

THE PLOTHOLDER

ROYAL PADDOCKS ALLOTMENTS NEWSLETTER No. 18 – July 2004

The same dilemma every summer – will it ever rain again? We know it will, of course, just as Wimbledon starts, and we weren't disappointed this time (at least, not if we prefer gardening to tennis). The downside? we couldn't take a rest from watering by watching the tennis, but nothing's perfect.

The welcome rain means that the Paddocks have their usual mid-summer shagginess: but really overgrown areas are shrinking, as our new tenants get to work. If you have more ground than you can manage, we can probably let it – we have eight people waiting to join us.

The Spring Social was a sunny, relaxed opportunity to meet our neighbours over lunch and a drink. It wasn't an Open Day, as we have no vacancies, and it was a little earlier in the year in the hope that people would bring seedlings to swap. This is a really good way to share your surplus – lets have more of them next year. **Tessa Lash** invited us to her plot (15 back), where she has done wonders clearing and planting fruit bushes, and she gave us a very interesting talk about her bees. We're glad to have a resident bee-keeper, bees being valuable members of the gardening eco-system. Read about other important inhabitants of the Paddocks in this issue – **Keith Birch's** record of bird sightings, and **Martin Croft** on how to nurture your ladybirds. The best newsletter is written by the readers – thank you!

CHILDREN AT THE PADDOCKS Children are the gardeners of the future, and as many of our tenants have young families it seems a good time to include them in our activities. At the Spring Social a dish garden competition started off our budding Diarmud Gavins. Thanks to **Brenda van der Kooy** for organising it, and providing prizes, and congratulations to **Henry Dawson**, outright winner among many great runners-up. **Rosie Harper** gave out pumpkin seed, to start off a contest to grow the Biggest Pumpkin, and they'll be measured, marvelled-at and judged at the Autumn Social. There may also be a 'Tallest Sunflower' somewhere in the Paddocks – is it on your plot? **Emma Moore** and son **Jack** helped a group of children to make some very friendly-looking scarecrows – we hope the birds see them in a different light! **Gaby Armstrong** (plot 123) has offered to co-ordinate children's activities with a horticultural theme, so get in touch with her if you'd like your family to be included in a contact-list, and if you have any suggestions. Perhaps a junior section in the Best-Kept Plot contest next year?

PICTURE THIS Are you a keen photographer? Have you taken pictures of your own plot, or others around the site? It's been suggested that we have a photographic competition and a display, to show at the next Social, 10 October, and also at the AGM in November. It would be lovely to have a few images we could reproduce, to use as greetings cards or for our official correspondence. We're also very keen to add interesting pictures to our archive, and we're extremely grateful to **George Harmsworth** for letting us make copies of his photographs of the major repairs he and his team made to the Seed Store when a tree went through the roof 20 years ago. Contact the editor if you have pictures, or ideas about this.

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**DIARY DATES** *Best-kept Plot contest: Judging will take place on 24-25 July. The Big Pumpkins (Paddocks Junior section) will be judged at the Autumn Social, Sunday 10 October. AGM, photographic display and prize giving (adults), Friday 12 November, 7.30 for 8 p.m.*  
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WELCOME to new tenants Samantha O'Dowd (42f), Alex and Liudmila Gromyko (76f), Patricia Price (sharing 86), Benoit Pilliod and Emma Douglas (134), Sally Seaman and Nicola Reynolds (153b), Gieta Eitul (156b), Jo and David Box (161) Adrian MacGregor (197b), Jennifer Stuart-Smith (sharing F, and read her Beginner's Diary on page x).
GOOD BYE to the Ostens (46), the Zettles (76f) and the Gillies (161), who all gave up with much regret.
GET WELL SOON Jack Naish (2) Kira Holt (63b) and Henri Wan (86). CONGRATULATIONS to Don Read and his new wife (155); and to Joseph and Amy Chouinard (20), Arusha Javadi and Harry Anstey (38), and Annette Prestidge (139b), who all have new babies.

BEGINNER'S DIARY Jennifer Stuart-Smith joined us this spring sharing plot F with Carol Sheilds. Her story so far (early June):

Roots 'Allotments are passionate places, I'd been told! But I wasn't looking for passion when I joined the waiting list - I wanted a thinking space, somewhere that wasn't hectic and filled with other people's deadlines, where the pace of life was dictated by the soil, the weather, and the plants themselves.

I'm a farmers' daughter, but my job took me to Central London, and I'd been 'doing time' at the Elephant and Castle. When I made my escape to the idyllically-named Strawberry Hill, it felt like time to put down some roots - literally. I knew a whole plot would probably be too much for me - my family, experienced fruit and veg growers, had told me that a lot of work goes on behind the scenes in creating a productive kitchen garden. Their words made me all the keener.

Herb garden I've started on a small scale, preparing an area for herbs (I'm a slave to my stomach). First in were seeds of parsley, coriander, thyme and dill, a present from a friend. To give them a fighting chance I bought some plastic cloches, which gave them a good start. I also took cuttings from my mother's garden and elsewhere on the allotment. The chives are going great guns, though the mint is struggling - and on my cousin's advice, I planted it inside a plastic pot to prevent it running riot! My rosemary sprigs are taking their time too, but having seen it thriving on neighbouring plots I'm optimistic.

Flowers I wanted flowers for cutting, too - they aren't cheap to buy round here, and the allotment seems the perfect place to raise them. Cosmos are easy and satisfying, and this week (early June) the first daisy-like flower has appeared. It seemed a shame to pick this solitary bloom, so it lives on to bring colour to the plot. Also satisfying is the vigour with which the gladioli appeared - 100% success, and a mass of little swords thrusting skywards. I'm hoping the blooms will be as sturdy. The dahlia worried me for a bit, but now they're pushing through too. The sweet peas are thriving at ground level, but have yet to get the hint that the wigwam is there for a reason. Learners, like me.

For someone used to a soil of chalk, clay and flints, the soil at the Paddocks is heavenly - it reminds me of playing in a sandpit. I really feel my roots are going down.'

Will the mint take over after all? Did the sweet peas learn to climb? Let's have an autumn update - Ed.

SAFETY RAFTS FOR BEES - Sue Hoar, of plot 187b, writes: I enjoyed Tessa's talk about her bees at the Spring Social, and pass on this tip to help bees, dragon flies and other flying insects who enjoy our allotments as much as we do:

1. Drink a few bottles of wine and collect the corks - 7 or 8 will do. 2. Make a bracelet of the corks with a piece of wire. 3. Float this in your nearest water tank. Bees will then, if they accidentally land in the water, be able to swim to the raft, scramble on board, and take off.'

THE MOWERS AND STRIMMERS have been much in demand, and the Committee is now asking a payment of £2 for each loan of the machinery, except when it's used to cut the roads and other common areas. This is helping to cover the cost of fuel, and the repairs which are inevitable when machines are used frequently, and by many different users. Note your payment on the signing-out sheet. Our grateful thanks to Joe Sell and George Loosemore, who manage the machinery and who are now collecting the money as well.

Currently one strimmer is being repaired and another made unrepairable after being filled with the wrong fuel. Each machine now carries a label explaining what fuel to use – *please follow these instructions*. The newer mower has a handle design which is vulnerable to being pulled round corners, and this machine is now only to be used on common areas, not on individual plots (which should be strimmed, not mown, if very overgrown).

If you can spare time to trim the common areas, it's much appreciated – but remember we are each responsible for the section of road in front of our plot. If we each keep our bit trimmed it makes less work for our willing volunteers.

BIRDWATCH IN THE PADDOCKS

Keith Birch (plot 91) is a member of the Wildlife Special Interest Group, part of the Bushy Park Regeneration Project. He is a keen observer of birds, and lists below his records this year, so far, starting with a cold Sunday morning in early March.

As gardeners, one of our first reactions to the birds on site is often to wonder what damage the more pestilent among them may have done to our plot, (but plenty of them are 'on our side', removing insect pests to feed their young).

In early March on a cold morning there were, sure enough, the ever-present Woodpigeon, and Crows, Magpies and Jackdaws. Added to these were a small flock of Starlings, and a pair of Ring-necked Parakeet. Medium-sized birds were represented by Blackbird and a welcome winter migrant, Redwing, but no thrushes that morning. Among smaller birds were Goldfinch, Chaffinch and Greenfinch; accentors were represented by Robin and Dunnock (Hedge Sparrow). Smallest of the resident birds seen that morning were Great Tit, Blue Tit and Wren. Perhaps most surprising was a Meadow Pipit, probably from over the Bushy Park wall. Mute Swan, Canada Goose and Grey Heron were all seen flying over, making a pleasing count of 20 species seen in a short walk around the eastern end of the site.

As spring progressed, Mistle and Song Thrushes, and a good number of Green Woodpeckers, or Yaffles, could be seen and heard most mornings. Other songbirds, heard if not seen, were Blackcap and Whitethroat Warblers. A pair of the latter nested and produced two chicks, and the family group could be seen hunting through currant bushes and brambles for insects.

The Great Tits and Blue Tits were joined by family groups of Long-tailed Tits in early spring, and mixed groups were to be seen working through the fruit trees looking for food. Now all three species have broods. Early summer has brought the Swallow, House Martin and Swift.

Uncovered heaps of recently-delivered horse manure can often attract fairly large groups of Jackdaws, 20 or more, presumably looking for flies and other insects. Compost heaps can also be food sources, as demonstrated on a recent Sunday morning when a female Kestrel was seen to catch and fly off with small vermin gripped in her talons twice within fifteen minutes. I hope they were either mice or young rats she was catching, and not the bank voles seen around the compost heap a few weeks earlier.

Finally, I was very pleased to see House Sparrows on my plot quite recently. They had nested in Park Road last year, and seem to be spreading through Hampton Wick and Teddington quite rapidly, but I had not seen, or heard, them on the allotment site before. It is not the best of habitats for them, with few obvious nesting sites, so maybe they are just daily visitors flying in over the wall. Whatever the situation it was nice to see them.

GARDENING ARTS Sheds are now Art – official: Just time to check out The Other Flower Show, in the V & A garden, where a group of identical garden sheds have been individually transformed by installation artists. Tracy Emin's contribution, at first sight sinister, is very poignant – another, by Heather Barnett, has a glass roof, a grass floor, and walls trickling with water, germinating curcicues of mustard seeds in all stages of growth and decay. On till 11 July.

HOME GROWN LADYBIRDS – THE GARDENER'S FRIENDS

Martin Croft, plot 73

Hate insects, and you'll hate gardening, because we can't have one without the other. If you try and exterminate them all, you'll end up with a barren, lifeless plot, because although many of the bugs we see on the allotments are undoubtedly pests, there are plenty which are beneficial.

Let's look at just one friendly species, ladybirds (there are many others). Ladybirds aren't just attractive insects, which fascinate children: they also eat huge numbers of aphids, undoubtedly one of the fruit and veg gardener's greatest enemies.

If you watch a ladybird for any length of time you'll see how busy they can be, racing across the front and back of leaves and up and down stalks and stems. They're hunting – both for the mature, green and black aphids we're so familiar with, and also aphid young. And ladybird young eat even more than the adults do. So if we can encourage a healthy breeding population of ladybirds on the allotments, we will have access to a natural and potentially very effective way of reducing one of the biggest pests we face.

Ladybird young You can actually buy ladybirds as eggs, larvae and adults: but it's far cheaper if we can 'grow our own'. On the other hand, if you've got a greenhouse, then investing in a tube of ladybird larvae can be well worth it (and if you've got young kids, they can get very excited watching 'their' ladybirds grow).

A lot of us may have been guilty of squashing ladybird larvae because we thought they were something nasty. They don't look much like the adults: they're grey in colour, light to very dark, with a pattern of yellow or orange stripes. Rather than being circular, like the adults, they're more streamlined, and look considerably more dangerous (if you're an aphid, that is).

If you carry an empty matchbox, you can easily transport 'lost' ladybirds which would benefit from rehoming next to a large colony of aphids. Obviously you wouldn't want to kidnap your neighbours' ladybirds, but it's surprising how often they turn up in odd places, even indoors. Drop a small ladybird onto a plant laden with aphids, and if you come back a week later, chances are you'll find considerably fewer aphids and a fatter ladybird.

Encouraging the 'crop' Ladybirds don't just eat aphids – they will take pollen and nectar from a number of plants. It's also worth growing some clumps of the plants aphids love, such as honeysuckle, lupins, and nettles (also useful for making a smelly but potent plant-boosting 'tea'). If the idea of growing food-plants for aphids sounds ridiculous, you need to know one simple fact: aphids that live on nettles are a completely different race to the ones living on broad beans, and won't switch host plant. That's true pretty much of all aphids – each plant species has its own family of little suckers.

You can also provide somewhere for ladybirds to survive the winter. You may have seen some extremely large ladybirds on your plot, compared to normal ones. These aren't a different species, or a different sex – they're actually last year's crop. Obviously, the more that survive, the more baby ladybirds we'll have.

You can buy special ladybird houses, which are extremely effective. But you can also help by taking hollow stems from plants like fennel or yarrow, tying them together and then putting them around your plot – behind your shed or tool box, in trees, in bushes and so on. Corrugated cardboard works too, as long as it can be kept dry. Ladybirds like to overwinter in evergreens, like hedges, conifers, herbs such as rosemary, or old seedheads like sunflowers, artichokes and teasels.

The nursery rhyme may go 'Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home', but we want ladybirds to regard our allotments as their home, to settle down, raise a family – and keep munching black and green aphids.

If you want to know more about ladybirds or other beneficial insects, talk to Martin on his plot, or contact him via the editor.

HOW TO CONTACT US: You can leave mail for the Committee (but not money), in the postbox by the gate. Contact the editor on 8977 4675, susan.saunders@fish.co.uk. Our website address is www.paddocks-allotments.org.uk/. We welcome contributions to The Plotholder.