

# System Allotment Society Newsletter

Summer 2015

Welcome to the summer 2015 issue of the newsletter. In this issue we welcome new plot holders and offer some advice about starting to work an overgrown plot, look at the leaf miner invasion that's been affecting our onions, garlic and shallots and beets, highlight a blog by a Leicester gardener who writes about her simple, self-reliant life and consider alternatives to metaldehyde slug pellets.

## Leaf miners devastate crops

The past couple of years have been difficult ones for growers of alliums such as leeks, onions, garlic and shallots. They develop curly or kinked leaves before the foliage dies back and the bulbs do not develop. There has been much speculation about the cause of this problem, not previously seen at the allotment site. It seems likely one possible cause is the allium leaf miner.



Distorted leaves on shallots caused by allium leaf miner

The allium leaf miner fly lays eggs on the alliums and the larvae tunnel into the developing leaves, stems or bulbs before pupating in a small red-brown case. The fly emerges from the case and the lifecycle begins again. The autumn pupae can overwinter in the soil.

According to the Royal Horticultural Society, the leaf miner was first found in Britain in 2002 and has spread northwards from south east England. The



The red-brown allium leaf miner pupae – three on the right hand side

flies lay eggs in March and April, and again from September to November. The first sign of an infestation is white spots on the leaves followed by the kinking, due to the presence of the maggots in the leaves. There is no chemical control, so covering the plants is one solution. Gardening writer Alys Fowler has tried to confuse the fly by interplanting alliums with wild flowers or clover, with some success, but she still finds that covering her alliums is the most complete solution.

Another leaf miner causing problems for some plot holders is the beet leaf miner. It eats the inside of beet and chard leaves and while this is generally a minor problem for beetroot, for chard lovers it's a real headache.

The tiny fly overwinters in the soil and emerges to lay eggs in May. Once the larvae hatch after around a week, they chew their way into the leaves and eat the tender inside, before dropping into the soil to pupate. This cycle happens several times over the



Beet leaf miner damage on a Swiss chard leaf

summer and is best dealt with by vigilance, and picking off any affected leaves. They can be put in the compost, but the larvae should be squashed first. Otherwise, it's back to covering the plants. We seem to be at a point where no plants can be left uncovered!

## Spring plant sale



Committee members Terry Bailey, Richard Thorpe, Gerald Pownall and Paul Windridge at the plant stall in Town Square

The spring plant sale was held on 16<sup>th</sup> May 2015 at our usual spot in Town Square. Plot holders donated a wide range of plants for sale, including tomatoes, marigolds, lettuce, courgettes, celeriac, beans and fennel. Eggs from Richard Thorpe's chickens were popular, and the rhubarb sold well. Committee members served on the stall, and raised £195 for allotment society funds.

## Recycling unwanted items

If you have unwanted items that may be of use to other plot holders you can leave them by the pond. Unfortunately there has been a problem recently with people disposing of their rubbish at this spot.



Please do not leave your waste either here or near the shed, as it will have to be removed and this comes at a cost to Syston Allotment Society.

Also, plastic pots and trays rarely get taken, so please do not leave these by the pond. If your donated items haven't been re-homed after a few days, please take them away yourself. Thank you.

## Not just greenfingers blog

*Notjustgreenfingers* is a blog by 'Mrs Thrift', who lives in Leicester. It's full of tips on growing, storing and using your produce, simple living, saving money, and gardens and growers to visit in the surrounding area.

She used to have four allotments but now concentrates on growing in her back garden using the vast knowledge she picked up when she had her plots. She blogs every week so there's plenty of new information available regularly. Find her blog at

<https://notjustgreenfingers.wordpress.com/>

## You've got a new plot – but where do you start?

We would like to welcome our new growers, who have taken on a plot this year. Unless you are very lucky, your plot will be untidy and overgrown, and you are probably wondering how you'll ever clear it. And you may not have had much experience with growing vegetables, and you feel overwhelmed with how much information you need to take in.

So where do you start? It depends what time of year you get your plot. Those who got to the top of the waiting list early in the year have the advantage of starting to clear their plots before the weeds got going, and have had some time to plan what they'd like to grow and clear some ground. But for those who have only just got their plot the task can be daunting.



How do you deal with this?

One way to approach it is to work on a bit at a time. Chop the heads off any flowering weeds to prevent them setting seed, and dispose of the weeds either in the green manure bin at the local tip in Mountsorrel or compost them. If you can get a heap really hot, which involves having plenty of weeds and a means of keeping them in one place, such as a compost bin or by covering with black plastic or a piece of carpet, you can get the weeds to compost relatively quickly. Alternatively you could put them in a black Dalek style bin and wait at least a couple of years. Then cover any ground you're not working with something that will exclude the light to stop the weeds growing, such as thick cardboard (bike shops are a good source) or Mypex, a breathable black cover. Both will need to be well weighted down, as our site is surprisingly exposed and it gets very windy at times.

Then work on a small part of your plot at a time, digging up the weeds and covering any ground you're not going to use right away. Don't be tempted to use a rotovator, as this will chop up the perennial weeds and they will resprout from each fragment. Chip away at it, and you will get your plot cleared, even if it doesn't feel like it at first!

Our soil is very light, and will need added nutrients, especially if you plan to grow organically. Get a compost bin going early on and add your vegetable waste from food preparation, lawn clippings and some paper shreadings or crumpled newspapers. You probably won't have enough compost for a while to add to your soil, so dig in bought compost – the site shop sells it at a good price - or well rotted (old) manure, if you can find a source free of aminopyralid weedkiller. Aminopyralid stunts and distorts some vegetables, and can leave your crops unusable. You can concentrate the compost or manure around your plants at first and work towards adding nutrients more widely as you go on.

Even if you get your plot in mid to late summer, you can still grow salads such as lettuce, radish and rocket from seed, you could get growing herbs from the supermarket and split them up into individual plants, get plug plants from nurseries, ask around to see whether other plot holders have spare plants, buy garlic and shallots ready for autumn planting and start sowing over-wintering vegetables such as spring cabbage, broad beans, winter salads and oriental brassicas.

You will need to learn about crop rotation, pests and diseases, what to sow or plant when, how to bring plants on...it's endlessly fascinating, and even plot holders with decades of experience are still learning. So start small, be consistent and visit often, accept that some things will do well and others won't and they won't be the same things next year, grow only what you enjoy eating, cover your brassicas against cabbage root fly, your carrots against carrot root fly and your alliums against allium leaf miner, and most of all, enjoy it. There's nothing like eating a vegetable straight off a plant you've grown, and this will sustain you when it all feels a bit too much, as it will sometimes. Being on your plot when the sun's shining, the insects are buzzing and the vegetables are growing well is magical, and it makes all the work worthwhile.

## Radio gaga

Many plot holders like to enjoy a peaceful time on their plot, and one of the best things about having an allotment is being able to enjoy listening to nothing more than the tranquil buzz of bees and the birds singing. In an increasingly noisy world this is a rare pleasure.



So if you enjoy listening to music or to the radio as you work on your plot, please use headphones so fellow plot holders who prefer to work in peace and quiet can do so. Thank you.

## Slug problem? Try nematodes

As we all know, slugs and snails can be a real problem. The commonly used metaldehyde pellets are known to kill slug predators such as birds and hedgehogs, but there are alternatives. Pellets based on ferric phosphate are claimed not to affect other wildlife, but this isn't certain and they should still be used sparingly. There are other methods such as traps and barriers, but these are less effective against the small soil dwelling slugs. Nematodes can be watered in and they will infect and kill the small slugs, but not snails. Companies such as the Organic Gardening Catalogue, Green Gardener and Harrod Horticultural sell ferric phosphate Advanced Slug Killer and Nemaslug.

## Boosting the waiting list

With increasing pressure to use land for housing and councils becoming ever more strapped for cash, allotment sites can be under threat of being sold for development. Councils are obliged to provide land for allotments if sufficient people request it, but they are able to sell off sites if they can provide an alternative. If our site was under threat any alternative would not necessarily be as suitable or as large as our current site. So it's important to have a healthy waiting list to make it clear there is a strong demand for plots in Syston that is most easily met by our large, existing site. Our waiting list has shrunk in recent years, and there's a need to raise awareness of both the existence of the allotments and of the pleasures and benefits of having a plot. So if you know anyone who may like a plot, please ask them to put their name on the waiting list. The committee are looking at ways of promoting the allotments, so if you have any ideas about how we can do this please contact a committee member.

## Committee members

Your current committee members are:

Terry Bailey	Plot 65A
Beth Cowley	Plot 59B
Helen Lake	Plot 63B
Gerald Pownall	Plot 23
Ann Shellard	Plot 62A
Marie Shellard	Plot 62A
Mick Streetly	Plot 11
Alan Terry	Plot 65B
Richard Thorpe	Plot 15B
Paul Windridge	Plot 54

## 2015 committee meetings

Committee meetings are on the first Tuesday of the month at the Syston and District Social Club, starting at 7.45. Any non-committee members are welcome to attend.