastic box for seed packets

Do you keep half-used packets of seeds in a disorganised, scattered jumble? Or do you, like me, carefully re-seal them and keep them systematically arranged in alphabetical order in a plastic box. Sickening, isn't it? This type of small plastic box is a good idea as it is just the right size for most seed packets and holds a reasonable number. The clip on-lid keeps the contents dry if it starts raining. This one was from Hobbycraft but I am sure similar ones are widely available. Storage in high humidity greatly reduces the longevity of most seeds so having them stored in a nice clean box may make storage indoors during the winter more 'acceptable' as it does prevent seeds dropping out all over the place.



4. Small-seed sower

It is quite difficult to sprinkle small seeds (like carrots) evenly down a row by hand so this little device is designed to help distribute seeds more evenly. You can vary the size of the aperture, depending on the size of the seeds, by simply rotating the clear, detachable cover to one of six positions. The seeds are placed in the circular receptacle and by gently shaking the sower the seeds come out of the spout in a more controlled manner. Available at all good Garden Centres.



5. Fast flow water butt tap

Do you find it rather a bore waiting for your watering can to fill up from your water butt because the flow of water is too slow? Life is too short for this, surely. What you need is a bigger tap – obvious, isn't it? This well-made Garland tap is interchangeable with most standard water butt taps but check before you buy – don't blame me if it doesn't fit.

Important note: the photo of my watering can overflowing was created purely for demonstrative purposes and in no way represents my normal *modus operandi*. There was a tray underneath the watering can to catch the overflowing water which was promptly recycled, of course....



6. Model snake for deterring pests (e.g. cats)



This life-size and life-like model snake is designed for keeping outdoors. Strategically placed, it might fool some of the animals that seek to steal your produce or deposit piles of unmentionable material close to your prized vegetables. Does it work? No!

Stephen Moss (Topstreet Way)

Plot Watching 2022

Wildlife (continued from p.2)

The cute creature in the photos on page 2, and its kin, may have been the cause of some distress among members as their sweet corn crops were gobbled up later in the year, though I'm sure most of the damage was caused by **grey squirrels**, an even more destructive alien pest. Suitable fencing to exclude deer is perhaps best left to individual plot holders, since site-boundary fencing does not seem to work. Excluding squirrels needs a different kind of fencing, or very strong netting. Squirrels can be controlled on a local scale by regular trapping, as has been shown in gardens not far from here. There is now a government-backed 5-year action plan, supported by numerous conservation and forestry organisations, called 'Squirrel Accord', aimed at 'humane grey squirrel management'. Outcomes should include fewer dead, de-barked trees, a revival in populations of the native red squirrel, and perhaps even safety for our sweet corn.

We have plenty more wildlife on the sites (Piggottshill anyway), not all of it visible. **Badger** and **roe deer** have both been filmed, apparently. **Rats** are present around the edges, but are not really a problem. There is, however, a vacancy for a ratting terrier since the retirement of Mungo, the site's favourite ratter. There are also **mice**, but I suspect not much of a problem. I only rarely have to resort to 'Little Nipper' traps in my cold frames. They are probably kept in check by foxes and the army of domestic cats that patrol our site. Cats in very small numbers might potentially be useful in maintaining the health of populations of smaller prey creatures, in the absence of native predators. In an ideal world, however, with no domestic cats, or just a sensible few, small native predators such as stoats or even polecats might be encouraged to return. There would certainly be more fledgling songbirds (and no perpetual stink of cat mess in my garden!). I saw no fledgling songbirds at PH last year, except for one young robin, which probably would not survive the onslaught. It is a pity that grey squirrels are too big and too quick for the cats.

Pondlife

The Piggottshill pond (plot 68) is flourishing again after its latest relining under the supervision of Rich Waight a couple of years ago. Large amounts of **frog** spawn led to a good population of tadpoles in 2022, despite the abundance of predatory **newts**. I don't know what became of the froglets, but young newts were developing nicely in late summer. The **duckweed** that used to cover the pond surface did not yet return, suggesting that ducks have not dropped in recently to deposit pieces from their feet. Visitors to the pond might notice the weeds at the rear of the pond plot. The **brambles** and bindweed are not particularly welcome (we have two white bindweed species here, **hedge bindweed** and **large bindweed**, not to be confused with the small pink **field bindweed** that spreads across cultivated plots), but we leave the **nettles** and **hedge garlic** to themselves, hopefully to provide breeding sites for butterflies and other creatures. A large patch of **green alkanet** (right) also established itself



in front of the nettles last year; bees seemed to be enjoying it. Underneath the nettles there are usually plenty of **slow-worms** and, when not in the pond, newts and frogs. You might like to sample the young nettle tops for use as a vegetable. We try to keep the pond area itself a little tidier, without resorting to major landscaping. Colourful **damselflies** could often be seen depositing their eggs in the pond. **Dragonflies** visited later in the year. The ornamental white-flowering bush (**Hebe** I think) in front of the pond was alive with bees in the first half of summer.

Wild flowers and weeds

Wild plants are valuable for maintaining insect populations and in giving us a sense of proportion. That's why part of the Piggottshill pond plot is left alone, and some of the boundary fences are not ruthlessly strimmed. But mostly these plants are weeds and not compatible with vegetable growing, especially if they produce seeds prolifically or have rhizomes or deep and spreading roots; such plants need to be controlled.

My nomination for weed of the year (2022) on our site (PH) is **lamb's lettuce (corn salad)**. It appeared



a few years ago (or went unnoticed by me previously), and has been increasing rapidly ever since. It grows, flowers and sets seeds (lots!) in spring, then disappears until the next year, when it appears in even more places. It is allegedly a salad vegetable and you can even buy its seed (but why would you?); maybe that's how it arrived as a weed at PH. It does have one use though: its soft tissue makes it a good compost additive. Its large clumps can easily be pulled up and dumped in the compost bin. Although now abundant, its easy removal makes it no problem on a well-tended

plot. But it will take over a neglected plot for a few weeks from early spring (as in photo on left). Curiously, it is also now one of those weeds that has become rare in field crops, and so is much prized by wild-plant spotters. We found some growing wild in a rape-seed crop in north Herts last year; I was not too excited.

Who's been eating my crops?

Perhaps my near-corner plot under tall trees is especially susceptible to pests, notably the **wood pigeons** that occupy those trees. They have broad tastes and most crops have to be covered for protection. It is impossible to grow brassicas (cabbage family), especially, without nets. One day I chased away a wood pigeon that was sitting on top of my blackcurrant net, breaking the branches and eating the crop below. But there were still enough currants lower down to make far too much jam (after checking them for pigeon poo). Nets or fences are also necessary in my corner to prevent eating or trampling of crops by the "wildlife" already mentioned: **grey squirrels**, **muntjac deer**, **domestic cats**, or **foxes**. I also suspect foraging **jackdaws** and **magpies** of digging up crops in their hunt for grubs, but maybe I'm getting paranoid.

Allium leaf miner (larvae of a fly) continues to do its worst. My winter-planted onions were badly affected last year and the crop was small. I still grow leeks in fly-proof netting, which is supposed to prevent the flies getting at the plants to lay eggs. It is not very successful. This year there was little damage early on, perhaps because of the hot, dry summer conditions. But I have almost learned to live with the pest, by letting most leeks grow big and cutting off all the outer damaged leaves (and disposing of them off-site); there is usually enough inside to make the crop usable. Garlic seems to escape damage, probably because it develops early, but I still found a few brown pupae between the cloves.



Allium leaf miner damage on young onions

Aphids suddenly arrived in May. **Black bean aphids** were not very dense on my broad beans (photo, left), which were, fortunately, already approaching harvest ripeness. A few sprays with soapy water seemed to be enough to prevent them getting out of hand over the remaining period of pod development. But the aphids quickly spread to my very young runner bean plants, which were too near. They persisted and became quite severe later on, before suddenly vanishing in late July. Maybe it was too hot, or there were enough predators to eat them, though ladybirds were slow to build up and I did not see many. As in most years, the ladybirds were mostly the alien **harlequin ladybirds**, which apparently eat our benign red native ladybirds as well as aphids. Or maybe the **French marigolds** and **nasturtiums** I planted nearby were deterrent enough; I believe that's the theory anyway. Curiously, neither the flowers of my runner beans nor of the surrounding nasturtiums (we collect and use their fruits too – “false capers”) were pollinated during July. It seems that insect pollinators did not like the very hot weather – news to me! Anyway, the crop finally came later, in August and September.



At the same time as the bean aphids arrived there was a rapid increase in aphids (**mealy aphids** I think; photo, right) on my cabbage seedlings. They did much more damage, spoiling the growing tips, curling the plants and turning them pink. Soapy water seemed to do little and so I gave them a couple of doses of deltamethrin. Most of the cabbages eventually produced satisfactory heads, but smaller than usual, and many of them had persistent aphids. We still had a surplus to make plenty of sauerkraut.



Most of my fruit trees were planted (too close to the paths!) by a previous tenant, and so I don't know what varieties they are. One of the apples had so far not been very productive or tasty and I was not too disappointed that it was the one that became severely infested with **woolly aphid** last year (photo, right). There are various approaches to controlling it, but I could not be bothered. I was thinking of putting the tree on the 5th November bonfire but then, ironically, it produced its first-ever good crop of tasty fruit. So I will keep it.



And what's been rotting my crops?

I was impatient and bought most of my 2022 seed potatoes long before our allotment shop had any in stock. Perhaps I should have waited and planted later, since two plants developed symptoms of **blackleg** (see photos below), a disease caused by a bacterium (*Pectobacterium atrosepticum*), which I had to dig up early for disposal off-site. The bacterium probably arrived on the tubers and benefitted from the cold moist conditions at early planting. Fortunately it was only two plants, and even they produced a few non-rotted tubers.



Diagnosing such diseases is not easy. At first I assumed this one was **stem canker**, caused by a fungus (*Rhizoctonia solani*), because some of the small tubers had symptoms of **black scurf** (photo below), caused by the same fungus, which I have not noticed before in my crops.

My early planting may have helped limit the amount of **potato common scab**, a disease favoured by dry soil, which would probably have been much more extensive on later tubers that were still developing in last summer's notorious drought. It is caused, by the way, by a fungus-like filamentous bacterium (*Streptomyces scabies*).



Black scurf on Désirée tubers (left)



Common scab, the most obvious of the many surface diseases that occur on potato tubers

Brown rot (*Monilinia* fungi) continues to be a messy nuisance on fruit trees. The pale spore-producing pustules often seem to be arranged in circles on the fruit surface (see photos); then the fruit rots quickly. Ideally, affected fruit and branches should be collected and taken off site. But there's far too much of it for that, so we have to put up with it. A well-cropping tree should still have enough healthy fruit, even allowing for those wriggling pink plum moth larvae inside many of the survivors. Plums seem to be worst affected by brown rot, pears much less so, and apples very much less so.



Brown rot on plum



Brown rot (and fly) on apple

Then came **fireblight**, perhaps brought on by the heat of July. This is another disease caused by a bacterium (*Erwinia amylovora*), which can affect apples and pears. Apparently there are no resistant varieties, though it really only affected my least favourite small pear tree (Conference I suspect). It is a weak tree, planted (not by me!) much too close to the tall boundary hedge, and its fruits never amount to much. My other two pear trees, bigger and healthier specimens, are different varieties and usually produce a lot of tasty fruit, much of which we store bottled in syrup.



Fireblight on pear

Those are just a few examples of the pests and diseases that affected my crops, and probably other people's too, during the last year. There were plenty more. It is surprising we get any healthy crops at all, or even bother to try. But at least we are not farmers or commercial growers, whose livelihoods depend on their crops. Even if just a small part of our crops survive it is usually enough for our needs. So let's relax and enjoy the survivors.

Healthy or not, there are still fruit trees on some plots that overhang and are a nuisance or a hazard, so **don't forget to prune** – you can do some of it in summer, and certainly in time for the 5th November burning.

My thanks to all contributors to this issue of *PSF*, and good luck with your crops in 2023!

Geoff Bateman (Piggottshill; editor)