
Newsletter of the South Harpenden Allotments and Gardens Society

Our precious allotments

As a Christmas present I was given a book called *Of Cabbages and Kings – the History of Allotments* by Caroline Foley. It's a fascinating account of the long and hard-fought right of individuals, mainly the poor, to have a piece of land to cultivate. It is definitely worth reading if you have time before the growing season starts.

Long ago allotments were considered a good idea by the landowning classes as a way of helping the labouring poor to feed their families - and keep them out of the ale house, but by 1925 land purchased for allotments by local councils was protected by statute, the basis of the protection we have today whereby councils cannot convert statutory allotment land to other use without ministerial permission. Of course there is always a danger that Section 8 of the Allotment Act 1925, which provides this protection, could be repealed and although the last attempt to do so in 2012 was unsuccessful it probably won't be the last.

By 2012 councils were being encouraged to hand responsibility for managing allotments to local groups and in early 2013 Harpenden town council devolved responsibility for the management of our nine sites, approximately 400 plots, to the Society. This brought us much more freedom to determine how the sites were managed but also more responsibility. We now decide everything that happens on our sites while the town council maintain the boundary hedges, fences and gates – and give us help where they can.

I hope you agree that we have risen to the challenge during the past two years and I described some of the achievements of the Society in the December email. At a meeting with the town council in January it was good to hear that the big improvements at Cross Lane, Oakley Road and Piggottshill were fully recognised and the work on Churchfield will be another success story this year. While the committee takes overall responsibility for the management of our allotments, all these successes and improvements come as a result of the hard work by site representatives and individual plot-holders, as do the improvements on all our sites. Take a look at the photographs on our website to see how good our allotments look. A history of the Society has also been put up: <http://www.shallotments.org.uk/the-societys-history.html>

So where now for the Society, what challenges and opportunities lie ahead this year? We know that with increasing pressure on land for houses in Harpenden our sites are attractive to developers and the protection we have could be fragile. We must try to have our plots fully let, and ensure each plot is well cultivated. Currently this is the best way we can keep our allotments safe. Our letting figures are good but we always need more people ready to take on a plot.

A big challenge is what to do with the small minority of overgrown and neglected plots. We understand that at any one time some of our members will experience increased work or family commitments, illness or other problems which leave little or no time to cultivate their plots. Sometimes plots are left for a period of time in the hope that they can be cultivated later but in the end they have to be given up. I would ask that if people find they cannot cultivate their plots that they take early action – tell the site representative about the situation as soon as possible. Plots which are just left get weedy, spread weeds to neighbouring plots, and are increasingly difficult to clear or let again.

One great opportunity we have is to increase the biodiversity on our sites. This is already happening where flower meadows, large and small, are being managed, bug hotels and hedgehog hotels are appearing and on one site beehives are planned to arrive this spring. If we can use bee friendly products we and the bees will benefit on all sites.

How times have changed!

Lin Norman,
Chairman



Will you join the 50 tonne club this year?

What, you may well ask, is the 50 tonne club? Let me explain. Commercial potato growers expect to obtain yields of at least 50 tonnes/ha with main crop varieties such as Cara, Desiree and Maris Piper. It *should* be easier to obtain equivalent yields on an allotment where each plant can receive more individual attention. However, a much wider array of pesticides is available to commercial growers for control of pests and diseases and they will often spray crops 12 or more times in a season - to prevent blight, for example. In addition, they will often irrigate their crops regularly. So, the allotment challenge I am proposing is to try to obtain a yield of potatoes of at least the equivalent of 50 tonnes/ha. The following table shows the tuber yield per plant required to obtain the equivalent of 50 tonnes/ha at different row width and seed tuber spacings within the row. In good allotment tradition, I have mixed imperial and metric measures. Row widths and spacing are given in inches while yield is given in grams. For other row widths and spacings you will have to work it out yourself.

Potato tuber yield per plant (in grams) to give a yield equivalent of 50 tonnes/ha

		Row width (inches)			
		18	24	30	36
Seed tuber spacing within row (inches)	12	695g	930g	1,160g	1,395g
	15	870g	1,160g	1,450g	1,740g
	18	1,045g	1,395g	1,740g	2,090g

As a broad generalization, you need to obtain tuber yields of between 1 and 1.5 kg per plant at typical planting densities. Commercial growers only harvest and sell tubers above a certain size but I'll be generous here, and allow you to include everything edible you can dig up.

How did I measure up to this challenge in the three years I have had an allotment? I averaged 25.6 t/ha of Desiree in 2012 (disappointing – bad blight); 76.4 t/ha of Cara in 2013 (excellent); and 49.9 t/ha of Maris Piper in 2014 (just failed). Thus I exceeded the magic 50 t/ha target in only one year. Plan for 2015? Use Cara, which I rate highly as a main crop variety, and use more fertilizer. Oh yes, and maybe harvest a few stones too.....

Stephen Moss



Taking on an allotment

It can be quite an exciting but daunting experience taking on an allotment. Unfortunately a lot of the TV makeover programmes make it look so easy. Take Joe Swift for example, on Gardener's World, a few years ago. He took on and cleared an overgrown plot, dug in huge quantities of manure and compost and within the year had beautiful fruit and vegetable crops. He made it look so easy! What we never saw though were the team of helpers and contractors behind the scenes, doing all the actual work – and all paid by the BBC!

Luckily when my wife and I took on our plot at Cross Lane over 15 years ago, gardening programmes on TV never featured allotments, so we were not under any illusion of how much work was involved. At the time there were only about six plot holders on our site, three of them from where we live in Mons Close, which is almost adjacent to the site.

We were given a lot of help and advice by our neighbours, most notably by Richard Williams, our site representative at the time, who persuaded us to take a plot and advised on which was the best one to have. The best advice we were given by Richard was not to try and tackle the whole plot at once, just concentrate on about a third or quarter of it and cover the rest with weed suppressant material. The following year work on a bit more and so on until after a few years you have a nice healthy plot. Cross Lane now has over 40 working plots I believe and looks like a proper allotment site, unlike the desolate field much of it looked all those years ago.

Unfortunately it is very difficult to give advice to new plot holders and most of the time they don't ask for it – thanks to these wretched TV makeover programmes. If my wife and I meet new plot holders we try, very tactfully, to pass on the advice we were given, which was not try to tackle the whole plot in one go. We have seen so many plot holders try to clear their whole plot in one go, leave it open to the elements, and then become disillusioned after about year as they cannot cope with the continual weed growth. Some even seem totally amazed that weeds and grass should grow again once they have been cleared! I know we don't want empty plots on any of our sites so maybe we should try, in the friendliest way possible, to offer help and

encouragement to new plot holders so that they can nurture and enjoy their plots for many years to come.

My wife and I sometimes still consider ourselves fairly newcomers to the world of allotments and often seek out the advice of our neighbours on site. What we've often thought would be a good idea, although not too sure how it could be organized, would be to have some sort of voluntary help line, telephone or email, or maybe a weekly surgery to impart help and advice. There is a wealth of knowledge across our sites from our expert and experienced plot holders.

Tony Dawson-Hill



Potatoes and carrots

When adding vegetable scraps to your kitchen compost bin, put your potato peelings on a plate first and give them 60 seconds in the microwave. This overcomes the problem of potatoes germinating all over your allotment if your compost was not completely ready before you used it. Also, start your very early carrots off in trays of toilet rolls. These can then be set out as soon as they germinate as they seem pretty impervious to cold once germinated. The toilet rolls give them a nice long straight root run. However the value type of loo rolls now have a very small diameter, which means Andrex all the time!

Marcia Dorey



The 2015 Annual Plan for site improvements & machinery

This year's Annual Plan for site improvements was agreed by the Society's committee in November. We looked at all requests from site reps and agreed which projects we could afford to fund. This year we intend to give our shop a bright new coat of paint, as the outside looks a little sorry for itself. As with all our projects we rely on volunteers to help with the work, so if you are handy with a paint brush you will be very welcome and we will publish the dates later in the year. We also intend to give the toilet at Piggottshill a little face lift. Our Churchfield site is earmarked for help this year as we were unable to fund any work last year. The new site rep, Keith Davison, has made a good start by clearing some of the overgrown plots and taking away lots of rubbish so, with the help of other plot holders, we should see a vast improvement by the end of the season. Cross Lane will have an Open Day in June, so watch out for more information. Last year we were unable to start the additional road works at Aldwickbury, but we have saved this money for the work in 2015. We could not achieve any of the planned works without your help, so thanks to all who gave their time last year and look forward to lots of volunteers next year.

	Approved	Machinery	
Shop/Main Store	£ 500.00		Repairs needed
PH Toilet	£ 250.00		Repairs needed
TAR outdoor area	£ 250.00		Fence/tidy up
Churchfield	£ 100.00		Wild Flower Area
	£ 200.00		Ploughing/Tilling
	£ 65.00		Weed killer
	£ 360.00		Manure storage
	£ 180.00		Skip hire
Cross Lane	£ 100.00		Open Day
Heath Close	£ 50.00		Guttering
Oakley Rd	£ 50.00		Bank area
Piggottshill	£ 200.00		Manure pen-top end
		£ 700.00	Mower
Topstreet Way	£ 250.00		Beech tree lopping
		£ 250.00	Mower replacement
Other site improv	£ 180.00		Weed supp membrane
	£ 65.00		Weed killer
Approved Totals	£ 2,800.00	£ 950.00	

Carole Pamphlett
Treasurer



Awards

Each year the Society gives awards for well cultivated plots, flower plots, the best overall plot and best site. We currently award gold, silver or bronze certificates and a small number of cups. You can find the current judging criteria on the website. We are reviewing the basis for judging and would like to hear your thoughts on the current system and any suggestions you would like to contribute to the review this year. Please send any suggestions to Chris Wilson, acting Awards Manager, at adcwilson@virginmedia.com



Chitting seed potatoes

Seed potato time is here again. We get many queries about chitting, i.e. starting the seed potatoes into growth. For small quantities, egg boxes work well. But you can use seed trays for larger numbers. You put the seed potato so that the 'rose' end, i.e. the one with the most eyes goes at the top (see photos). If you are still not sure, put them on their sides; the plants know what to do. As the potatoes chit, they will shrink and become wrinkly. This is normal. You must keep the growing plants frost free; a cool well-lit room is ideal (not direct sun; not near a radiator; not on a windowsill).



The 'wrong' end – a stalk and few 'eyes'



The 'right' (rose) end – no stalk; many 'eyes'

Peter Loveland



Rootstocks

Fruit trees will not reproduce true to their variety by means of planting seed because they are genetically not sufficiently uniform. Therefore they have to be propagated vegetatively by cuttings, rooted suckers, or by grafting onto rootstocks. Usually it is unsatisfactory to grow them from cuttings or suckers, as they grow too large, may not develop a good root system, and take a comparatively long time before they fruit. Grafting or budding a piece of the desired fruit variety onto a chosen rootstock gives control of tree size, fruit size, and can shorten the time to produce a fruit crop.

The reproduction of fruit trees by budding and grafting was well known to the ancient Greeks in at least the third century BC and probably to the ancient Egyptians a thousand years earlier. The practice was probably brought to Britain by the Romans. At first the rootstocks used were wild relatives of the cultivated fruit, such as crab apples and wild cherries. Later, use was made of seedlings, suckers, and fruit varieties which root very easily, such as the Burr Knot apple (one of the varieties on the Percy Bradbury Memorial plot at Piggotshill). The development of modern rootstocks was started in 1912 at the East Malling and Long Ashton Research Stations (near Maidstone and Bristol) by R. G. Hatton and B. T. P. Parker. This work led to the range of vegetatively-propagated rootstock varieties we use today. For each of the major tree fruits, such as apples, pears, plums and cherries, there is a range of rootstocks available to give various sizes of tree. The commonest are shown in the table below. Usually the more dwarfing the rootstock, the earlier it will promote a full crop of fruit. Trees on the more dwarfing rootstocks need permanent staking. The rootstocks used for pears are quince.

INFLUENCE OF ROOTSTOCK ON TREE SIZE

<i>Rootstock variety</i>	<i>Approximate final size of tree*</i>	<i>Rootstock variety</i>	<i>Approximate final size of tree*</i>
Apple**		Plum (including damsons and gages)	
M27	4 – 6 ft.	Pixy	8 – 10 ft.
M9	6 – 8 ft.	St Julien A	12 – 15 ft.
M26	8 – 10 ft.	Brompton	15 – 20 ft.
MM106	9 – 11 ft.	Myrobalan	20 ft. upwards
MM111	10 – 12 ft.		
M25	14 – 18 ft. upwards		
		Cherry	
Pear		Gisela 5	7 – 9 ft.
Quince C	5 – 7 ft.	Colt	15 – 20 ft.
Quince A	8 – 10 ft.	F12/1	25 ft. upwards

* Will also be influenced by soil conditions, fruit variety and pruning.

** M = Malling; MM = Malling Merton

David Ebbels

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S.H.A.G.S. Office Bearers and Committee Members, 2014-15

(As elected at the AGM on 21 May 2014)

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