

THE PLOTHOLDER No 2 - October 1998

It may come as a surprise that this is the second newsletter since the EGM in March. The first one suffered from distribution problems. But if at first you don't succeed, try, try again - so here we go with Issue No. 2. (Anyone with a copy of Issue No. 1 is advised to hang on to it: it may become a collectors' item.)

PLOTHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION AGM

The Plotters' AGM will be at the Bullen Hall, Hampton Wick, at 7.30 p.m. on 6 November, and I urge as many plotters as possible to attend. As well as the usual business of presenting awards, electing committee members, and so on, the Chairman's report will review our current situation, and suggest courses of action and changes in organisation to make our efforts more effective. Please don't think that because it is not an Extraordinary General Meeting there is no need to attend. Though the immediate pressure has relaxed we need to follow up the interest, enthusiasm and ideas generated at the EGM. Please come to the AGM and hear and contribute to the discussion - your presence is important.

PLOT LETTINGS

At the time of writing we don't know how many plots are rented and how many are vacant. Rent collection is still proceeding and until that is complete the situation is a little uncertain. However, you may be interested to know that last year, out of 210 plots, only twenty were uncultivated, due to the Maretail Problem, and security problems to do with the fence. Of the rest only one was unrented, and a waiting list of eleven applicants built up.

This is encouraging, but it begs the question 'Why are large areas of the site so scruffy?' The main part of the answer is that seventy-three and a half plots - almost a third of the site - though rented, were poorly cultivated. Plotters who need to are urged to correct this situation, and next year's Committee will have to tackle it positively. As a waiting list builds up, we will need to offer plots falling into disrepair to new tenants before they become beyond cultivation.

On the other hand, there have been huge improvements in some areas of the site. It is truly amazing what some people have achieved within one year of taking on an overgrown plot. I think the secret lies in regular attention rather than periods of intense activity followed by lengthy absences. Nature has a nasty habit of resisting attempts to manage it. Sustained attrition appears to pay off better than periodic ambush.

The upkeep of roadways and paths is another contributing factor to the look of the site. If every tenant could keep their section of roadway and path tidy, the overall effect would be significant. To help with this the Committee have bought a strimmer and are looking to buy a new mower. There are regular rubbish collections, and we

have a new shed to replace the rickety affair just inside the main gates. We have bought a supply of Round-up for general use, and we hope shortly to get a supply of black plastic sheeting to help deal organically with badly-neglected plots awaiting tenants. When these are available details will be posted on the notice board.

THE GROWING YEAR

What successes and failures have you had? Can you recommend any varieties, methods, useful tips? Following the Year of the Slug and Snail, were there any varieties of potato which avoided their ravages? Was the tomato blight widespread, and did any varieties appear resistant? Onions were devastated on certain plots, identified in one case as downy mildew by the RHS. Were any treatments successful, or varieties less susceptible? - Welsh onions seemed to be free of it. It would be interesting to know. Sharing this kind of information could be a regular Newsletter item.

I had a fine crop of swedes this year, so I was disappointed to find that the variety 'Marian' tasted like soggy cardboard, the flesh as pale and uninteresting as some of the modern spuds. I'm afraid this is increasingly my experience with new varieties - do you find the same? Or can you recommend good and tasty varieties which do well here? Let us know - pop a note in an envelope and drop it through the letterbox in the Seed Store, addressed to 'The Plotholder'.

THE HENRY DOUBLEDAY RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

Some people will be aware of the Henry Doubleday Research Association (HDRA). I hope so, because it deserves wide support. It is a rapidly-expanding association devoted to the promotion and practice of organic gardening methods, and anyone wishing to keep up to date in this field would benefit from membership. It produces a very interesting quarterly newsletter, which is a useful source of information on all matters organic, care of crops, fertilisers, and pest control. Membership allows free entry not only into their gardens but also RHS gardens, including Wisley.

For a small additional membership fee you can join their Seed Library, and receive free samples of old varieties which are being rescued from the oblivion resulting from the sales policies of the large seed producers like Monsanto. I have grown a pea called 'Epicure' which quite simply out-tastes any variety I've ever eaten. Unfortunately the pigeons liked them as well, so my seed supply for next year is small. In future years I hope to build up my stock so that I can pass some on.

Ever heard of a tomato called 'Broad Ripple Yellow Currant'? HDRA found this growing between the cracks in the pavement in (I think) Baltimore, USA. It produces a profusion of tiny sweet yellow tomatoes, has been entirely clear of blight, and is a real talking point with guests at my dinner table. The dwarf bean 'Cherokee Trail of

Tears' was taken by the Cherokee Indians on their enforced march to their new reservations in USA. Seed arrived in the British Isles when supplies were sent to Ireland during the dreadful potato famine.

I'd like to set up a Seed Swap system for vegetable varieties that do well here, particularly old varieties in danger of disappearing. Meanwhile, if you're interested in the Heritage Seed Library, or the HDRA generally, contact them. The membership fee is £20 p.a., with a further £8 for the seed library (for which you get six packets of seed). The address is:

The Henry Doubleday Research Association,
Ryton Organic Gardens, Coventry CV8 3LG.

Tel. for membership enquiries: (01203) 308210
e-mail: membership@hdra.org.uk
World Wide Web: <http://www.hdra.org.uk>

PADDOCKS WILD LIFE

Some years ago I was actively involved in recording the species of birds seen in Bushy Park on behalf of the Royal Parks and ultimately the London Birds Report. I think a lot of people would be amazed at the wide range of birds that pass through the allotments. I personally have seen a cock stonechat, redwings and fieldfares en route from Scandinavia, wheatears, whitethroats and warblers of many kinds. Tony Walker tells me that a tawny owl regularly roosts near his plot, and although the kestrels appear to have deserted us this year I am sure they will return.

Our native songthrush has featured on a postage stamp as an Endangered Species, so I was thrilled to hear one singing its heart out as I left a Committee Meeting one evening. I was even more delighted when some weeks later I saw a songthrush collecting slugs and snails and flying off to what must have been a hungry brood. Long may they stay with us. I will willingly lose the odd lettuce if the return is that I can hear the songthrush on our plots.

If anyone sees an interesting species of wildlife, be it bird, animal or insect, do drop a note in at the Seed Store, addressed to 'The Plotholder'. Passing this on to the Parks Bird Report people may well build us a bit of credit in their eyes.

THE SEED STORE

Whilst talking about the Seed Store, let me give it a bit of a plug. Most people know where the Seed Store is, but it was evident at rent collection time that there was some uncertainty about its activities.

The Seed Store is completely separate from the Plotholders' and Management Committees. It is operated by George Harmsworth, and carries a considerable stock of cheap fertilisers and other materials; and in the spring, a range of seeds, onion sets, potatoes and tomato plants. The more support George gets, the better range he can supply. There is also an additional benefit that on Sunday mornings his wife Hazel makes a lovely cup of tea for 15p, and on alternate weeks free-range eggs are on sale at £1.20 per dozen - order them in advance.

A £1 Trading Card bought in February will cover the forthcoming year, so note it in your diary, and in the mean time try the tea and the eggs.

MANURE

The subject of fertilisers leads logically to the supply of manure. We are very lucky to have a regular supply of horse manure from nearby stables. It arrives 'fresh' on Saturday mornings ready to be stacked for rotting down for about six months. It is a good time now therefore to place an order with Fred Adams. A load costs £15 (no half-loads - all right, Fred). There is a waiting list at present, but if you see Fred, he will enter your order in his book, and it will arrive in due course. If you fail to see Fred - recognisable by his distinctive and rather chic white woolly hat, then drop a note in the Seed Store, addressed to Fred Adams, Manure Dealer, clearly stating your name and plot number. Fred will be unable to chase everybody, so please try and contact him direct on plot No. 116. One important point: when the manure is delivered, please try to be present to shift it onto your plot straight away - it will be unloaded on the roadway.

PADDOCKS MILLENNIUM PROJECT

As part of our efforts to improve the site we have decided to set up a fund specifically for that purpose, in direct response to a suggestion made at the March EGM. If you would like to contribute it will have to be in the form of a cash donation, as an Instant Access Bank Account is proving difficult to set up. Receipts will be issued, and accounts audited and reported at the Plotholders' Committee. Donations can be passed to me, Les Dickinson, on site on Sunday mornings.

AND FINALLY . .

I think that's probably enough for now, but I'll make a last appeal for items for future issues of 'The Plotholder'. I'm conscious that at present this is very much from me rather than a wider range of people. So please let us have details of anything that you feel will interest plotholders - gardening tips, successes and failures, recipes, anecdotes, memories, things that you want clarified - these can all be included. Is anyone interested in special groups, for instance Sweet Pea Growers, Fruit Growers etc.? How about suggestions for competitions? Whatever you think, you know what to do - Drop It In At The Seed Store.

Until next time, Good Gardening - Les Dickinson.