

# The Plot So Far..

**Newsletter of the South Harpenden Allotments and Gardens Society – Spring 2021**

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## From the Chairman

WELCOME TO 'THE PLOT SO FAR' ...



Over the recent years along with rent collection days during February and March and the chance to meet all the Society members, one of the highlights was the publication of the SHAGS magazine, with interesting articles, detailed research results, ploholders' exploits, successes and failures, general news and a complete contact list of the Committee members. It has also been a useful PR tool for new member enquiries and formed part of new ploholder paperwork. As more and more of our admin turned over to 'on line' transactions 'The Plot So Far' nearly disappeared, but thanks to the intervention of Geoff Bateman it is back for 2021.

2020 was a difficult year for everyone and our allotments have been a haven of tranquillity as people were able to have exercise outdoors and enjoy socially distanced conversations with neighbouring ploholders. Our sites have been transformed and there is a waiting list now for a plot on each and every site. We welcome our many new members.

When you get to the back page you will notice there are a few gaps in the Committee. Most important to keep our sites in tip top order is the role of Site Rep and we have no one yet for Sibley Avenue and Oakley Road and an additional rep is required for Churchfield. Our Shop Manager vacancy remains unfilled from early August and this is putting some burden on the volunteers who have kept the shop stocked up and running. If you would like to help in any of these tasks, call in at the shop on a Sunday morning, as during lockdown it has become a socially distanced forum between a number of committee members calling in to buy their supplies.

**Mike Cobby** (SHAGS Chairman)

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## Allotment Shop

Our well stocked shop continues, despite losing our manager, Roger Gillet, who suffered a catastrophic stroke in early August and now is in a nursing home in Welshpool, to be near his son Paul. With the enforced lockdown during 2020 we still managed to supply items to members on an informal basis, then when restrictions were eased we had some of the busiest-ever trading sessions on record. Supplies have become limited at times, no more than currently with peat products likely to be banned

in the future and peat-free products in overwhelming demand, which is proving difficult to satisfy by the producers, then the suppliers and then the outlets, like us, for our customers.

As part of reopening we have undertaken a deep clean of the shelving, made improvements on the display of some of the items for sale and taken down old shelving in the small kitchen space. To make payments easier we have tried to make payments direct to the bank easier, but watch this space, from next month we are introducing a 'pay by card' facility ... taa daa ! We also are planning a better way of serving coffees on Sundays, having experimented with a Nespresso machine we are now looking at a better way and hoping to recruit a barista ... any volunteers?

In the run up to Easter we also tried opening on Saturday afternoons, to ease the Sunday queues, resulting in a slight increase in takings over the two days at our busiest time of the season with seed potatoes, onion sets, summer bulbs etc., ready for planting.

The shop has had the roofing renewed late last year, the exterior woodwork is nearly ready for a working party to smarten up the outside, and in 2022 we are also looking at replacing the main doors and trying to find a new canopy for the front shop awning.

**The Sunday Shop Team**



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## **Photo Competition for 2021**

Early in April this year we announced that our society would be holding another photo competition. 2020 was the first time we had ever attempted to do an online photo competition. The original idea was to try and get as many of our plot holders involved as possible. Not everyone is at the standard where they might win an award in our annual plot judging, but with so many people able to take a quick snap on their phone we hoped that we would get a good response. The theme was 'I love my allotment' and we asked our members to take a photo that gave them a feel-good factor while on their plot. It could be a beautiful butterfly, birds looking for worms, an odd-shaped veg, a beautiful bloom, your children or grandchildren helping you. We asked that they hold their photos and submit a favourite later in the year, so we could have a nice display at our Awards Evening in October. Unfortunately this had to be cancelled because of the CV lockdown but the good news was our allotments were busier than every as was stayed open throughout the year.

Our main problem was how people could send us their photos and how we could store them in one place for the judging. Rod Cooley our web master worked very hard on this and he was able to send

out detailed instruction. We had a good response and some lovely pictures were sent in, which made it hard for our three judges. In the end they chose four photos to receive a small prize, a voucher for our allotments shop.

We hope that this year we get more people joining in, and have some lovely photos for our Awards Evening in October, CV restriction permitting.

**Carole Pamphlett** (S.H.A.G.S Treasurer)

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## **S.H.A.G.S on Facebook**

For those that may not know S.H.A.G.s now has a Facebook page. Please do follow and like.

@SouthHarpندنAllotments

I decided to set it up to share content via a social media platform to be able to promote the Society locally and update group members with information.

Currently the page is a closed group but, in time, I hope to turn it into a community page allowing members to post articles too.

If you'd like to add interesting tips or articles please do message via the page.

Long-term, I am looking for a couple of likeminded people to become admins alongside me (I already have a member from Churchfield); this is an extremely low-key role but will allow others to post comments and photos to keep the page interesting and interactive.

If you'd like to grow the group and enjoy social media please do get in contact.

**Lisa Lyons-Montgomery** (Piggottshill)

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## **For Peat's sake... why are we still using peat?**

Gardeners and the horticultural industry have long used peat to grow plants – as potting composts and soil conditioners. However, for many years, environmental charities, wildlife trusts and even the government have been trying to persuade us to move to peat-free alternatives. What is all the fuss about?

Healthy peatland stores vast amounts of carbon, as well as helping to control flooding, and providing homes for wildlife - much of it threatened. It takes many, many centuries for a peat bog to form, with its unique wildlife. Modern machinery destroys it in days, to produce peat for the horticultural industry. This releases huge amounts of carbon dioxide, contributing to global warming and climate change. We can stop this, by switching to peat-free alternatives or peat-free compost.

Peat is mainly sourced from lowland raised bogs in the UK and Ireland. The effects of extraction are irreplaceable, as it takes thousands of years to make a peatbog. Over 99% of peat is used in the horticultural industry, with 69% used by gardeners and much of the rest as mushroom compost.

In 2010 the UK Government introduced a voluntary code to eventually ban peat from horticulture. The industry was asked to remove peat from retail use by 2020 and from commercial use by 2030. Yet over 2 million cubic metres of peat was sold in the UK in 2019, and peat still constitutes 50% of all potting composts sold. Peat consumption has reduced by just 12% in the compost that gardeners buy in this time. This means peat bogs are still being destroyed at an alarming rate, and carbon is still being released on an enormous scale.

So why are we still using peat?

- 1) Many people have had a bad experience with peat-free alternatives in the past. There is now a wide range of different peat-free growing media, with much improved quality. It's important to choose the right compost for the right purpose – for seeds, potting, soil conditioning or for containers. It's also important to read and follow the advice on the label, as peat-free products may need slightly different treatment to peat, especially watering and feeding instructions. The RHS gives more advice on its website (<https://www.rhs.org.uk>).
- 2) Peat-based composts are cheaper. They may be a little cheaper, and the price of peat-free does tend to reflect the quality. However, can we really afford to continue destroying our peat bogs?
- 3) It says 'environmentally friendly' or 'organic' on the packaging, so it must be peat free. This is not always the case as many of these brands still contain peat (*Ed. One well-known brand says 'environmentally friendly' on the bag but is 100% moss peat!*). It's really important to check the label – if it doesn't say 'peat-free' then it probably isn't.
- 4) We buy plants from nurseries or garden centres that have been grown in peat. If we ask what the growing medium is, and explain why this is important, the message will start to get through. Shockingly, the vast majority of garden centres are still using peat-based composts to grow the plants that we buy.

The SHAGS allotment shop stocks peat-free composts, and I strongly urge you to buy peat-free, both from the shop and in garden centres and supermarkets. Maybe it is time for the allotment shop to stop stocking peat-based composts altogether? Many wildlife and environmental groups have written to Environment Secretary George Eustice calling for an end to all peat extraction, import, export and sale by 2025 (*Ed. Bord na Mona – the Irish Peat Board – is to close all its extraction sites by 2025 – see <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/27/ireland-closes-peat-bogs-climate-change>*).

Want to do more? Join the 'For Peat's Sake' campaign, to help end the use of peat in horticulture. <https://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/ForPeatsSake>. Also, I just received this petition from the Wildlife Trusts about banning peat in compost: <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/ban-sale-peat>. It makes very sobering reading.

Remember, if it doesn't say peat-free, then it probably isn't. Switching to peat-free is such a simple and important way to combat carbon emissions and reduce habitat loss. Please don't use the remaining peat, it is such a vital and irreplaceable resource.

**Margaret Charlston (Piggottshill)**

Editorial inserts (above) and the following disturbing photos and additional web-page information were supplied by Peter Loveland:

Image below of a peat bog, before and after peat extraction. From <https://www.forpeatssake.co.uk/pages/saveourpeat> - source acknowledged.



There are also some very striking 'before and after' images at: <https://www.indefenseofplants.com/blog/2015/5/4/the-truth-about-peat?rq=peat>

## Evaluation of Black 'Permanent' Markers on Plant Labels on My Allotment

A range of different brands of black markers claiming to be 'permanent' was used (see table). Text was written on both sides of white plastic plant labels plus pencil on wooden lolly sticks and white marker on slate labels. Labels were placed on my allotment at Harpenden on 12 January 2020, with one side of each label facing due south (S) and the other side, unsurprisingly, facing due north (N). Two labels were used for each marker. Legibility of writing was assessed 12 months later, on 17 January 2021, using the scale shown below. Photos were also taken – labels were temporarily turned round so both sides could be photographed from the same camera position.



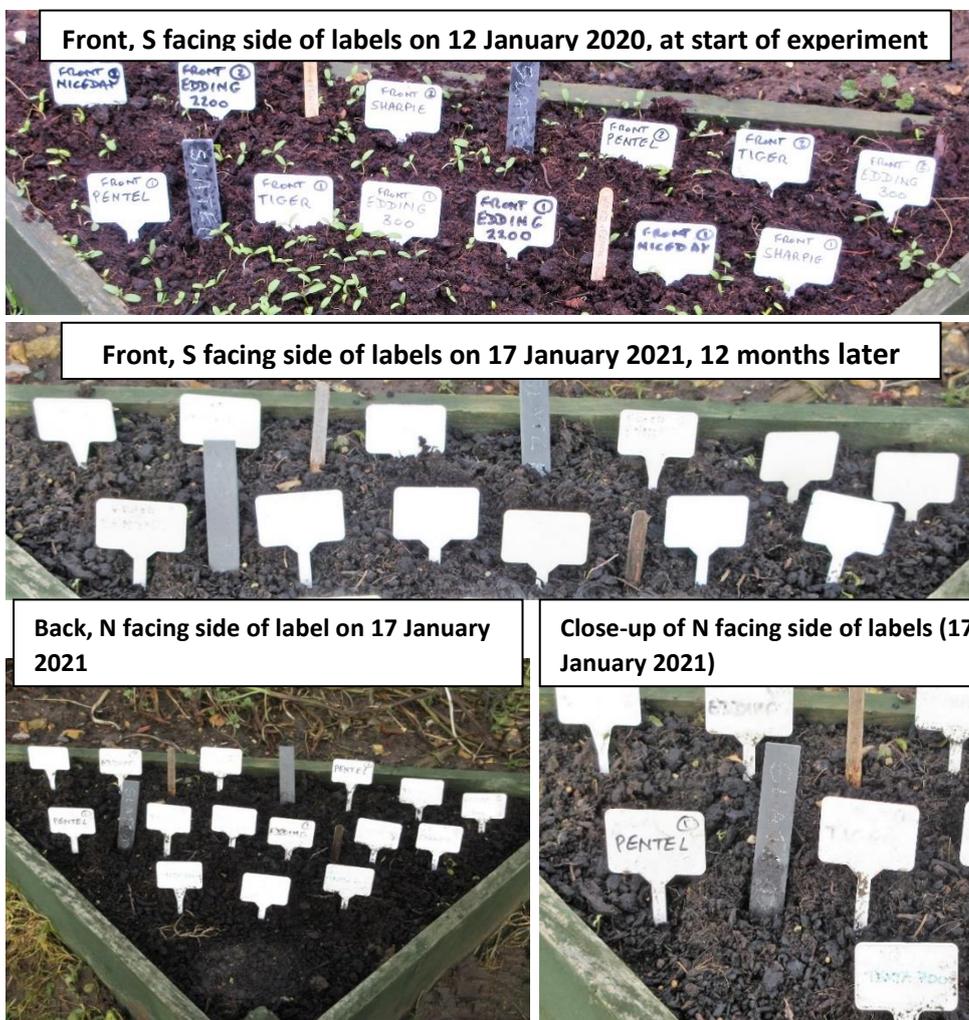
Scoring
5 = virtually no fading, perfectly legible
4 = slight fading but still clearly legible
3 = noticeably faded but legible
2 = badly faded but still just about legible
1 = severely faded, virtually illegible
0 = totally faded and illegible

Details of markers used and assessments are given below.

Assessed 17 Jan 2021 (12 months)	Front - S facing			Back - N facing			difference (back - front)
	Rep 1	Rep 2	mean	Rep 1	Rep 2	mean	
Edding 300	0	0	0	2	2	2	2
Edding 2200	0	1	0.5	3	3	3	2.5
Nice Day	0	0	0	1	1	1	1
Pentel Twin Tip	2	2	2	4	4	4	2
Sharpie	0	0	0	3	2	2.5	2.5
Texta 700	0	0	0	3	3	3	3
Tiger	0	0	0	2	1	1.5	1.5
Slate + white marker	1	3	2	3	1	2	0
Lolly stick + pencil	2	3	2.5	1	1	1	-1.5
mean			0.8			2.2	1.4

## Conclusions

- Most 'permanent' markers failed dismally to live up to their name. This was true after only 6 months too (data not shown).
- There was a clear winner – the **Pentel Twin Tip**. This was the only marker with which writing on plastic labels could be said to be still clearly legible after one year.
- There was a big difference in legibility between N and S facing sides of the plastic labels. Writing legibility was much poorer on the side facing the sun (S) and better on the side never exposed to direct sunlight (N).
- Perversely, writing in pencil on the lolly stick was *more* legible on the south facing side, as the sun appeared to bleach the wood while not affecting the pencil writing. However, the wood was starting to rot after one year.
- Slate labels were not very successful as the uneven surface meant legibility of writing was not very good even at start of the experiment.
- ***The best solution would be to use the Pentel Twin Tip marker on plastic labels but ensure that the side with writing on faces north, or at least is not in direct sunlight.***



P.S. I am repeating this experiment using a wider range of Pentel markers.

Stephen Moss (Topstreet)

## Potatoes

It is a curious fact that some of the world's most important food crops are either toxic or belong to plant groups with toxic members. Cassava (*Manihot esculenta* – a member of the Euphorbiaceae) is a very good example of the former and in the form known as manioc can be fatal if not prepared properly (however did people work out how to do it before it killed them all?). The potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) and the sweet potato (*Ipomea batatas*) are both in the Order Solanales, of which the most famous member in the UK is Deadly Nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*). Aubergines and tomatoes are also Solanales and, if you are like me, the bitter taste of the former renders them almost inedible whilst other people find them delicious. Most of these plants originated in South America, especially in the northern Andes. The common potato has its homeland in Bolivia/Peru, where it was probably 'domesticated' by the Incas or their forebears. Nowadays, a large number of Andean 'heritage' varieties are the subject of intensive research as they provide a very valuable gene pool (you can find out a lot more by typing 'chuno' into Google).

A common feature of some of these plants is the formation of below-ground tubers which, with some exceptions (above) are edible with very little preparation and also can be stored for long periods. Almost every country in the temperate regions of the world has a potato breeding programme and thousands of varieties are known. Even in the UK the 'approved' variety list is huge (see: <http://varieties.ahdb.org.uk/varieties/index/>). Most of the varieties are targeted at the commercial market and have been bred for very specific properties, e.g. baking, chipping, mash, supermarket 'whites' etc. and are not readily available in small quantities for the amateur grower.

Potatoes are, of course, grown from 'seed' potatoes, i.e. specially grown tubers that are certified as disease-free. The growing of seed potatoes in most countries is very strongly controlled in order to keep seed potato stocks as disease-free as possible. Most of the UK varieties are grown in Scotland where the soils are very much less prone to harbouring pests such as eelworm.

In our shop, we try and obtain a range of varieties each year that cover not only the cooking spectrum, but also the seasonal pattern. Very roughly, potatoes are classed as: first earlies, second earlies or main crop. All potatoes are planted out at roughly the same time – late March to early April, depending on the weather. First earlies are ready about 80 to 100 days after planting, second earlies about 90 to 110 days, and main crop after 100 to 110 days. 'Salad potatoes' are varieties that produce prolific crops of small tubers, i.e. 'new potatoes'. These are generally treated as first earlies (you dig them up when it suits you in terms of tuber size) but if left in the ground will become whatever their parentage dictates. Plant breeding has, over the years, rather obscured the distinction between first and second earlies, which is why we stock rather few of the latter in the shop.

Growing potatoes from seed is generally straightforward. You choose your varieties, 'chit' them (see the article elsewhere in this Newsletter), plant them and wait. There are various ways of planting. Traditionally, you make trenches about 15 to 20 cm deep. You can fork a little fertiliser into the bottom of the trench, sprinkle some slug control pellets, stand your potatoes in the bottom with most of the 'chits' facing up, and fill in the trench. Trenches should be about 60 cm apart and you should plant about 8 tubers for every 3 metres of row. You can do 'no dig'. Lightly fork the row and add your fertiliser etc. and place your seed as above. Then cover the tubers with soil, compost etc. Potatoes are a particularly good crop for areas recently brought into cultivation; they do wonders for weed suppression and soil structure.

The main thing with the growing tubers is to exclude light, otherwise they will go green and cannot be eaten as green tubers are slightly toxic (they also taste unbelievably bitter anyway). As the tubers grow

they become much bigger so you need to increase the amount of cover – this is commonly known as ‘earthing-up’. Unless you have very large amounts of compost, it is usually most cost-effective to keep drawing up soil from between the rows; this is what gives potato rows their typical pyramidal shape and is part of the reason for leaving a wideish gap between rows. If the space is too narrow you won’t have enough soil for earthing-up. It also means that you can water them most easily by adding water between the rows and not flattening your careful earthing-up.

In choosing your varieties you might want to consider disease resistance (see below), yield potential (Cara, Desiree and Valor are good), suitability for a small space or large container (Maris Peer), size (Marfona is the ‘baker’ potato), drought tolerance (Stemster) and the perennial question of ‘waxiness’. Almost all the seed potatoes sold in England are regarded by the trade as ‘waxy’. The most waxy of those that we stock is Charlotte, and the most ‘floury’ is British Queen. Everything else is somewhere in between (see the notes on the Society website: below).

People often ask if it is OK to plant potatoes from the supermarket. Many people do but there is a greater risk of disease. Likewise other people cut their seed potatoes in half, allow the cut surface to dry, and thus double their number of seed potatoes. It can work but the cut surface is a magnet for disease. As a Society we do not recommend either of these approaches. A common question is whether to add lime or calcified seaweed to the potato trench as a preventative against wart or scab. There is little evidence that this is of any value in well-cultivated allotment soils. The practice arose in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when little was known about soil chemistry. Many soils were then on the acid side (all soils become more acid in the long-term) so ‘liming’ or ‘marling’ was widespread and this extended to the amateur gardener. If you are concerned about the acidity or alkalinity of your plot (measured as pH) it is better to buy one of the cheap soil testing kits available (we have a few in the shop).

Most potatoes are subject to some attack by one thing or another. You might come across wireworms (the long, multi-legged, bright orange things that wriggle around in the soil) especially in areas recently under grass, and clusters of whitish, very small worm-like creatures – most likely one or other form of eelworm. There are no products available to the amateur grower that will make much difference to the occurrence of these pests. The best thing is not to grow potatoes in the same place in successive years; leave a gap of at least two years.

The two biggest menaces are slugs and late blight. Slugs will attack all forms of potato, but especially main crop varieties that remain in the ground longest and into the autumn when the soils become wetter. You can put some slug pellets in the trench at planting (see above) and/or sprinkle some between the rows as the plants grow (but note that the bright blue ones based on metaldehyde are now banned but their replacement – based on iron phosphate – seems to be very effective).

Blight is an especial menace to main crop potatoes (and, as it happens, to outdoor tomatoes – also Solanales). It is caused by a soil-borne fungus *Phytophthora infestans* and there are many strains. You cannot treat your soil with anything that will kill the spores, which are ubiquitous in southern Britain, although a cold winter can help reduce their numbers. The symptoms are that the leaves of your plants start to go brown in patches and this spreads quite rapidly to the stems and then the tubers. At that stage the plants can smell unpleasant. There are no treatments available to the amateur gardener. There is a very informative article on the web-site: [www.allotment-garden.org](http://www.allotment-garden.org) and it is worth keeping an eye on Blightwatch ([www.blightwatch.co.uk](http://www.blightwatch.co.uk)). If you do get blight then all you can do is dig your plants up and either bin (green bin not compost) or burn them. Avoid growing potatoes in that patch for at least two years. The breeding of blight-resistant potatoes is a major research programme. There have been reports among our Members of differing degrees of effectiveness among the ‘Sarpo’

varieties, which are probably the most blight-resistant varieties available to the amateur grower – but they are not entirely resistant by any means.

Although not a pest, you should keep an eye open for seed pods. These are the same colour as the leaves and can be hard to spot (see image, right). They look like unripe tomatoes and are toxic. Pull them off and put them in your green bin (not your compost bin) otherwise they will vanish into the soil and produce loads of small potato plants next year.



Finally – harvesting. First earlies and ‘new’ potatoes are generally harvested soon after the flowers have died off. However, proceed with caution. Rather than simply dig your plants up, it is better to scrape the soil off the side of one of the earthed-up mounds in one or two places and see if the potatoes on ‘offer’ are what you want. If not, leave them another week or two (but remember to replace the scraped-off soil otherwise you get green potatoes). Second earlies and main crop are usually harvested when the leaves (the ‘haulm’) have died right off. Once these leaves have withered you can remove them. If you have any suspicion that your plants have (had) blight then the advice is to burn the leaves. If you can’t do that then put them in your green bin – do not compost them.

So, good potato growing; there is nothing quite like a freshly dug potato cooked within a very short time of harvest. We put notes on the potato varieties that we have ordered on the Society website, usually within a few weeks of the order being confirmed (late October). Those notes contain much more information than given here.

**Peter Loveland**

[Dare I add a couple more tips to Peter’s excellent and comprehensive account of potato growing? Oh well, here goes. 1) I try to keep the soil moist by watering in a dry June. Scab (common scab caused by *Streptomyces scabies*) develops on growing tubers, especially in dry soil. Keeping the soil moist suppresses the scab. 2) I cut off potato tops (and green-bin them) as soon as dying-off starts, then dig up tubers at intervals when needed. Blight starts on the tops (haulm blight), from where spores wash down to infect tubers (tuber blight). If there are no tops on which disease can develop and produce spores, there should be no risk of tuber blight. My personal preference for main crop potatoes, by the way, is Desiree, because slugs don’t like it as much as, for example, Cara. – **Editor**]

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### **Chitting Seed Potatoes – Is It Worth It?**

‘Chitting’ potatoes means encouraging the seed potato tubers to ‘sprout’ (i.e., produce short shoots) before planting. The idea is that shoots emerge from the soil faster than from non-chitted tubers and the more advanced plants are ready to harvest earlier and, hopefully, produce higher yields. Chitting is achieved by putting seed tubers, with most ‘eyes’ upright, in a light, cool but frost-free place at about 10°C. Some light is essential to avoid white, elongated shoots and temperature must be not too high (too much growth) or too low (risk of tubers freezing).



I have compared planting chitted and non-chitted early and second early/main crop potatoes for several years on my allotment. Earlyies were typically planted in March under a cloche and second earlyies and maincrops in mid-April. The results are summarised below.

	Early potatoes				Second early & Maincrop potatoes			
	variety	tuber yield g/plant		% increase	variety	tuber yield g/plant		% increase
		Non-chitted	Chitted			Non-chitted	Chitted	
2018	Maris Bard	410	796	+94%	Marfona	985	1121	+14%
	-				Picasso	747	821	+10%
2019	Swift	347	478	+38%	Picasso/Cara	3326	3981	+20%
2020	Swift	356	685	+92%	Picasso/Cara	2139	2585	+21%
	Maris Bard	970	878	-9%				
	mean	(521)	(709)	+54%	mean	(1799)	(2127)	+16%

- Early potato yields were greatly increased, by an average of **54%**, by chitting the seed tubers.
- Potatoes from chitted early varieties were ready to harvest about 2 weeks earlier than plants from non-chitted tubers.
- In contrast, there was much less benefit, an average of only **16%** yield increase, from chitting second earlyies and maincrop seed tubers. However, the small benefits were quite consistent.
- The more variable year to year response with early potatoes may have been a consequence of greater frost damage to the earlier emerging plants in some situations. This can be a problem with chitted early potatoes if they are planted too early and are not well protected from frost.

**Conclusions:** Chitting seed tubers of early potato varieties will usually substantially increase yields and result in an earlier harvest. There is a benefit to chitting second earlyies and maincrop potatoes, but it is much less than for earlyies.

Stephen Moss (Topstreet)

## Carrot Concerns

Carrots: one of my favourite home-grown foods. But not so easy to grow. I notice that some allotmenters at PH are now sowing their carrot seed in sieved soil or compost, in boxes raised from the ground. Very sensible, since this prevents them becoming distorted by the abundant flints in our soil, and puts them out of reach of carrot root fly. We learned in a previous *Plot So Far* that straight carrots can be achieved by starting them off in toilet-roll tubes, later transferring these straight into the ground. I would prefer that method (but so many tubes to collect!), since I don't want to build raised wooden constructions on my plot. But I don't really mind misshapen carrots (and ever hopeful of finding a really rude shape!). I once considered giving up growing them, however, because of root fly damage. Then I read that a fly-proof net would protect them, even if only as a fence rather than an overall covering, since the flies approach at soil level and don't have the sense to jump over a netting fence. I tried a fence and it was too difficult to keep it upright and in place. Then I tried a tunnel cover using bent plastic tubes as support for the net. And it works. Now I have undamaged roots, at least until slugs find them. I grow leeks under the same net, but it is not as effective at preventing attack by *Allium* leaf miner (larvae of another fly), which has become so serious that a lot of people have given up growing leeks. Onions and garlic escape the worst effects, probably because of earlier harvesting, but my perennial Welsh onions have suffered. That particular fly must be now too widespread in my



soil, despite rotations, to be excluded by a net. I have almost learned to live with it, by peeling off the outer, infested leaf sheaths of the leeks (for the green bin, not compost!) and just using the inner parts. Anyway, the carrots do well, as long as I keep a few seeds in reserve to fill in gaps caused by inevitable (in my soil anyway) patchy emergence. Even the late-harvested knobby roots that grow to enormous size (see photo) remain tasty (unlike many perfect supermarket specimens, I'm told) and not at all woody.

**Geoff Bateman** (Piggottshill)

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## 2020 Vision

Last year, 2020, was not much fun for many. But we lucky people had allotments to escape to. Here are some of my personal memories of allotmenting events in that troubled year.

**Botany.** My first visit to the Piggottshill site was long before the first lockdown. On 4 January a small group of us took part in the 3-hour "wild plants in flower" count, an annual New Year event organised by the Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland (BSBI). It is very unscientific and has become more of a competition, but does (unnecessarily) provide further confirmation of climate change (more species flowering early each year), and gets a few plant people outdoors in the off-season. Our "Southdown" patch included the allotment site. There was nothing special, but most notable was the large number of flowering individuals of Balkan spurge (*Euphorbia oblongata*) on the more overgrown and weedy plots. This increasing, naturalised alien is one of the many winter-flowering plants found in town surveys that were originally garden escapes.



During the summer I learned that researchers at the University of Hertfordshire were looking for populations of duckweed (*Lemna* spp.) to take samples from, looking for strains that might be suitable for mass culture (for protein production I think – not a new idea). I suggested that a sample of duckweed might be taken from our Piggottshill pond (on former plot 68), where floating duckweed is a bit of a nuisance. They also took a sample from the small pond on plot 22. Then I remembered seeing duckweed in Fraser’s washing-up-bowl “pond”, and that was sampled too. That one looked a little different, and was identified as fat duckweed (*L. gibba*), rather than common duckweed (*L. minor*), the species in the two other ponds. It was decided not to impose a conservation order on Fraser’s bowl, though, since *L. gibba* is not rare.

**Bonfires.** The best bonfire at Piggottshill in 2020 was the Chairman’s beacon to celebrate VE Day on its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, on vacant plot 84 (see photo), which had only a few “socially distanced” spectators. There would be no Guy Fawkes bonfire, and so woody material was burned when and where convenient. A large heap was collected and burned in the west-side manure compound (the “Jimpound”), just before the Piggottshill gateway was widened and renewed to allow manure and wood-chip deliveries by truck or tractor. The next big fire was of cut-down trees (an old and useless apple and an overgrown coppiced hazel) on vacant plot 11. A huge amount of ivy and other cuttings from the nearby internal hedge was added to the burning pile. It was heavy work and not much fun, mainly because of “incessant” complaints, to ourselves and to the Town Council, from a neighbour who evidently could not use his garden if there was the smallest whiff of smoke. I am happy to report that bonfire plots 84 and 11 (which was in a really terrible state) both have new tenants and are looking wonderful.



**Blooming.** Our allotment sites have been mostly fully tenanted over the last year and a half thanks to the need for outside activity, when travel and most entertainments were not allowed, and to the diligence of our lettings manager (Jim). Luckily, I chose 2020 to have an extra plot, for one year only. In summer 2019, in need of a project, I identified a half-plot that was in such a bad state that it would have been unfair to ask a new tenant to pay rent for it. Its problems included much rotting carpet that once overlaid much of the plot (*don’t ever use that stuff, please!*), all deeply buried under a matted tangle of grass rhizomes, and a lot of deep-rooted dock, especially in a pit of gravel, which all had to



be dug out. Having spent about 6 weeks clearing the plot, I kept it during 2020 to make sure it was usable, planted all of it, and actually produced good crops (see photo), except for the plums on the tree in the corner, which were badly affected by brown rot (*Monilinia*). It was let to new tenants in good time for the 2021 season.

If we never again suffer from such a pandemic, a consequence is that our allotment sites may never again look so good.

Many thanks to the contributors to this issue, both for the quality of their articles and for their compliance with my very unreasonable deadline date. Please send me your own articles, on any topics relating to allotments, for inclusion in a future issue of *The Plot So far*.

**Geoff Bateman** (Editor)

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## **Diary Dates for 2021**

(To be confirmed and subject to Covid-19 restrictions being lifted)

June/July:	Our delayed Annual General Meeting.
August:	Breakout Barbecue.
September/October:	Awards Evening.
November:	Bonfire Night.

[Please scroll to the next page for the list of S.H.A.G.S. committee members and contact addresses.]

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