

System Allotment Society Newsletter

Winter 2013/2014

Welcome to the winter 2013/2014 issue of the newsletter. We've seen some changes to the allotment site in the past few months - a new track was laid last autumn and the water troughs have been installed. The community plot has been transformed into an orchard, which will start to fruit in a few years and will be a feature of the site for decades to come. In this issue we take a look at the new orchard, and make some suggestions for growing, foraging and cooking unusual winter greens.

The Knoll Orchard

System used to be full of orchards. A 1903 map shows orchards along Upper Church Street between High Street and the allotments, and it's believed that there used to be an orchard exactly where the allotments are now.

In January, after months of preparation, the allotment society community plot was transformed into a new orchard, named after the old name for the allotment site – Knoll Allotments.



The Knoll Orchard – from an overgrown plot...

The committee had applied for a grant of £700 from the South Charnwood Area Forum budget to pay for the trees, ground cover and fixings. After making two presentations at the decision night in June last year along with a number of

other local projects, we just missed out on being considered for a share of the money.

Fortunately a local benefactor was keen to see the project go ahead, and he generously offered us the money, as long as he could remain anonymous. Gamble and Hollis butchers also donated £30 to pay for one of the trees.



...to Richard Thorpe and Paul Windridge planting the trees...

The trees are a mix of heritage and more modern varieties. The fruit varieties, all on dwarf rootstocks, are:

Apples: Ashmead's Kernel, Epicure, St Edmund's Pippin and Discovery
Damson: Shropshire Prune
Greengage: Cambridge
Pears: Concorde and Onward
Plum: Victoria
and two black mulberries.

All domestic apple varieties are thought to be descended from the Ashmead's Kernel, which dates back to the 18th century. It is a russet type apple with an almost acid drop pear flavour. Some of the other fruit varieties are even older. The Romans introduced damsons to Britain and the first written record of the Shropshire Prune goes back to the late 16th century.



..to Mick Streetley, Richard Thorpe, Paul Windridge, Alan Terry and Helen Lake finishing off the orchard by laying bark chippings

Black mulberries were introduced to Britain in the early 16th century in the hope silkworms would feed on the leaves, but they much prefer to eat the leaves of the white mulberry that won't easily grow in Britain, and the venture was a failure. The delicate fruits have a complex sweet and tart flavour, and can be eaten raw or cooked, and made into preserves and drinks. Shropshire Prunes were used in Victorian times to make dye for the textile industry, a use that continued until the middle of the last century, which made it an important cash crop in Shropshire. Now the fruits are used in both sweet and savoury dishes, as well as for damson wine, gin, whisky and eau de vie...

Summer produce sale



An early customer for Treasurer Terry Bailey at the produce stall

The summer produce sale was held on 24th August 2013. Plot holders contributed a range of late summer produce, including onions, beetroot, courgettes and beans. The sale raised £168.20 for allotment society funds. Committee members took turns to serve on the stall, and to collect more produce from the allotment site as popular items sold out.

Syston Town Council trophy

The 2013 Syston Town Council trophy for the most improved allotment was presented to Steven and Gill Faulkner-Billington. Gill and Steven took over Plot 73A in late summer last year after it had been unworked for some time, and within weeks had dug it back into shape. Gill loves sweet peas, and she hopes to grow them cottage garden style alongside their vegetables, as she finds they won't grow in her garden at home.



Chairman Richard Thorpe presents the trophy to Steven and Gill

Spicy winter greens

For those of you keen to have a change from cabbages and kale in winter, there is a spicy alternative to these stalwart winter greens. Oriental vegetables will grow throughout even a cold winter, especially with a little protection from frost – a layer of fleece or growing them in a cold frame will keep them going even during extended frosty conditions. These vegetables have a spicy flavour, ranging from a definite mustardy tang to a mild warmth. The hottest are

giant red mustard, golden streaks mustard, green in snow mustard and green wave mustard. If you prefer a milder taste try mizuna and mibuna.



L-R: golden streaks mustard, giant red mustard, mizuna

The larger leaves can be cooked with other greens – kale, chard and green wave mustard is a lovely combination – but all can be eaten raw. These Oriental vegetables are brassicas, so need to be included on any crop rotation and protected from cabbage root flies. They don't need manure, just some compost. Sowing the seeds in mid to late July will give you plants big enough by September to see you through the winter. They do bolt as the days lengthen, so always sow after midsummer.

Pasta with winter greens

This simple recipe uses seasonal greens to make a quick and delicious pasta dish. If you want to add mustard greens but don't have any on your plot you can sometimes find mustard flavoured 'sag' greens at Leicester market.

300g winter greens such as kale, chard and mustards
3 tomatoes
175g spaghetti or linguine
2 tablespoons olive oil
1 garlic clove
1 red chilli or dried chilli flakes to taste (optional)
Freshly grated parmesan or similar hard cheese
Salt and pepper

Steam the greens until cooked – about 5 minutes. Skin the tomatoes by covering them with boiling water for about a minute then

plunging into cold water. Chop the flesh, discarding the seeds. Cook the pasta according to the directions on the packet. Slice the garlic. Put the olive oil and garlic in a pan and fry the garlic until it starts to colour. Add the tomatoes, seasoning and the chilli if you're using it. Drain the pasta, add the greens and tomato mixture and stir together. Serve with the grated cheese.

Edible winter weeds

If you are looking for some more variety in your winter salads, try eating weeds. Chickweed, garlic mustard and dandelion leaves complement each other and add some bite to a salad of winter lettuce. Chickweed and dandelions are common on our allotments and continue to grow throughout the winter. Chickweed has a mild flavour and juicy texture, and is a good source of vitamin C.



Chickweed

Garlic mustard appears in late winter and can be found beside the footpaths around Syston. The leaves have a slight but distinct taste of garlic, although not anything like as strong as wild garlic. Eat the leaves before the plants start to flower for the best flavour.



Garlic mustard

Dandelion leaves are bitter but a few will work well with other salad leaves. Use young leaves, but in moderation as they are mildly diuretic. Their French name is *pissenlit*, which literally means 'wet the bed'.

Natural aphid control

Many of us will have some broad beans on our plot, and will soon be looking out for black fly on the growing tips. Paul Windridge knows an old recipe for a simple insecticide that kills all aphids such as black fly, greenfly, scale insects and grey aphid, and passes it on here for your interest. All of these insects breathe through their skin, so this simple potion will deprive them of air and leave you with no aphids within 12 to 24 hours after application.

Mix together 50ml rape seed oil, 500 ml water and three drops of liquid soap in a cheap plant sprayer, such as those sold in Wilkos, and shake for a few minutes until the liquid becomes a white and milky emulsion. Spray the aphids infecting the plants and the following day all the insects will be dead. This is 100% safe. It may cause the leaves to become a little shiny but this will not harm the plant and more importantly it will not harm you!

In the Summer 2014 newsletter, Paul will explain how to minimise white rot and increase your 2015 yield of onions, shallots and garlic by using the leaves and peelings from this year's onions.

Bonfires

Under the new Syston Town Council rules, bonfires are only allowed outside of British Summer Time, so please ensure you have your bonfires before the clocks change on Sunday 30th March. Bonfires are only allowed during the two hours before dusk. As a guide, here are some sunset times for March:

March 1st 5.43 pm
March 15th 6.09 pm
March 29th 6.33 pm

Leicestershire Wildlife Hospital

Leicestershire Wildlife Hospital look after injured wild animals at their site in Kibworth Beauchamp, and release them back into the wild wherever they can. Any animal that would be unable to survive in the wild is cared for at the hospital. If you find an injured animal you can call the 24 hour casualty helpline on 07951 285366.

If you would like to make a donation of either money or food, or sponsor an animal, you can contact them on the above number or via their website <http://www.leicesterwildlifehospital.org>



The hospital is full of young hedgehogs too small to survive the winter on their own

2014 dates for your diary

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. The Annual General meeting will be on 18th March.

The spring plant sale will be on Saturday 17th May and the summer produce sale will take place on Saturday 16th August. We welcome contributions of any plants and produce you can spare from your plot. If you have the space, could you grow some extra plants this spring for the sale, or sow a few more seeds of vegetables that will be ready to harvest in August?