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# THE PLOTHOLDER

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12 ROYAL PADDOCKS ALLOTMENTS NEWSLETTER - Issue No 5 - October '99

**THE END OF THE GARDENING YEAR** is almost here - as usual rents have been collected on the first three Sunday mornings of this month, and this year you'll have been asked to fill in a form giving your name, address and details of any help you can give the allotments. This should mean that all tenants get their copy of The Plotholder through the right door - if you think you've been left off our lists, call the contact number at the foot of page 4.

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... **AND THE AGM TAKES PLACE ON FRIDAY 12 NOVEMBER** at 7.30 p.m. at the Bullen Hall, Hampton Wick. Please do come - the presence of as many tenants as possible makes the running of the site much more effective. Let us have your nominees for the committee in advance - the committee you elect can hear what plotholders want (and don't want) from them, so that all our efforts can bear fruit.

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**PUTTING THE PLOT TO BED** . . . . It's timely (*says Les Dickinson*) as we come to the end of the growing season, to stress how important it is to get plots ready for the winter. If, as is often the case, people are unable to spare much time on their plots during the winter, a good tidy up, weed clearance and autumn dig will give a huge reward next spring when the fine weather returns.

Remember too, that if you intend to apply organic fertilisers like bonemeal, or fish, blood and bone, these are slow-acting, and should be applied in the autumn to ensure that the necessary plant foods are available in the spring. October is also the month for planting garlic and autumn onion sets, and the latter are available from George in the Seed Store. *There's an interview with George on page 3 of this issue.*

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**GOOD MANNERS WITH ROUNDUP** . . . . This weedkiller, produced by Monsanto, the people who brought us GM foods, has been mentioned from time to time in these pages, and we have been asked to remind users that they should be careful to spray when it isn't windy, to ensure there's no drift on to neighbouring plots. The package comes with a device which can be used as a spray-guard, but if you've lost yours, a plastic cup will do the job.

*If you prefer to manage without sprays, follow the advice in the previous paragraph: I've discovered that diligent weeding in autumn and a good start in spring can reduce the number of germinating weeds more than I would have thought possible. Ed.*

With great regret, we say goodbye to Les Dickinson, both as a tenant, and as Chairman of the Plotters' Committee. He has worked hard for us all during his eighteen months in office and we shall miss his commitment and enthusiasm. We print below the main points of his outgoing Chairman's Report.

#### **CHAIRMAN'S REPORT TO THE AGM.**

*It's been a Curate's Egg sort of year, good in parts. The Committee has achieved most of its targets, but progress on some important issues has been limited. You seem to have welcomed the quarterly issues of The Plotters, and the two social functions; both look like good ways of improving communications between the Plotters' Committee and tenants, and I hope they will be continued.*

*But the ongoing battle to get full cultivation of all plots has been less successful, with a steady stream of applicants balanced by an equally steady flow of departures. The result is that the state of the site has not improved significantly.*

*Much work was done in the early part of the season by a few willing helpers, to set up action areas and clear and prepare plots in areas which were deteriorating, but despite the new strimmer, and much blood, sweat and tears, there was little lasting success. The main reason appears to be delay in cultivating newly-cleared sites. Unfortunately a number of new tenants never came back to work their plots. A delay of even three or four months means that nature fights back, and plots become overgrown again. Next year's committee may wish to consider a system that exists on other sites, whereby an initial non-returnable deposit is taken (say £20), and then a six-month probationary period served. This might deter tenants who fail to cultivate, and fail to notify the Committee that they are unable to do so.*

*Perhaps we forget what a huge site the Paddocks are. With 220 full plots, and many split into half-plots there could be anything up to 300 tenants if the site were fully occupied. This is far more than can be run by a handful of willing plotters and an annual Management Committee meeting. Arresting and reversing the decline of the site is the single biggest task of future committees, and it is absolutely crucial that we debunk the idea, frequently propounded, that all is well as long as we have a Plotters' Committee in existence. This is complacent and dangerous. We need at least thirty active helpers, so that no-one has more to do than they can manage, to work on rubbish clearance and site maintenance; we also need a substantial increase in funds, to deal with buildings in need of repair.*

*On a more positive note, the new shed has been installed, and a new mower and strimmer purchased. Two rubbish collections were carried out. The Millennium Fund stands at £191.39. Due to good work by the Hon. Clerk to the Management Committee, new main gates are to replace the existing damaged ones.*

*So on the whole, a mixed year, and future Committees still have a lot of work to do. Regrettably this will be without the Chairmanship of myself. For a variety of personal reasons I have had to give up my plots, and I will not be available in future. It is important that volunteers for the Committee come forward to press on with those initiatives already introduced, and to tackle the on-going problem of the condition of the site.*

**Les Dickinson**

*Veronique Olive  
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## VETERAN PLOTHOLDER CLOCKS UP MORE THAN 50 YEARS' SERVICE

79 year-old George Harmsworth has seen more than 50 years of changing seasons on the Royal Paddocks, and he describes himself as a soon-to-be **Millennium Octogenarian** - he celebrates his 80th birthday on Christmas Day. You may already have met him - he is the bright-eyed chap who mans the seedstore on Sunday mornings, with his wife Hazel. From ten o'clock onwards he deals with a stream of visitors buying a wide range of goods, from farm eggs (every other Sunday) to bonemeal, seeds and the current seasonal planting. Serving under a slogan which proclaims 'Open to sunshine, friends and God', George makes a careful note of each purchase with a hand-written receipt for each customer. 'I've always been here on Sundays', he says. 'I've only missed because of family commitments, or if it was deluging snow or rain.'

George and his friend Stan Bastion are proud of their efforts with the cleanly-decorated seedstore. 'We rebuilt it in the 50's - it was like the Black Hole of Calcutta. Then a lime tree crashed through the roof in the late 70's and we dealt with that.' George, Stan, and George's father rebuilt the lavatories in 1967. The incinerator is George's responsibility too. And he also maintains our 22 water pumps. Each one has to be dismantled and stored before winter to protect it from frost, and put back around Easter. 'He never sits down for a minute', says Stan. 'He has a cup of tea and then he's off again.'

George's two plots, numbers 104 and 105, are evidence of a man who takes gardening seriously. A bright green and orange sign indicates the Harmsworth plot, where he grows enough to keep him and Hazel self-sufficient in vegetables for ten months out of twelve, perhaps just needing to buy potatoes at the back end of the year.

### Modern gardeners

So what does this tough, active, nearly-80-year-old think of modern gardeners? 'People tend to be lazy. They want a ready-dug plot and they expect to do a bit and then come back in six months and find a plot full of vegetables', claims Mr Harmsworth. Having said that, he has a kind word for some of the younger plotters who've moved in recently. 'One chappie, him and his girlfriend took over from Barge Walk Lil, scrubbed it all, and have grown some quite good stuff this year.'

And organic gardeners? 'Organic is a silly name in some ways. People don't seem to realise that fertilisers, sulphate of ammonia and potash, are all natural. In the days of coal fires we'd ask the chimney sweep to put aside a bag of soot for half a crown, and we'd keep the slugs and flies down with that.'

George spent his working life as a gas fitter in what he terms the 'stockbroker belt' of Esher, East Molesey and Teddington. The allotments have been his life-long leisure interest, but more than a hobby. 'Early on, the working wage was between £3 and £4 a week and we grew our own vegetables to help with food bills. I enjoy it - you miss it if you stop, it's like an addiction. I don't want to blow my own trumpet, but I've been a mainstay', concludes George. With half a century of gardening behind him, it seems a bit of trumpet-blowing is in order for this quick-witted Kingston resident who always strikes a green note.

*interview by Sarah Onions*

Those of us who are much newer to gardening than George learn a lot from our more experienced neighbours. We also learn the hard way, from experience. But even when things don't go as planned, there's so much pleasure to be had out in the open air, especially if we keep our eyes and ears open for the other, non-human, occupants of the site. As these journal extracts show . . .

December 12th '97: Planted broad beans in new allotment. Weather mild for Dec. Clear, bright sunshine. Saw green woodpecker and jay . . . also robin and parakeets. Planted a raspberry bush (cost £5.50).

December 13th: More broad beans planted in centre of plot. Horse manure obtained from Horse Rangers. Composter half-filled now. . . 3 jays, one in a tree stripping bark or eating berries, and robin. Watered raspberry bush by mistake, and covered in plastic.

December 19th: Very brief visit to check raspberry bush - had survived 4-5 days of very cold and frosty weather. Saw a trio of jays. Plot between Bula and me is being cleared quickly.

Christmas Day: brief visit with Joe to pick parsley for the spicy stuffing. Very mild, rainy. . . plot next door proceeds apace, fruit bushes planted. Must get on! Heard Christmas bells of St John the Baptist pealing.

December 31st: Blue skies, sun on my back. Cut raspberry canes down to nine inches. . . Freshly-raked bean row looking quite professional. Dug over one of front patches - lots of grass in it, seems hard work. . . Gardener on patch next door has made such progress with nice neat canes marking off plots. I covered 4 crowns of rhubarb with buckets and cardboard box for forcing. Woman working nearby said she was having problems with couch grass, and that my digging was nearly as bad as hers - did she mean my technique or the extent of work to do?

January 1st: A great visit. Coldish blue sky. Surprised to see at least 5 other gardeners digging away despite sharp wind - needed my woolly hat. Bula's garlic, planted in Nov., looks green and fresh. Tame fox walked about pathetically with mangy tail. On my way back, said hallo to policeman digging his garden. Houses on old gas site have gone up another 20 thousand to £220,000. Arrived home 12.30 as St John the Baptist bell did not chime noon.

January 9th: Very mild, but Bula advised against planting peas at this early stage because of threat of frost, so dug over back patch for potatoes instead. Forcing rhubarb seems to be working, although each pot had a snail or slug under it. Bula suggested planting garlic . . .

January 10th: The man with a plot in the middle said peas could go in, and he'd already planted his (Feltham First) without cloches.

January 11th: Late afternoon visit to plant peas - delicate salmon pink sunset on the way. .

January 20th: Minus 5 forecast tonight - set off at 7.40p.m. armed with tarpaulin to cover up the broad beans, and found soil already frozen. . . Saw middle-aged couples learning the waltz in the lit-up dance studio, as I walked back through Hampton Wick.

January 23rd: Healthy young fox with strong brush took off at my whistle. The tarp. had done its job as soil beneath frost-free, though seedlings look a bit battered. . . Followed hoof-prints back through the park, and was suitably rewarded. Find myself putting frozen dung in plastic bags on a January morning.

January 24th: Times gardening column suggests planting broad beans in cold frame . . . but what about in the roaring open, 5 nights of frost behind us, under mineral water-bottle cloches? . . .

*Extracted from Sarah Onions' Diary of a London allotment*

To contribute to The Plotholder . . . . . contact Susan Saunders on 977 4675

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