



# SUNNYSIDE ALLOTMENT SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

www.sunnysideallotments.org.uk  
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2/2007

It's April 2007. Where have all the April showers gone? Why is May blooming in April? So far there has been not a drop of rain since the beginning of the month, just beautiful sunshine every day. This makes us all feel good and gives us our required dose of vitamin D for healthy living but it is not good news on the allotment! Already hoses are in operation, watering has begun early. All the more reason for following the excellent water conservation tips you can find on our website. But have we ever seen such beautiful blossom on the fruit trees? They look magnificent against the blue skies and if we have a scarcity of vegetables, surely there will be an abundance of fruit. Nature compensates!

Already we are making plans for our summer activities, the barbeque and the Open Day on Sunday, 19th August. We have a photographic Competition and a Scarecrow Competition so there is plenty to do as well as gardening. We hope you will find time to support these activities and join in the fun by giving a helping hand.

Your committee, mainly Angela and Jenny, have been working hard to help with gardening advice. You will read that there is to be an Allotment hand book, available for all tenants; if you are still in doubt about what variety of crops to grow or feel you are lacking knowledge about suitable growing conditions, turn to this year's calendar where you will find excellent information about most of the main crops and lastly, read the second part of Clive Smith's article about how to turn a 'forgotten jungle' into a 'cultivated allotment plot'. A busy summer lies ahead!

## Protecting fruit trees

If you have recently planted any fruit trees on your plot, it is strongly recommended that you fit tree protectors round the trunks to prevent damage by rabbits. Three year old trees were fatally ring-barked last season.

## Paths

Now that it is time for path mowing again, a reminder to keep the paths between the plots clear of obstructions, stones, netting etc to avoid damaging machines. Also please keep any structures away from paths to allow for the safe passage of mowers and other equipment. Finally, if you are training fruit eg. blackberries parallel with your path, remember to plant well back from the path to allow for growth of the fruiting spurs. When these encroach onto the path, beware of bloodletting when you mow!

## A new addition!

Congratulations to Karin & Roy on the birth of their daughter Amelia Grace, who was born on March 22nd. See right for a picture of the proud parents.

## Sunnyside Allotment Handbook

### - Advance notice

Members of the SAS committee in conjunction with the Town Council are producing a Sunnyside Allotment handbook, bringing together much general and site-specific information. We hope you will find it useful to refer to. All tenants will be entitled to a copy, and these may be collected from Berkhamsted Town Council office at the Civic Centre. They will be available from 5th July. It will also be on our website.



## Your current Committee Members

### Chairman :

Angela Wheeldon 874440

### Vice Chairman:

John Driver 862734

### Secretary :

Jenny Sippings 865890

### Treasurer :

John Powell 878640

Fiona Duck 874334

Patrick Stileman 874457

Brenda Baynes 865853

Ted Dyer 872684

Billy Wall 871425

Anna Dolan 870918

Prue Schofield 878559

## Bird boxes in Birtchnells Copse

There are now eleven bird boxes in Birtchnells Copse, including four new ones made this winter by John Powell. They are mostly tit boxes high up in the trees, but there is one open fronted one for robins or wrens. On a recent inspection by John Powell and John Driver, which according to them, involved perilous climbing and they have a photo to prove it!, six out of the eleven boxes show signs of being used with full nests of eggs in two of the boxes. The eggs are only the size of a five pence piece and are thought to be tits. This seems to be a very encouraging result as half of the boxes have been newly installed this year.

## Days out and about Claydon House & gardens, Middle Claydon, MK18 2EX 01296 730252

We have been sent details by the Head Gardener. As well as the NT house, you can now visit the gardens which are still largely owned by the Verney family. These include a 2 acre walled kitchen garden. They are open Saturday to Wednesday from 1pm to 4.30pm, March to October.



**Above:** The intrepid John Powell at the top of the ladder for box inspection - with the equally intrepid John Driver out of picture holding the bottom of the ladder! (we hope).

## Tenancy Changes

|                 |        |
|-----------------|--------|
| Goodbye to      |        |
| Judith Stringer | A1     |
| Philip Woulds   | A32b   |
| Freda Earl      | B14    |
| Simon Tooley    | New 12 |
| David Green     | New31  |

### Welcome to:

|                       |         |
|-----------------------|---------|
| Jo & Jane Garstin     | A1      |
| Cynthia Fulks         | A32b    |
| Rob Bennie            | B14a    |
| James Moffatt         | New 31a |
| Julie & Spencer Adams | New 31b |
| James Southern        | New 41  |

## Wood chip

We gratefully receive wood chip from various local tree firms which is freely available for everyone to use. It can be useful as a deep mulch or for making paths. There are 3 designated wood chip areas. On SSold they are adjacent to Plot A4 above the car park, and above Sunnyside Rural Trust's garden on C Road. On SSNew the area is at the top of the central green roadway, below Birtchnells Copse.

Recently there have been deliveries onto the car park by the SSNew bottom gate. We don't want it here as it is blocking parking spaces, and we have put up a notice. If you see anyone delivering there, please direct them to the sites listed above. In the meantime, gardeners at the bottom of SSNew please use as much of it as you can so that we can regain the use of the car park.

## Parking

Now that we are full, there are more cars on site. On busy weekends please park 'chevron style' on the car park by Grantham Mews in order to accommodate as many vehicles as possible. Alternatively, as our Town Mayor would say, think of your carbon footprint and walk instead!

## Open Garden

22, Hall Park Gardens, Berkhamsted. Peter and Jean Block are opening their garden as usual on Sunday, 6th May from 2pm, in aid of the National Gardens Scheme. Refreshments will be served and there are plenty of seats on which to sit and admire the garden.

## Jobs for Open day

It was agreed at the last AGM that we would produce a list of jobs which need doing on or before Open Day (Sunday 19 August) to prevent all the work falling on just a few people, and asking for volunteers. If you could help with any of the following, please contact Angela Wheeldon (874440 or 10 Chapel Street) or Jenny Sippings (865890) or [info@sunnysideallotments.org.uk](mailto:info@sunnysideallotments.org.uk) before the end of May.

The jobs include:

- Poster display (in shops etc around the town) –2 weeks before.
- Scarecrow competition.
- Gazebo & furniture team.
- Mowing paths, car parks etc
- Photographic competition.
- Putting up signage – day before.
- Book & tool stall
- Children's activity
- Serving refreshments
- Pricing produce
- Cleaning garden furniture – week before
- Selling produce

**Tool stall:** we thought a stall selling second-hand tools (gardening, DIY etc) might be a popular addition this year.

# **Breaking new ground – or how to turn a ‘forgotten Jungle’ into a ‘cultivated allotment plot’ By Clive Smith**

## **Part Two**

### **Weeds – not all bad news!**

When a piece of ground is called rough or dirty, it implies difficult perennial weeds, couch grasses (twitch) and maybe unwanted wild brambles and tree roots. The latter two should have been cut-down and rooted out, a good tool to borrow for this is a mattock; the former awkward perennials should be distinguished\* from annual weeds, benign grasses and clovers. In many ways these are beneficial: binding the soil over winter, helping to hold moisture near the surface and if turned in at the right time (at least a couple of months before planting, longer if a dry spring) they provide good humus forming matter, nitrogen, potassium, phosphorous and other minerals i.e. ‘green manure’. When it comes to planting crops, they should be well rotted into the soil or removed and composted elsewhere – not burnt! If you are creating a seedbed, then one certainly doesn’t want much ‘detritus’ in the soil, even if it is half rotted small annual weeds. This ‘in-situ-composting’ detracts from the soils ability to supply needed nutrients and bacteria – the soil structure and nutrients should be ‘in-place’ by then – well, that’s the aim of the game. From the moment the annuals are turned in or removed, try not to walk on the soil, especially in wet weather – use a plank.

### **Tackling large areas of grass and rough (dirty) ground.**

There are a few ways of tackling weedy, grassy ground. But first it is best said, the time to turn a poor piece of dirty weedy ground into a fine looking fully cultivated area, is two to three seasons – and a lot of work. If you really don’t think your commitment is at or close to that level, it might be best to consider allowing someone else to have that allotment garden resource – they are becoming more popular and quite scarce in some parts of the country.

1) Set it aside for a year and half (no more than two) covered in heavy carpet or black plastic (heavy DPC). Provided it is held down flat, does not blow away or succumb to UV damage in that time, this when lifted, will have dealt with the majority of difficult weeds, especially thistle, dock and have made a good impression on much of the bindweed or ground elder, giving you a fighting chance, provided you thoroughly dig the plot over, removing any live weeds as soon as it is lifted. Additionally, the rotted weeds will have provided good fertiliser and humus to the soil. Don’t leave carpet for much more than 24 months, if it too rots in situ you may well live to regret it! You can cover the edges of DPC with soil to keep it down, but again, this is not advised with carpets, as it will soon become part of the problem.

Carpets are best as they allow some moisture penetration to maintain the rotting process. Don’t use foam or rubber backed carpets. Watch for the pile starting to drop out or the propylene backing weave breaking down badly under UV light – lift, bag and dispose of immediately.

2) Rotavate or dig?. Nearly as controversial as bonfires, since unless the plot is very clean and well cultivated to start with, this will just break all the perennial weeds and grass

roots up (bindweed, thistle and dock particularly), throw it about and bury it everywhere, creating a nightmare weed lawn again a few weeks after it next rains! Most live to regret using this modern mechanical marvel on an allotment plot full of turf and perennial weeds. If the weeds are simply annual varieties and light grasses (rather than couch) then it can be a fast way to prepare the plot – though frowned on by many traditional allotment plot holders - many are out for a good workout these days as well as good fresh crops; taken steadily, a good dig does wonders for strength, stamina and general fitness (remember that working men would have been hardened to physical labour from a much earlier age). If digging/weeding, make a point of standing up, taking a stretch and a look around at regular intervals – don’t wait until you ache!

3) Cut the top turf/weed layer off with a spade. Then ‘clamp’ the turfs (stack back to back in a regular heap, cover with DPC or heavy carpet and leave for 18 months to 2 years) – the result? – perfect loam! Then one can dig over more easily the ground, removing the big weed roots by spot digging as you go – those big tap roots must come out, preferably whole from the hole! Sieve out with a fork anything that looks like thistle, dock, cow parsley, buttercup, bindweed, or ground elder – indeed anything perennial that looks the least bit alive – apart from the worms of course – chuck them onto freshly dug ground, they’ll live. If there were turfs on the top then the ground should have worms beneath – always a good sign. The first dig/weed should be as deep and as thorough as your spirit and strength allows!

4) Remove and knock out turfs, the top few inches, preferably onto a plank, corrugated iron or plastic sheet. The theory is that the soil around the turf and weed roots is the most fertile and rich in nitrogen and humus. So return it to the plot, having shaken out the weed and root growths, which then will compost much faster. Provided these are added to a good ‘hot’ aerobic heap, seeds and root weeds should be killed off. Otherwise, a long rotting period in a ‘cold’ heap, as in the ‘clamp’ method above should be used – these will eventually produce excellent compost. Before being used, material from this style of composting should be sieved, and any live weed recycled through the process a second time.

Then check over the top surface for missed deep rooted weeds, chase down any tap-rooted weeds and especially fork carefully right under areas of bindweed, ground elder etc., attempting to remove every trace – so it’s said, 1/10th inch will grow again! Break up any large clods of soil, rake off the finished area and if possible, leave to settle a while before planting. Once levelled-off and ready, use a plank to walk on it for planting – you have spent a lot of energy aerating it!

### **Deep beds/ raised beds – the latest thing, what are they where are the benefits?**

These are promoted (principally by organic gardeners) as a way of providing easy access to a growing bed so that walking on the soil is unnecessary – avoiding compaction.

Usually running across the plot and being no more than 5 ft in width, the soil is mounded up (Bob Flowerdew method) or contained by raised borders. Paths between the beds are often first sheeted with a weed suppressant (e.g. Mypex) before being mulched heavily with sand, pea-shingle, stones, wood chips (often available free on-site) or bark.

Provided that deep-rooted perennials are dug out properly to start with, annual mulching and the lack of compaction soon leads to good aerated soil with a high humus content and theoretically at least, few serious weeds – all without the necessity for annual digging. Light tilling and removal of annual weeds before planting and then around plants as they mature is necessary, but the mulching suppresses growth of the rapid spreading (e.g. couchgrass, buttercup) or deeper-rooted weeds.

Since some plots might be overrun with brambles and perennials, in order to ensure a nominally weed-free bed to start with, it might be wise to treat the newly dug area as a stale seed bed first e.g. create a good tilth, rake it flat and then keep it damp for a couple of months – just to see what comes up! Weed that thoroughly and finish constructing the raised bed.

Creating a set of raised beds naturally lends itself to a longer-term project, inviting a systematic approach to cultivating an allotment plot in stages over several seasons if the time to prepare the whole plot is limited. A first working bed can be prepared and sown, whilst other areas are undergoing the more thorough weeding that this form of gardening requires, remembering that the payback is not having to do the annual dig from end to end, nor the application of heavy manures. Don't skimp on the preparation of paths, it will amaze a newcomer how some things can grow through almost any gap, and then sprout into a veritable jungle – nature is all powerful! Annual mulches should be applied at the right time – they can keep moisture out of the soil just as well as in – take advice. If using the banked-up method without solid borders, choose suitable varieties to grow on the sides, where some faces will get more direct sunlight and others less.

And remember, deep-beds are not necessarily a better, nor worse style of gardening than a 'dug all over plot' – just different! They do, however, reduce the total area under cultivation.

### **Synthetic detritus**

It is quite likely that your new plot may have some or a lot of man-made rubbish on or in it. Bottles, glass from old cold-frames/greenhouses is just one type of obvious rubbish to be systematically cleared. Synthetic carpet fibres (polypropylene and nylon mainly) might be another annoyance. Most synthetic materials like this will begin degrading seriously due to ultraviolet light after a couple of years, even UV shielded plastics will break down seriously after 3 or 4 years, but unfortunately they tend to go brittle and break-up first, causing an eyesore if not actually a real problem in the soil. The worst seems to be large sheets of clear plastic possibly used for make-shift greenhouses and cold-frames – you may well decide to use such materials,

but the minute they show the first signs of breaking down, pack them into bin liners and dispose of them properly. They can go from a manageable problem to a nightmare in a month or so – to see your plot (or your neighbours) covered in a million fragments of plastic that just break up further when picked up will bring tears to your eyes. Don't wait for that carpet or DPM covering to get blown to the winds, bag it!

### **Fertilising your new plot**

It is a personal choice whether you go for gold and spread manure or good compost as soon as you've dug and readied your plot for a first season. Intensive vegetable growing takes a lot out of the soil and allotment gardeners tend to be pretty adamant that a lot has to be put back on a consistent basis. Typically, traditionalists spread one large trailer load (a lot) of cow/pig manure over their 10 poles every year, before the winter sets in. Others say two loads (a heck of a lot!), whilst still others might get by using a couple of smaller loads of well composted horse-manure, leaves as well as long-term composted turf and annual weedings. Proprietary concentrated fertilisers (e.g. chicken manure based products, specialist organic concentrated pellets etc.) can also be used, but should be sourced and costed wisely. (Unless you run a large vegetarian restaurant, don't expect your annual kitchen waste to do much more than a small herb bed).

For the following reasons, it is possibly not worth bothering with manure for the first year:

- If the plot has been fallow for more than a year or so, a lot of weed top and root growth will have rotted back into the soil – this is evident after a couple of years under carpet allowing some moisture through – the soil has noticeably good organic content and grows good crops for a year or two. Equivalent to a green manure.
- Provided the turfs and weeds have been knocked out during digging, a lot of goodness will have been returned – the loam around grass roots particularly and some other weeds is about the best there is. Thus, don't dig when it is too wet to quickly shake any earth out of the sods or weed roots – or if you do, then turn the whole sod back under deep so it rots over winter (about the best technique in a very wet Autumn).
- The last tenant probably manured the plot the season before leaving – it can't be that bad!
- After the hard work of a first dig, it may be too much hard work or too late to do any good! Time is perhaps better spent weeding thoroughly, properly clamping the turfs that came off or building some large compost bins for the horse manure deliveries.

If, when the soil is slightly damp you can't turn up plenty of earthworms, then that might be a sign someone's taken all the goodness out of it (or used heavy chemical fertilisers – which is unlikely) – maybe then consider your options provided you have time. One year without a heavy treatment of fertiliser will not destroy the soil or mean you'll fail to produce good crops – the first year may well bring superb results due to rest the soil has had!

Advice on Bonfires to follow in the next issue.