

Syston Allotment Society Newsletter

Winter 2015/2016

Welcome to the winter 2015/2016 issue of the newsletter. In this issue we focus on our sandy soil and what grows well – and not so well – in it, we look at how to encourage beneficial insects onto your plot and suggest ways to keep on top of your plot if you have little time. The Annual General Meeting is coming up on 15th March, and you will find an invitation on the back of this newsletter.

Produce competition



Competition winners with judge Catherine Voyce (centre)

The inaugural produce competition, organised by Marie Shellard, was held on 29th August 2015. Town Manager Catherine Voyce kindly agreed to judge, and she awarded the following prizes:

Best box of produce First: Beryl Seagrave (the vegetables were actually grown and harvested by young brothers Ben and Josh Carvell), second: Malc Eden.

Best use of produce First: Kate Hubbard with plum crumble, Syston White plum jam, redcurrant gin and redcurrant vodka, second: Malc Eden with parsnip wine, piccalilli, pickled onions, and green tomato chutney

Funniest shaped vegetable Carrots from first: Helen Lake, second: Marie and Andy Hillman.

Tallest sunflower children's competition Winner: Angus Pirie-Scott.

Tips for sandy soil

Our light soil can be challenging. It doesn't hold nutrients or water well and it has endemic clubroot that affects brassica growth. Some experienced plot holders have provided their tips to help you with your growing.

Mick, plot 11: Grow brassicas on in pots in a mix of compost, lime, and blood, fish and bonemeal, mixed with clubroot free soil if available. When the plants are around two feet high, plant out just in the mix that comes from the pot.

Dot, plot 2B: Manure the whole plot every couple of years and try inexpensive fruit trees – Dot's Bramley apple trees from Wilko did really well.

Ernie, plot 7: To prevent the sides falling in when making holes for leeks, water the soil if it's dry, then make a hole about 8 inches deep with a dibber twisting it round a few times to create strong sides to the hole. Trim the leek roots a little so the plant sits right in the hole. There's no need to water in.

Brian, plot 3: Plant out Brussels sprouts after rain. Then, when firming them in, the soil will remain compacted. If they are firming in when it's dry, the soil will spring back. For the same reason, avoid walking on wet soil – even our sandy soil will set hard.

Paul, plot 54: The best potato varieties for our soil are earlies Epicure, which keeps up its yield even if frosted, and Lady Christl, which has double the yield of most others. Also main crop varieties Druid, a heavy cropper, and drought tolerant Isle of Jura, both with good pest and disease resistance.

Attracting beneficial insects

Most of us will know the frustration of our crops being attacked by pests. Instead of reaching for chemical sprays and slug pellets, there is an organic alternative – encouraging beneficial insects onto your plot.

These insects will eat pests, and will also pollinate our crops and help to create a resilient ecosystem on and around our plots. By gardening organically the health of the soil is preserved, which in turn helps us grow strong plants that can more easily resist the attentions of aphids, slugs and other pests.

It's well known that bees are essential pollinators, and ladybirds will eat aphids. But other insects will also do a good job around the plot. Hoverflies, ground beetles and lacewings are all important beneficial insects, and there are many others, including wasps, earwigs and centipedes.



A bee and ladybird on borage

Ground beetles, the black beetles of various sizes that we don't often see because they are nocturnal, are omnivorous animals that eat aphids, slugs, weevil larvae and caterpillars and will also clear up dead and decaying matter – and they won't touch your crops. They need an undisturbed habitat to return to after feeding, and a pile of small branches, logs and other prunings in a quiet corner is ideal. Add some dead leaves to provide a place to sleep and a source of food, and they will come out

at night and eat their way through your pest problems.



Devil's coach horse beetle

Honey bees and bumble bees are probably the best known pollinators, but hoverflies are second only to bees in importance for pollination. They will travel a long way and are very hardy. Lacewings eat greenfly, mealy bugs, and white and black fly, as will ladybirds.

Insect hotels create an excellent habitat for bees, ladybirds, lacewings and hoverflies, especially over winter when they can seal themselves in to survive the cold weather. Fill a wooden frame with things that have a cavity an insect can enter, such as hollow stalks, or drill holes in a 4 x 4 piece of wood using different sized drill bits. Put a sloping overhanging roof on the hotel to keep the rain off the holes and cavities. Place it somewhere dry and out of the prevailing wind, and leave it undisturbed.



A bee on calendula marigold

Without pollinating insects we would have a very limited range of crops. To attract pollinators, grow flowers that are predominately natives, with single, open flowers. The daisy and sunflower families are particularly useful, plants such as asters and heleniums. Bees and ladybirds love borage, and lacewings and ladybirds are attracted to the flowers on herbs such as parsley, thyme, rosemary, fennel, sage, oregano and dill. Echinops, cornflowers, poppies, poached egg plants, marigolds, coreopsis, sweet peas and hyssop are excellent, hyssop especially, as it flowers for months. Lavender and Verbena bonariensis are very important attractant plants that extend the pollen season significantly. Companion plants can be used to both attract pests away from your crop and to provide beneficial insect food. For example, nasturtiums attract blackfly as they're close to the ground and the pests won't go higher up in search of your beans.



Bees on echinops

Place flowering plants so that they can be used as insect attractors, for example as edging to a path. An excellent plant for late winter is the honeysuckle *Lonicera fragrantissima*, which has pollen available in February for the first bees emerging after winter.

On allotments where ponds are not allowed, the leaves of *Alchemilla mollis* (Lady's Mantle) provide helpful rain - or watering can - droplets for insects to drink.

Attract beneficial insects by providing for their needs – somewhere quiet to sleep, food, water and avoiding insecticides. Then a robust ecosystem will

gradually be created, benefiting nature and so benefiting us. By encouraging the tiny creatures the bigger ones such as frogs, toads and hedgehogs will appear and they will also help out by eating slugs.

With thanks to Kate Hubbard for providing this information and the photographs. Kate has created a thriving ecosystem in her garden, and she has started to do the same on her new plot, 19B.

Dig for Victory

On 26th September 2015, Syston Allotment Society had a 'Dig for Victory' stall at the 70th Anniversary of the End of WW2 Celebration held in St Peter and St Paul's church. The event was popular with people who had lived through the war, and many took a great interest in the stall. Some produce was on display, along with historical information about the allotments.



Gardening expert Derek Cox with committee members Richard Thorpe and Mick Streetly (photo: Kate Hubbard)

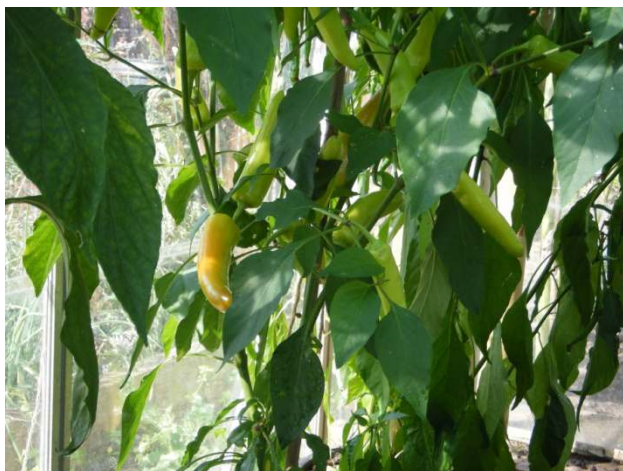
2016 committee meetings

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. The full list of dates will be on the notice board.

Finding time for your plot

In any conversation between plot holders, finding enough time to keep on top of our plots will often come up. Despite working 20 hours in a demanding job as a Health Care Assistant and looking after two children, Jodie always seems to have her plot, 69A, under control, and she has shared some tips to help other time poor plot holders.

Before she got her plot, Jodie grew vegetables in pots in her garden, and when the allotment came along she built on her knowledge by watching YouTube videos such as Allotment Diary, doing lots of reading and by getting labour saving tips from other plot holders right from the start.



Jodie gets to her plot at every opportunity to prevent jobs building up. She has integrated the plot with the rest of her life, which was much harder when her two children were younger. Now, whenever she's not working, she visits the plot while they're at school and she takes full advantage of free weekends when the children are visiting their father.

With watering potentially being a huge drain on time and energy, Jodie has found ways to minimise this task. Watering a little at a time every couple of days encourages the plants to develop surface roots, which then dry out very quickly during warm weather and this sets up a cycle of needing to water frequently to keep the plants alive. So Jodie waters young plants regularly, but then leaves them

to develop deep roots by giving them a good soak less frequently. She watches the weather forecast, and if it's been dry, and brief but heavy showers are due, she waters the ground first to prevent the rain running off the soil.

To deal with weeds, Jodie hoes regularly and covers the soil during winter and spring, but only after the first frosts have got to the soil to break it up. Once the soil is covered, she only visits to harvest her winter vegetables, as she hates the cold and wet and prefers to focus her energy on the plot in her summer and autumn.

Jodie likes to try growing new things, and planning is key to succeeding with the wide range of fruit and vegetables she enjoys. Jodie has a greenhouse, where she grows a variety of chillis and peppers, and she has a polytunnel in which last summer (2015) she grew tomatoes, sweet potatoes, tomatillos and cape gooseberries. In late winter she puts a small zip up greenhouse in the end of the polytunnel and starts seeds off in trays that are covered with cloches. These three layers of protection give her seedlings a really early start, and as the weather warms up the greenhouse can be unzipped and the levels of protection gradually reduced.



Jodie's son loves carrots, and she has found a simple way to defeat carrot fly. She grows them in waist high tubs built from scaffolding planks. The tubs are filled with sieved home-made compost that has previously been used to grow potatoes in

tubs, and are covered with clear plastic until the colder weather has passed. Even though the carrots are sown fairly densely she gets good sized, straight roots free from carrot fly damage.

Timing, consistency, and awareness are the keys to Jodie's success. She stays one step ahead of those time eaters, watering and weeding, and ensures she has a succession of plants being brought on from very early in the growing season. It's about making the most of the time available, and all of us with busy lives can learn from Jodie's approach.

Growing difficult vegetables

Some plot holders enjoy the challenge of growing vegetables that are better suited to very rich, fertile soils than to our light, sandy soil. It seems the key is water, water and then more water...



Alan Hill grows celery on plot 64A. He sows the seeds in his polytunnel in early spring. The seeds are very fine, so he just scatters them over a seed tray filled with compost and covers them lightly with more compost. Once the seedlings start to show, they need to be watered twice daily and this must continue until the plants are harvested, even if it's raining, as the rain doesn't penetrate between plants. Once the seedlings are 4" high, he pricks

them out into individual pots, then plants them out when they're 6-8" high in a 4" deep trench (to hold water), about 6-7" apart.

Once they're planted out, he adds comfrey tea to three waterings each week. Once all the plants have been harvested, Alan scatters chicken pellets and digs them in to replenish the soil.

Richard Thorpe has taken on the challenge of growing summer cauliflowers. He sows the clubroot resistant seed Clapton in March in his unheated greenhouse in pots or a seed tray, using multi-purpose compost. Once the seedlings have come through, he pricks them out into modules and keeps them in the greenhouse until they are 4 inches tall. To plant them out, he forks through a row on his plot, makes holes about 6 inches in diameter, adds a handful of chicken pellets, covers lightly with soil, puts the plant in and firms in. You could add blood, fish and bone to the hole if you wanted to, but Richard doesn't generally do this.



Photo: Richard Thorpe

Then he waters them, and keeps them damp for the first month. Once they look like they're making a head – the leaves start to curl over - he starts to feed with comfrey juice, doing this a couple of times over their lifetime. The key is to not let them dry out. They can be harvested from July onwards. They don't store well, so any surplus needs to be frozen, which doesn't work that well, as they tend to go mushy.

ALL PLOT HOLDERS AND THEIR FAMILIES
ARE INVITED TO COME TO
**THE AGM OF SYSTON
ALLOTMENT SOCIETY**

ON TUESDAY 15TH MARCH 2016 from 8.00 to 9.00 pm
AT SYSTON SOCIAL CLUB
HIGH STREET SYSTON

There will be a free raffle for all plot holders who attend

AGENDA

1. Minutes of the AGM for 2015
2. Chairman's Report
3. Treasurer's Report
4. Secretary's Report
5. Election of Officers
6. Rent increase
7. Any other business