

THE PLOTHOLDER

ROYAL PADDOCKS ALLOTMENTS NEWSLETTER

No. 19 October 2004

A WET SUMMER, BUT WONDERFUL GROWING WEATHER, especially for fruit, beginning with gigantic gooseberries, on through cascades of currants to prolific plums, remarkable raspberries and astonishing apples. At the moment raspberry Autumn Bliss is living up to its name – it goes on producing a plateful a week with the minimum of fuss, until the frost sets in.

AUTUMN BRINGS THE AUTUMN SOCIAL, on Sunday 10 October, between midday and 2 p.m., outside the office. There'll be a barbecue and other refreshments, a Bring and Buy stall, and the Giant Pumpkin judging. Come and meet your neighbours, especially the new ones.

IT ALSO BRINGS THE AGM, ON FRIDAY 12 NOVEMBER – this year in the function room at The Lion, Wick Road, where the landlord is Don Witts, tenant of plot 4.

PICTURES We start at 7.30 p.m. with refreshments and a display of photographs, and this year we have some from the history of the Paddocks. George Harmsworth has allowed us to copy his photographs of the repairs he and his team made to the roof of the Seed Store, when the tree went through the roof in 1980.

Have you got any pictures of the Paddocks in the past, which we could scan, and add to our album? We know a number of tenants are keen and talented photographers, and if you have any pictures you can share, let Gill Hiley know, by putting a note for her in the mailbox by the gate.

WINNERS Business starts at 8 p.m. and the highlight of the evening is the presentation of the cup and prizes. This year, as always, we have some well-deserved awards to make. How do we decide on the winners?

A shortlist compiled from the summer inspection reports is divided into four categories: Best kept full plot, Best kept half plot, Best newcomer's full plot, and Best newcomers' half plot. Five judges look at the plots on the shortlist over a weekend, chosen with the aim of finding the greatest variety of crops, including onions, still growing. (This year it was the last weekend in July, which seemed to coincide with a huge explosion of weeds.) The marks awarded by each judge are totalled to find the winners, and the advantage of judging by committee is that the particular preferences of each are equalled-out.

Established tenants (the first two categories) are judged on variety of crops, quality of produce and overall appearance, while the newcomers – who must have joined within the last twelve months – are awarded marks for the amount of improvement they've managed in the time available. So of two plots looking similarly well-tended, more marks will go to the one where the tenant has cleared a wilderness in eight weeks (yes, it happens).

PRIZES And there are prizes, not just glory! The cup, with this year's winner's name engraved on the pedestal, is awarded to the winner of the Best Full Plot, but we also give National Garden Tokens to all winners, £25, £20 and £15 to full plot winners, and £20, £15 and £10 to half plot winners. They, and all the runners-up, also receive a certificate. All the winners are an inspiration to us, and show just how much you can do with a ten or five rod plot. Come and show them your appreciation – and make your suggestions for the future running of our site. If you're worried that you won't be able to hear, Don tells us that he has a microphone in his new rooms. We're looking forward to a good crowd.

The AGM, Friday 12 November at 7.30 p.m. at The Lion, Wick Road, Hampton Wick – note the change of venue from previous years.

WELCOME to Sharon Pryde (21f), Darren Sait and Christine Eastham (130), James Burton (151), and Gavin and Christina Collins (163), who've all taken on very overgrown plots this summer

A SAD GOODBYE to Jack Naish, for some time our 'oldest inhabitant', and careful tenant of plot 2, who has now given away his spade and fork, following a fall from his bike in the early part of the year. Jack has been an allotment gardener for longer than he can remember, first at Denmark Road in Kingston, then when the site closed, Barge Walk in Hampton Wick. That site was taken back by the Crown in the '70s, and its tenants moved to the Royal Paddocks. Besides his vegetables, Jack was an expert chrysanthemum grower and shower, and Harold Chapman remembers the special cart Jack constructed to take his prize blooms, each held securely in its own compartment, to the shows in Kingston. We wish Jack well in his retirement, and many happy evenings at the Lion, with Don Witts, his one-time neighbour on plot 4.

Another sad loss to the Paddocks this autumn is **Hans van der Meulen**, who plans a retirement move to France with his partner. Hans won the cup for Best-Kept Plot three times, and came second just as often. His three plots on East Road have been an inspiration, full of flowers and produce throughout the year, and Hans himself kind and patient with advice.

And last of all . . . goodbye **Lottie**, the little allotment cat, last seen about a year ago. Albert Batting inherited her from an earlier tenant, and looked after her for many years, providing cosy winter quarters for her on plot 172, in the form of a polystyrene fishbox plus blanket. She had never grown very big, and by last summer's Open Day was a little bag of bones, though still capable of a vertical take-off to grab a sausage at the barbecue. She appeared less and less frequently during late summer, and Albert finally concluded that she'd gone to the happy hunting grounds.

HANGING GARDENS OF HAMPTON WICK Visitors to the Hampton Court Flower Show may have admired the entries in the window box and hanging basket contest. This display, more colourful than ever this year, was put on by 40 RHS Affiliated Societies, some of them our near neighbours – for instance, Richmond Adult Community College, and Shepperton and Surbiton Horticultural Societies.

We could do that! Each year the RHS, to which we are affiliated, invites us to contribute an entry. Is anyone interested in entering next year? Contact the Editor if you'd like to know more. While we're on the subject, congratulations to Mark and Tulin Turner, of plot 160, whose company Enchanted took a silver medal again for their show garden.

RECIPE FOR JAM? Car parking provision is now a fact of life, though when the Paddocks site was first laid out, few could have predicted that the 'labouring classes of Hampton Wick' would be arriving on four wheels in quite such numbers as we do.

Allowing unrestricted access to cars has produced fewer problems than we feared at first, but because parking space is so limited, we now encourage all new tenants to get here on foot, by bike, or by public transport wherever possible. Reducing car use also helps cut down atmospheric pollution, even if only by a tiny amount. If you just want to drop off or collect a large item, it's easiest to simply drive in and out on a weekend morning, when the gates are left open.

If you will need to bring your car in often, please consider making a small area of your plot into a space where you can pull off the access roads. If you don't do this, at least *put your plot number clearly in the windscreen*, so that someone who needs you to move your car can find you easily. It's been reported that a few times this year South Road has been blocked at both ends by large cars, making it difficult for cyclists, or even barrow-wheelers, to get past.

HINTS AND TIPS Have you invented the definitive brassica protection? How do you stop wildlife interfering with your broad beans? What is biting chunks out of the beetroot? Do seeds germinate better at certain phases of the moon? (Don't laugh, this is a serious question.) Are you gardening organically? What do you do about slugs and bindweed?

Could we compile a companion volume to the cookery book (see page 3)? If you have tips, techniques or warnings from your own experience to share, especially with beginners, send them to *The Plotholder* (contact details on the back page).

Here's one from Margaret Patient (plot 54), who tried this tip from her son, and found it worked. If you see signs of blight on your tomato leaves, remove them, and it will help prevent the blight spreading to the fruit.

ARE YOU GASTRONOMICALLY CHALLENGED? Jo Sims, who took on plot 161 this summer, to brilliant effect, writes:

I was a newcomer to the allotments this May, and with a very limited knowledge of growing my own vegetables, I set to work clearing as quickly as possible, so that I could harvest something by the end of the season. With time against me, I eventually decided on pumpkins, three kinds of squash, sweetcorn, carrots, onions, lettuce, runners and French beans.

I planted out all the tomatoes I'd grown from seed earlier, plus some I had been given. I completely underestimated the ability of courgettes and squash to grow at such an alarming rate - and I hugely overestimated the number of tomatoes one family of three requires! To date we've had courgette salad, deep-fried courgettes, slow-roasted courgettes, courgette tarts, courgette soup, courgette bread, courgettes stuffed with rice/chilli/tomatoes etc. etc.

I've picked tomatoes and eaten them like sweets still warm from the sun. I've made sauces with them, I've sun-dried them, and made salads, relish, even sorbet with them. (My main problem with the tomatoes is that because I originally grew them to be planted in hanging baskets at home, they are all cherry tomatoes - delicious, but a nightmare to skin!) I'm continually amazed at the prolific nature of these plants, and marvel at their success, not wanting to waste a single one.

As gardeners we nurture our plants and raise them from seedlings, fighting their battles with elements and pests. And so we feel we have to eat everything they produce, or we've somehow let them down, and wasted all our efforts. Maybe others too know what it's like to come to the end of their uses for a glut of vegetables or fruit, and need some inspiration. Or maybe you have a recipe which hits just the right spot, and which you'd like to share.

In this spirit, the idea for 'The Allotmenters guide to gastronomy and beyond' was born. I suggest that we compile a booklet of tried and tested recipes, using the produce we grow here on our plots. It could contain recipes for fruit and vegetables, from staples to the more exotic; recipes handed down for generations, dishes you have invented yourself, your own or your children's favourites. Sales of the booklet could also raise some funds towards the maintenance of our site and buildings.

As I aim to get the booklet out by next spring (in time for another cookery year), it would be helpful if I could have your recipes before the end of this year. All contributions and suggestions will be gratefully accepted - please leave them in the postbox in the shed beside the gate, or email me at josims@beeb.net, including your name and plot number.

This is such a good idea - perhaps with illustrations by some of our young gardeners? Here's the first contribution to the book, with thanks to Sonia Springall, plot 164.

ONE CUCUMBER PLANT IS ENOUGH when fully on-stream. You think you're keeping up with the flow, but then, under the leaves, you find yet another prickly green cudgel quietly swelling into something like the weapons wielded by giants in fairy tales. When you and your neighbours have had enough cucumbers, why not try pickling them?

SWEET CUCUMBER PICKLE (or in America, Bread and Butter Pickle)

Peel and slice 2 medium onions, and put them in a large bowl with 2 thickly sliced cucumbers (don't peel these). Mix with 2oz coarse sea salt, and leave to stand for 24 hours.

Meanwhile, put 12 fluid oz cider vinegar into a large saucepan, and add 12 oz granulated sugar, 1 level teaspoon yellow mustard seed, 1 level teaspoon turmeric, and 2 level teaspoons of celery seed or dill seed. Heat gently till the sugar has dissolved. Carefully rinse and drain the cucumber and onion, and add them to the saucepan. Bring everything to a simmer, but cook for 2 minutes only, or the pickle will be too limp.

With a draining spoon remove the vegetables and put them into warm sterilised jars. Boil the remaining syrup for 5 minutes to concentrate the flavours, then pour it over the pickles and seal immediately with plastic-coated lids. Keeps for a year.

THE BIG PROJECT this spring was completing the re-marking of the boundaries in the area between South Central and South roads. Where the plots run back-to-back the line had almost vanished, and if the sides of a plot had gone too, we were back in uncharted territory. Occasionally we had to let a plot without really knowing where it began and ended, so it's been a huge relief that we've at last remade the map on the ground, so to speak.

Now it's up to all of us to keep it there by making sure our plot numbers are easy to see, and our paths are straight and clear – including our share of the road in front. Remarkably, even a neglected plot can look much better if it's framed by a good path – and there's a psychological benefit too: somehow, it makes clearing the bit in the centre seem more manageable.

'FIRST FIND YOUR PATH', said Barbara Wood in an interview in *The Plotholder* last year. Barbara helped with the boundary marking with great energy this spring, and her own paths are immaculate, kept that way with a lawnmower and edging shears. I asked her for some guidance about starting from scratch, for those tenants who are hacking their way through brambles (possibly the origin of the term 'from scratch'?). This is her advice.

MAKING A PATH

Recalling our first season some twenty years ago, our paths were full of mounds and potholes, and very long grass (at least we had grass). We didn't want to spend valuable time sorting them out, but after several sprained ankles and the humiliation of falling flat on our backs, never mind the effort of cutting the grass with shears, we decided something had to be done. But what could we do that didn't involve digging the lot up and starting again?

My solution was to use the old principle: 'If it don't work, hit it.' Over the winter we sliced the tops of the mounds and took out some soil from the lump to fill the potholes. Then we replaced the sliced-off top in the divot, and hit it hard with the back of a flat spade or a club hammer, even a bit of stamping. The paths looked awful, but when spring arrived and the grass started growing over the bare patches it wasn't too bad. Of course we had to repeat the process as the earth settled, but it was so much easier to mow. These days, any repairs needed are done in a similar fashion.

Some tips for novices:

- ❖ *Don't throw your weeds on the path; it's surprising how much soil is attached to the roots, which will form a mound.*
- ❖ *Avoid planting too near the edge of the path, especially anything permanent.*
- ❖ *Remove any 'clumpy' grass, as this grows faster and the roots are thicker, and in no time you'll get mounds again.*
- ❖ *Try to keep the edges clipped; it makes digging so much easier without the long grass getting in the way.*

Any other things I've done to my paths will sound quite pernickety, so I won't put them into print! After all, I can't have people thinking I'm obsessed, can I?

[Divot: slice of earth with grass growing on it – Scottish dialect word and golfing term. Ed.]

FOR YOUR DIARY

Autumn Social, Sunday 10 October '04, outside the office between midday and 2 p.m.

PLOTHOLDERS' ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING Friday 12 November '04, 7.30 p.m. at The Lion, Wick Road, Hampton Wick

HOW TO CONTACT US: You can leave mail for the Committee (but not money), in the postbox in the shed by the gate. Our website address is www.paddocks-allotments.org.uk/. We welcome contributions to *The Plotholder*.