

THE PLOTHOLDER

ROYAL PADDOCKS ALLOTMENTS NEWSLETTER No 11 – September 2001

What a wonderful season it's been. Walking through the Paddocks in mid-August, so often a desiccated time of year, we might have thought ourselves in Eden. Yes, there were weeds, but a mantle of bindweed in full bloom has beauty on its side. And everywhere food plants were flourishing, in rows or just self-sown. Trees and bushes sagged under the weight of the crop, and we could go on sowing seeds right through the summer with some chance of success, thanks to the rain. Hasn't it been great to use our precious time picking, rather than endlessly lugging cans of water just to keep things alive? Some crops are a bit late, but this seems to have protected the tomatoes somewhat against blight, which is only now starting what seems its inevitable yearly journey through the site.

The Best Kept Plot has been judged. Though the shortlist was agreed too late for us to notify those who were on it, as promised, we have some fine winners, and all will be revealed at the AGM on Friday 9 November – 7.30 p.m. in the Bullen Hall, as usual, so put it in your diaries now.



Inside this issue is a questionnaire. *For the first time we're seeking the views of every tenant, because the issue is an extremely important one. Those who recall the February issue of The Plotholder know we have been facing some big questions about the maintenance of our buildings. The situation is complicated, both because we are on Crown land, and because we are in effect a co-operative: together with six councillors on our Management Committee (one of whom is also a tenant) we run our own show. We have no paid staff, and no-one to pick up the bills.*

This means we've been able to keep plot rents extremely low; it also means that responsibility for running the site in a way that's best for all our tenants rests with each one of us. If we want to have certain facilities which council-run sites have, we can decide to have them, and we can decide how to have them.

At the end of May the Management Committee had an enjoyable and useful visit from the representatives of our 'landlady'. Her Majesty the Queen, and a fuller account of this is on the back page, together with an explanation of the issues. Please, read this and give it your full consideration before filling in the questionnaire. We need your answers by 7 October, so that we can discuss the matter constructively at the Annual General Meeting. Return your sheet to the office, or to the mailbox by the main gate.



Open Day must have been one of the hottest of the year, perhaps the reason why fewer of you came. Those who did enjoyed it, and though we didn't set out to make money, financially it was surprisingly successful. There are many people to thank, among them Annemarie Locher for her really delicious strawberry cakes (what a pity there weren't more people to eat them) and Marion Bennett and Carol Sheilds for other very tasty lunchables.

Thanks to Philip Brew for taking photographs, the Pococks for loaning the drinks tent, and everyone who gave things for the raffle and tombola. Gill Hiley produced some great colour posters, which were reproduced in black and white in the last newsletter. We had hoped all our tenants would display one. Advertising is very important for attracting new tenants, and we have a permanent supply of 'Allotments available' posters in the office, so do put one up if you have a suitable place.

Welcome to new tenants Alistair Clark (4), Victoria Crossland (21f), Andrew and Lilian Harry (6), Mrs Miles (126), Jo Nickolds (176, 177), Ian Palmer (67) and Jan Spreckley (139b), who've all joined us since June.

Congratulations to Matthew and Siobhan Carter (42b) on the birth of Molly some months ago.

We say goodbye to Dino Razza, retiring from plot 22, and to Marc Muir (27) who has moved away. Anne Jones, a new tenant of 150 in summer '00 (remember her piece in the newsletter about the mysterious patio doors?) is moving too, later this autumn, but has 'got the bug' and has put her name down for a plot in Epsom. Bill Brewer (50f, 51) is reluctantly hanging up his fork this autumn because of ill-health. He's been a tenant for many years, and his cheery greetings, helpful advice and generosity with plants and seedlings will long be remembered by his neighbours at the Paddocks.

Which pesticide residue? For the last four years the Consumers' Association has been monitoring the tests for pesticide residues which the Government carries out on thousands of food samples. Thank goodness most fruit and vegetables tested contained no detectable residues, but some have consistently been a problem, sometimes exceeding the legal limit. And sometimes pesticide levels can vary a lot between individual items of fruit or vegetables from the same patch or plant.

Which?, the CA magazine, reports that apples, carrots, celery, lettuce, pears, grapes and strawberries were particularly problematic – about half of all apples tested had detectable residues, over half the carrots, lettuce and grapes were affected, and almost three quarters of the celery sampled. As for strawberries, 'the 1999 tests found 80% of samples contained residues, and 42% had multiple residues. One UK sample had 5 different pesticide residues and another contained a fungicide' which is not approved for use in the UK.

Which? suggests that these fruits and vegetables should be top of shoppers' 'organic list'. Of course, we'd add 'Or grow your own'. And enjoy eating foods in season, rather than expecting to have them fresh all year round.

Twickenham Farmers' Market

Since spring this year there's been a Farmers' Market in Twickenham on Saturday mornings. Go to the Holly Road car park between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m. any Saturday, and you'll find about 20 stalls, selling not only fruit and vegetables, but also fresh and smoked meat and poultry, cakes, pies and breads, honey, eggs, fruit juices, herbs and other plants. Some of the produce is organic, but all is from suppliers who rear, grow or make it themselves, and are only too glad to tell shoppers about it.

This is the only place I've seen pea tendrils for sale (for stirfries), and there were other interesting leafy vegetables on the same stall, including oriental greens. The rule that all the stallholders must come from within 25 miles of the M25 ensures freshness of the produce (though I must say I hadn't realised the Isle of Wight was that close!).

There are now at least nine London Farmers' Markets, the brainchild of Nina Planck, an American whose parents farmed in Virginia. Since 1980 they have sold their goods in farmers' markets in the States. Nina, with her siblings, helped with growing, picking and selling the crops, and when she came to Britain to work in the US embassy, couldn't believe there wasn't a similar organisation here.

When she approached the NFU for advice they told her they didn't think there'd be any demand! In fact, since the first Market opened here, in Islington (naturally) in June 1999, there's been no looking back. Countrywide there are now 250 of them.

Nina's now produced a luscious book – The Farmers' Market Cookbook – (how to make roasted carrots with garlic and thyme; salmon, couscous and marinated beetroots with greens; butternut risotto; rhubarb souffle, etc., etc.). Readers of gastroporn will enjoy these beautifully illustrated, zesty and workable recipes, with their brief explanations about food production, harvesting, how to tell if something's 'ready', and a real sense of respect for the food we eat. Plenty of old favourites, and some new ideas for ways to eat what we grow, or might grow next year, or might grow when pigs have wings.

A touch of the East This summer a group of giant sunflowers greets visitors to **Boula Rice's** half-plot, 43f. Further back, and on her plot next door, she has two apple trees, and there are runner beans, leeks, chard, sweet peas, potatoes – they're all bursting with life, but nothing you don't expect to find on an English allotment in summer. But Boula's plots (she has several, and helps a friend with two more) hold a lot of surprises.

Boula transplanted herself from Thailand 16 years ago, and took root in the Paddocks six years later, where she's become a familiar sight, working some time on her plots nearly every day. She was born and brought up on a farm far from town, where her family grew and raised nearly all they needed, rice, yams, greens, buffalo, pigs and poultry. They used no chemicals, only manure, and this is still Boula's practice. The exception she makes is using slug pellets, which she scatters sparingly around the edges of the crop, not wanting them to touch any of the leaves.

For some time she worked as a cook in Pai Lin, a Thai restaurant in Tolworth. She cooked Thai food for her husband and two sons too, finding ways of growing many of the ingredients she couldn't buy here, despite the huge differences in growing conditions. Now she has flourishing patches of exotic vegetables, some of which she can only name in Thai. We walked round her plots one morning at the end of August, while she showed me a drift of green coriander, holy basil (the Thai version of the European herb), Thai rocket, Chinese chives – all fairly recognisable. Then we came to the chilis, raised from seed Boula had soaked out of grocer's dried chilis. These had gone in too late to flower this year, but she knows the seed is viable for another attempt. Mizuna, pak choi and some other brassicas I could recognise, but pak boung (water spinach, perhaps) was a mystery to me, as were hairy melon and bitter melon, and a largish plant which seemed to be from the amaranth family.

Following the practice of her parents, Boula buys seed and plants as seldom as possible, preferring to save seed from plants which are already adapting themselves to their situation. Her coriander patch was started several years back with seed from the grocers, as was a clump of dill; garlic was originally from a vegetable stall in Kingston market. Even her apple trees are from seed, 'one for each son'. On one of her plots a previous tenant had planted a vine. It doesn't produce much in the way of grapes, but it does form a kind of natural 'shed', under which she dries off the plants whose seed she's saving. Once the seed has dried off sufficiently, she stores it in labelled paper bags, not plastic, which can cause rotting.

It's not all food. She has several square yards of gladioli, propagated from a few original bulbs, which she covers with carpet in winter, then lifts and divides them in February. She also grows plenty of garlic, which needs to go in in October, she says, to have enough time to grow. I could almost hear the growing happening around us. 'What's your secret?' I asked her. 'I know you don't use artificial fertilisers – what about compost?' No, said Boula, 'but I talk to the plants. I tell them, You're very good!' Boula gave The Plotholder this recipe, which should take about 25 minutes to make. Adjust the quantities according to the number of diners, and the vegetables according to what you have available – this is a guide.

Stir-fried pork and vegetables

Ingredients: About 1lb lean pork, cut into strips; 2 cloves of garlic, crushed; 1 sliced onion; half a red and half a green pepper, sliced; some sliced courgettes; the white part of 5 spring onions, sliced lengthways; half a pack of beansprouts; flavourings to taste – fish sauce, oyster sauce, dark soy sauce; 1 teaspoon sugar, 1 tablespoon cornflour slaked with water; half a teaspoon monosodium glutamate.

Method: In a wok heat 1 tablespoon of cooking oil for every two people eating, and fry 2 crushed cloves of garlic till golden (not too hot, says Boula). Add the pork, stir fry till tender, and then the sliced vegetables in cooking order, beansprouts last. Next add the flavourings, then the cornflour and water to thicken the sauce, and last the MSG.

In Thailand each diner would have a separate bowl of rice, and would help themselves from this dish in the middle of the table. Enjoy!

We used Joy Larkcom's book 'Oriental Vegetables' to find some of the English names for Boula's crops.

THE BUILDINGS – OUR OPPORTUNITY TO DECIDE

We reported in the February issue that the maintenance of the brick buildings on our site was still under review, and that the Management Committee was to discuss the matter with Mike Fitt, the head of the outer Royal Parks. The buildings date from Victorian times, and the agreement made with the Crown in 1925 was that we could convert them for our use providing that 'the cost of materials, repairs and maintenance will be defrayed by your society'. No-one then could have foreseen what we would have to defray 76 years later.

BIONEUTRAL At the end of May we had a visit from Mike Fitt, his colleague Margaret Blackburn of the Estates Management department, Ray Brodie (superintendent of Bushy Park), and his deputy Bill Swann. Four members of our Management Committee showed the visitors round, and gave them Paddocks elderflower cordial. It was a beautiful day, and the site was looking particularly lovely, showing ample evidence of both industry and bramble. The visitors were interested in all aspects of the site, including its history (the handpumps alone might have been worth the trip!), and they were very sympathetic to the allotment movement. Royal Parks' policy is to become 'bionutral', using renewable energy resources where possible; the group arrived in gas-powered cars. So our low-tech site is very much in keeping with their thinking. And they are keen to provide habitat for wildlife, so we were not criticised for leaving some areas uncultivated, though this proportion should not become too large.

THREE POSSIBILITIES Though our very low site rent came as something of a surprise to the group, it will remain unchanged, and what we charge for plots can still be our decision. We are also free to make our own decisions about the future management of the buildings, though any money we spend on them continues to be our responsibility. We aren't obliged to keep the buildings in repair. There are broadly three possible course of action: 1. To close them as they become unsafe and manage without them. 2. To have basic repairs done by professionals so that we can continue to use them as we do now. Or 3. To carry out a more complete renovation, adding electricity, water and sewerage, and making space for many more tenants to use, in the form of storage lockers, and a communal area for social events, a reference resource area, and shelter in bad weather.

GRANT APPLICATIONS Option 2, we know already, would be costly (well over £10,000 for just one building); option 3 would be very costly. But the good news is that a repair and development project like this stands a good chance of winning charitable funds, according to Mike Fitt, especially if we were to make use of renewables like solar power and rainwater, as we would like to. Our site already meets many of the criteria used by charities in this field, and if we decided to go ahead with this we would have the support of Royal Parks staff with experience in drawing up grant applications.

LOOKING AHEAD Because ours is a site run by its tenants, with no paid staff, our plot rents are a fraction of those on council-run sites. The downside is that council-run sites may have amenities we have been unable to afford. This could be our chance to make the Paddocks a bit more user-friendly, especially for some of our older tenants, or those with young children, the gardeners of the future. It could also ensure that we safeguard a useful, perhaps irreplaceable, resource, into the new century.

LET US KNOW WHAT YOU WANT But we can't go ahead with an ambitious project unless a strong majority want to do it. So the committees are asking each tenant to reply to the questionnaire. When we have a clear idea of the will of our tenants we will bring a proposal for a course of action to the AGM on 9 November.