Many Gardeners’ Question Times ago, a questioner asked what the difference was between a good and a bad gardener. ‘Two weeks’, responded John Cushnie, rather laconically. Of course a minute scanning our own behaviour with the seed packets, and we know what he meant. And yet, in a cool dry Spring like this year’s, maybe a two-week delay isn’t so bad. There’s still time to sow most things, and garden centres are increasingly obliging with their supplies of vegetable plants as well as summer bedding. We just need to get the digging done, and the ground occupied, before the weeds take over. ‘Spadem’ (see page 4) warns of what can happen if they do!

No concealing, however, the absence of the winter issue of The Plotholder — editor’s apologies. Catch up now with the latest site news, and the names of last summer’s prize winners, with advice from two of them.

The Cup Winner for 2002 is someone we all meet on our way to our own plots — or if not Barbara, her bicycle. Barbara Wood has transformed the area just past the notice board, and is currently laying out a flower garden on plot 201 (remember the bramble patch?). Barbara won for plot 182, though her others weren’t far behind. Read more about her on page 4.

Other Full Plot winners were Hans van der Meulen, in second place for 89, Wally and Annemarie Locher, third with 60. Vera Longley (78) and John Mason (87) were both highly commended. Of the Half Plots, Baula Rice came first, for 43f, Tony Walker second for 33f, and Susan Staples third, for 36f — Susan’s composting tips on page 3.

In some ways, the most notable winners of all were those in the Best Newcomer category. To qualify, the winners had to have taken on their plot within the year. Ashley Catto of plot A, and Carol Irvine, E front, had both made almost unbelievable progress with ground that looked like a howling wilderness when they started. And where they lead, others are following: the strip along the South Side is slowly being transformed. Thank you and congratulations to all the winners, and all the pioneers.

It takes all sorts
The RHS journal ‘The Garden’, despite its name and rather gracious appearance, often contains articles about veg growing, and even about allotments. (The Paddocks copies are in the office, if you want to read them.) In February ’01 there was an inspiring feature by a local garden designer, Cleve West, who has two plots on our sister site over in Hampton Hill. Cleve, who is an excellent gardener, uses found-object sculptures in the gardens he creates, and art has a place in his allotment too – the dreamy, romantic quality of the photos illustrating the piece belle the hard work which went into reclaiming his plots (they have brambles over there too).

This March, ‘The Garden’ ran a piece about a very different kind of allotment, whose tenant, Will Sibley, reckons to keep his plot highly productive on half an hour’s work each day. A businessman, he believes in careful time-management, and fits his thirty minutes in on his way to work, having decided on a work plan the night before. He wastes no time on crops which he reckons are just as good from shops; but grows ‘dinner party’ food, small quantities of top-quality ultra-fresh produce for discerning guests. Production is maximised by making plentiful use of plug plants, and in the interests of efficiency, he uses chemicals where necessary.

Here at the Paddocks we have all sorts of gardeners – the extremely business-like, who dig from front to back and grow their crops in neat rows; the home-from-home bodies, with lawn, picnic bench and lavender bush; the creative types with pergola, fan-shaped beds and scarecrows; the put-it-down-and-a-grows person, with flourishing clumps of this and that; the technology fans with their ironmongery... And the dreamers, who haven’t quite got down to it yet. As we all learn in time, to be a gardener there really isn’t any substitute for Being There. (Next plot inspection in early June...)

Open Day/Spring Social – Sunday 18 May from 1 to 4 p.m.
This year we’ve brought the date of the Open Day forward to give a longer growing season to new tenants, and it’s combined with an invitation to all tenants, old and new, to meet over a drink and lunch. The barbecue is always good value, and the cold带来的 and share’ lunch always delicious. Will you have seedlings to spare? Bring them along. Have you got friends and neighbours who’ve always wanted an allotment? This is the day to get them started.
Welcome to new tenants Polly and Emma Moore (who have transformed 1 front), Frances and Martin Steerman (6b), Graham Dillamore (26), Elizabeth Junor (30), Lisa Hutchins and Andy Darley (44b), Vicki and Jennifer Glaysher and Alison Hughes, all on 71, Martin and Sue Croft (73), David Kelly (74f), Martin Churley (127), Linda Melkie (132), Giles and Samantha Moberly (139), Robert and Berlie Claydon (141), Ivan Lowe (144), Ann Kimmins (165b), Judy Hodges (171), Caroline Bianco (175), and Patrick and Petra Claydon (187f).

You win some, you lose some, and we say goodbye to Andrew and Lilian Harry (6), Nicholas Martian (8), Jochem and Nicole Hollestelle (26), Ruth Krief (39b), Geraldine Locke (63f), Ian Palmer (67), Fred Chitty (71), Jan Spreckley (195f), Simon O’Neill (100), and Jane and Lindsay Hatchett (161).

The Plotholders’ Committee welcomes Jo Nichols, of plots 176 and 177. Jo, who has been a tenant for two years, had quite a bit of clearing to do when she started, but for the past season has begun to enjoy ‘the small rewards along the way’. (Last summer’s inspection report on her plot noted ‘Big Pumpkin’ – a not-so-small reward?) Jo has two young children, is keen to grow organically as far as she can, and is doing a part-time horticultural course at Merrist Wood.

Sadly Roy Bennett, our chairman for several years, is still suffering from intermittent ill-health, and though he remains on the committee is unable to continue to chair it. We are very grateful to Roy for all his work, and we need to replace him! This is an important post, which we really do need to fill. It doesn’t require you to be in the office every Sunday morning, as the committee work to a rota.

A list of committee members and useful contact persons is on the shed by the gate.

The Rules, an American book published some years ago, purported to give a foolproof method for women to get their man, and by all accounts resulted in a generation of hunted-looking urban thirty-somethings, all busy either applying the Rules or avoiding them applied to them.

Your Clerk is sometimes involved in clarifying the Rules at the Paddocks. Like any organisation, we have them, though ours are not an endurance test, and are only intended to make life simpler. Every new tenant is given a copy, and they also appear on the shed by the gate. Those Conditions of Tenancy, though couched in the language of a bygone age, are quite basic and practical, essentially requiring all tenants to keep their plots and paths in reasonable order, not to make life difficult for other tenants, and to pay their rent on time.

There are some other conditions attached to our use of the land, which are contained in the Royal Licence of 1921, and there is a transcript of this, and the 1957 agreement with the local authority, in the office, for anyone interested to read. These conditions are designed to prevent exploitation of the land for any purpose other than private cultivation – so the removal of sand, gravel, or large quantities of timber are forbidden, as is taking on hired labour to cultivate extra ground, and the erection of buildings or structures.

Misunderstandings can sometimes arise, probably in connection with rule 6 in the Conditions of Tenancy. This states that ‘The tenant must act in accordance with any instructions which may from time to time be posted on the notice board by the Committee for the welfare of plotholders. Temporary rules, such as those concerning parking, will sometimes be necessary to make things easier for a majority of tenants, but can be lifted when the need has passed. And on the subject of parking, it seems so far that the lifting of the Sunday parking ban has caused much less congestion than was feared. We’re grateful to everyone who parks considerately, some using a space at the end of their plots. If you do need to park at a distance from where you’re working, it’s helpful to show your plot number in the car.

And bonfires... Naturally our neighbours in the road and the cricket club don’t welcome smoke blowing over them, and they let us know when they have a problem. However, our fellow-tenants deserve consideration too, especially those south of the office building, who sometimes get more than their fair share of smoke from the rest of us – they are in the corner where any smoke goes when it’s blowing away from the houses.

Do we need a more specific rule about bonfires? It’s been suggested. But the problem with any rule whose reason isn’t universally applicable, is getting people to keep it. Your committee are tenants too, who come to garden, rather than act as an in-house police force! My own feeling is that the first course, if you have a problem about parking, bonfires, or anything else, is to try and sort it out in a friendly way. Good neighbourliness is a good rule too.

Cheeselogs, anyone? These are really Monkey Peas, says Angie Barker (123). Oh, all right, woodlice, if you must. Any more suggestions?

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Road safety is quite a problem around our gates, opening as they do on an obtuse angle of the road. Following concerns voiced at the AGM, we have been in touch with David Breen, the Borough Traffic Engineer, who tells us that crossing points to serve Cobblers Walk, in Sandy Lane and Park Road, are to be constructed soon. A further point on Church Grove is under consideration. We have also suggested a mirror opposite, and asked for the placing of signs warning about a concealed exit, as there is no indication in either direction of this, and it can be quite hazardous parking temporarily while one closes the excellent new gates.

However, other tenants have pointed out that these problems have largely been solved for the tenants of the Hampton Hill site. They also have gates which open onto a busy road (though not on a bend). Their solution takes the form of a ‘cage’ of 7ft railings, large enough to take a lorry, with a lockable gate at the far end. Thus a vehicle can enter the cage, and stop to secure the gate before moving out into the traffic. If we were to adopt something similar it would also solve the difficulty with our side door, which changes shape during wet weather, and sometimes fails to lock securely.

Is this something we should consider for our site? It would be fairly costly, and we would have to fund it ourselves. But site maintenance and improvement is what our rent rise was for. Take a look at the Hampton Hill gate, and let the editor know if you have a view, either for or against.

OTHER SITE NEWS

Bill Swann at the Stockyard says that repairs, though not a rise in height, are to be made to the Avenue fence, using concrete supports for the existing fence posts, where they’re still good.

JUNE SHOULD SEE WORK STARTING ON THE LOCKUP BUILDING to the north of the site. As reported earlier, Rathbone Training in Mitcham are to use the repairs as a learning project for building trade students. We pay for scaffolding, generator, Portasol for the students, and all materials needed, and the students, supervised by tutors, will provide free labour. Last year’s rent rise means that we have enough money to fund repairs to the building without looking for grant money at this stage. All the known users of the building have been notified of the work, but if you haven’t had a letter about it, and have anything still stored in the lockups, please get in touch at once with the committee.

We expect the work to take about three months. The students will be stripping off the roof, repainting or replacing timber and slates as necessary. We hope to add some spotlights to increase the natural light inside. The brickwork is to be repointed, and the building’s interior refurbished, to maximise the use of the space by more tenants, and to provide a place to meet and shelter. Thanks to Matt Allchurch, providing professional expertise, and David Hamden and Marina Lim, co-ordinators.

THE ‘NEW MOWER’ is in for service at the end of the month, though the old one is working at the time of writing. Please, if you use either of them, take advice from Joe Sell, and do not use it on uneven or stony ground. Nor is it suitable for clearing – someone has been observed trying to cut brambles. We have a strimmer for the rough stuff, and long-handled loppers for brambles.

WELCOME BACK TO GEORGE HARNSWORTH, who is still recovering from his injury last year, but has nevertheless, with the help of Bill Jones, got the pumps working during the past few weeks. Sadly, as members will know, the Seed Store is ceasing to trade this year.

PRIZEWINNING TIPS from Susan Staples. Susan grows mostly flowers on 36f, and over the years has raised a good deal of money for the Princess Alice Hospice from plant sales in her Kingston garden, which she stocked with cuttings raised on her allotment. I had always thought of her as someone with an inborn affinity with plants – one gradually becomes aware of her among her flowers, like a kind of dryad in sun hat and apron. But she did, once, actually learn her skills, first as a country child (beginning gardening at age 5), and later as paid help, aged 19, to the head of a large garden in Oxfordshire, working for someone who supplied Somerville College with vegetables. From him she learned the importance of weeding, and the art of composting, and she shares some of her know-how with us below:

I have five compost heaps at a go, made up of kitchen vegetable waste, garden waste, fresh manure from a nearby stables, grass cuttings, comfrey leaves, and other leaves. Using rubber gloves or fork, I mix everything up together (avoiding layers), which I find helps to make heat, and encourages the vegetation to disintegrate. This is all covered by plastic sheeting to keep the moisture in, and old carpet to keep the warmth in. After six months the earth mix is useable for trenches, holes for planting, and of course mulching the top (roses etc.). One heap always seems to have a big resident toad – rather an ugly fellow!

As many of you may know (but somehow I did not), do not put any part of the potato or tomato plant on your compost heap. These two plants often carry a virus, and the compost encourages this, with the result that your soil will become infected.

My two most favourite and useful vegetables are spinach and purple sprouting broccoli.

When there is a glut you can freeze them so easily.

Thank you, Susan, and it’s good to see you back at the Paddocks after a spell of ill-health.
FIRST FIND YOUR PATH, says cupwinner Barbara Wood, who has perfected the art of reclaiming derelict plots. I met up with her in late January, when the ground was still moist and the weeds dormant. All her plots were of an exemplary neatness, with pruned fruit bushes and rows of winter-standing crops interspersed with strips of manure laid to rot on the surface of the soil. She was then still getting red cabbage, leeks and perpetual spinach. Brussels sprouts had finished, but spring greens were almost ready.

Barbara first took a plot at the Paddocks in ’82, working it with her husband Peter, and later, little son Sam. They took on a couple more in the next few years, and Barbara won the cup for the first time. But then Barbara took over a greengrocery business close to Peter’s butchers shop, and this, together with part-time catering, left no time for gardening. An 8-year break from the allotment, and Barbara was keen to get her hands dirty again. Four years ago she gave up the day jobs, took back two of her old plots, and the rest is history.

Barbara hates muddle, and as with all she does, took up where she had left off with zeal and relish. Her advice to people taking on an overgrown site? First inspect it to see what’s in the ground, and whether any of it is worth keeping. Fruit bushes should be carefully checked for coral spot, big bud, and so on — ask neighbours for advice if you’re a beginner. If you like soft fruit it’s worth investing in new, good stock, replanting in clean ground.

Ideally, the whole plot should be dug in late winter, but if this isn’t possible, Barbara would water on Turnipweed, on a still day to avoid cirt. She has no problem with using chemicals, and isn’t a fan of the carpet method, feeling that it harbours pests. She would leave the dead growth on the ground till she’s ready to begin cultivating, to prevent annual weeds germinating, and to keep in moisture. It’s very important, she believes, to clear at least one area thoroughly, and plant it up as soon as possible, ‘to avoid despondency.’

Potatoes are a good first crop, because the ground doesn’t have to be perfect, and the top growth will shade out quite a lot of weeds. Try Accent for earlies, and Marfona and Cara for maincrop, ‘though you may have trouble with eelworm’. Runner beans should do well without manure on fallow ground (ground that has not been worked the previous year), but they will need water well, as the soil will lack humus. Other easy crops for beginners are French beans, butternut squash, and salads — sow a few lettuce every fortnight to keep a steady supply.

Couch grass should be forked out and piled up to rot, which it will eventually do, if it’s kept dark. Above all, don’t do what Barbara has seen some learners doing, which is taking away bags of topsoil and couch roots to the dump. The topsoil is the most productive part, and can be reclaimed with a bit of patience, whereas what’s underneath is infertile and sandy.

What do you do with all you grow, I asked. Barbara, who is a talented cook, freezes a lot, gives a lot away, and feeds her family almost entirely with home-grown produce, storing celery, carrots, potatoes, white cabbage, onions and dried beans through the winter.

‘I love digging and being out in the fresh air’, says Barbara. ‘We don’t know how long we’ll be active, and we should make the most of it.’ She makes no secret of the fact that half-done plots fill her with frustration. ‘If people only kept the rules, the whole site would look better.’ She claims to like plants in rows, too. Though her latest plot is laid out for flowers in graceful curves, you can certainly see where the paths are.

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**Paddock Pranks**

by Spademan

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To contribute to The Plotholder, contact the editor, Susan Saunders, 8977 4675.

Thank you, Spademan, for the Awful Warning!