Gardeners, like farmers, always find a reason to complain, but this year, like most, has had its own successes, despite record-breaking temperatures and drought. Spuds and onions could be lifted for immediate storage, and soft fruit has been prolific—relieving the bushes of their burden I marvelled again at the way gooseberries, whose flowers are so early and discreet, suddenly cover themselves in fruit like little light-bulbs, as if by magic. OK, no Victoria plums, but not having to process them was a great time-saver. And the runner beans are doing better now than earlier in the year, the rhubarb seemed to stay pink for longer, and there’s even a small second crop of strawberries (check the recipe on page 3).

Choosing the Best Kept Plot was a real challenge to the five judges. Some new names feature this year, and the Best Newcomer shortlist was an inspiration. The qualifiers had all taken their plots since last September, and some who joined this summer feature in the awards. Heroic feats of clearing have taken place on the southern side, and crops grown and harvested in a few months on ground which was under bramble at the start of the year. Find out who won at the AGM.

RESTORATION 1  Talking to George Harmsworth about the early days of the Paddocks (see page 4) was a reminder of how much work went into making a field for the King’s horses a productive area of strip-farming. George’s father was one of those who surveyed and laid out the site, marking boundaries with sturdy lengths of pipe, producing the map we have today, and constructing the roads. In 1921 the only well was next to the office. This building, together with the lock-ups, had provided stabling and cart sheds.

Allotments were an important part of the life of the ‘labouring classes’ for whom the ground was made available, and provided much-needed extra food for poor families. But as times became more prosperous, and ‘growing your own’ became a matter of choice rather than necessity, they moved in and out of fashion. There was a resurgence of enthusiasm in the ’70s, reflected by the sitcom ‘The Good Life’, made in neighbouring Surbiton.

During the 80’s and 90’s both here and on the local authority sites there was a drop in interest which became a problem. Plots remained unlet for long periods, or were let to people who hardly visited them, which gave the committees during those years a real headache. The serious gardeners, of whom there has always been a strong nucleus, were battling against weeds, brambles and rubbish from the ‘badlands’ surrounding them, without enough help to control the vacant or neglected areas. Paths and boundaries began disappearing, and woodland trees sprang up.

Now people are waking up again to the wonderful resource on their doorstep. Forty new tenants have joined us since last October, and eight hopefuls are waiting for something less challenging than the few remaining vacancies. Quite a number find us through our website, managed by Mary Newing (new address www.paddocks-allotments.org.uk).

HOW YOU CAN HELP  Thanks to hard work by Jean Blanc and Barbara Wood, restoration of the boundaries and central path was started this spring in the area bounded by South Road and South Central Road. This project is being resumed in autumn as vegetation dies down. If your plot is in this area, please be ready to give a hand.

And if you have a woodland tree on your plot, an oak, ash, sycamore, chestnut, willow, or anything which grows really large, please cut it down, or ask for help if you can’t manage to. Fruit trees are not a problem, as they are smaller and relatively short-lived. But other trees are not compatible with vegetable growing—they shade the ground and take water out of the soil in large quantities. They will also, if left to grow too large, cost a tree-surgeon’s fees to fell. So remove them before they can become a difficulty, and if you want a shade tree, plant an apple, pear or plum.

If you are unlucky enough to find yourself dealing with someone else’s rubbish, we’ll be very grateful if you could remove whatever you can manage to yourself. This costs individuals nothing at the local tip. If you have no car, or the items are too large, let the committee know. Thank you to everyone helping to restore the site to the way it should be—DIY is what keeps our rents so low.

You are cordially invited to the AGM on Friday 7 November ’03, in the Bullen Hall, Bennet Close, Park Road. Business, including awarding of prizes, starts at 8 p.m. and refreshments will be served from 7.30.
SUSAN STAPLES wrote about composting methods in the last newsletter, and won third prize last year for Best-Kept Half Plot. She was unwell for quite a while this spring, and has now written to us: 'It is with much regret that I must sadly give up my allotment. I think I have had it about 10 years, and it has given me immense pleasure and satisfaction working it. Also I have enjoyed knowing some of my neighbours, swapping plants and useful information. I still miss Ken, whose climbing haricot beans I sow year after year. ... I much appreciated all that wonderful space, wild life and clean air. Please thank the present and past Committee members for all their hard work, dedication and friendliness. My reason for leaving is my bad back; I cannot longer carry watering cans (without pain later on). I used to find pumping quite romantic but aged bodies can't take it.'

Susan, we are very sorry you're retiring, though we understand why. You leave a well-cared for, well-stocked plot, and characteristically supplied a list of what is growing in it. Your successor will be a lucky person.

... and ALAN DRAKE wrote to us in some indignation at 10 p.m. on the November evening following last year's AGM.

Dear Plotholder,

I have just returned from the AGM. I didn't want to go because it was a rotten night and I was going to miss the Archers (would this be the night that Jennifer found out about Brian's carryings on?).

But I'm very glad I went. There was a glass of wine to greet me; pictures of some of the winning plots, and nice people to talk to, including three Councillors. David Harned (in the absence of the chairman, Roy Bennett, who was sick), told us what had been going on; where we were in regard to rebuilding the seed store and the loo, etc.; how many plots had been let. Treasurer Helga Ross explained the financial position. Susan Saunders, secretary, and editor of The Plotholder, was able to field all sorts of questions with assurance.

Why, then, do I feel so dissatisfied that I find it necessary to put my feelings on paper as soon as I come home? Certainly not with the Committee. On our behalf they've worked nearly one month. They've organised three Sunday morning get-togethers and the same number of clean-up sessions. One of them has been available every Sunday morning to greet potential new allotmenteers. They would all much prefer to work on their plots, but they realise that the site can't run itself. If it isn't seen to be well organised and used the whole area could be incorporated back into Bushy Park.

What I am dissatisfied with is the small number of plotholders attending the meeting. I counted less than twenty non-committee members. Many of the prize-winners didn't turn up either. This really is too bad. The least we can do is to show the Committee how much we appreciate what they are doing for us by attending the AGM. If I was a Committee member (why aren't you then, but that's another story) I'd wonder why I bother to help provide a marvellous hobby for people who can't even bother to attend a meeting once a year. It isn't as if it doesn't provide a pleasant interlude on a dark November evening.

ALAN DRAKE
Plot 174.

Alan, thank you so much for this expression of support, which every Committee needs. We look forward to welcoming you, and many others, at this year's AGM. Alan's garden at home in Teddington Park is to be featured in the autumn in a TV series, 'Best British Back Gardens'.

CARROTS CAN BE DIFFICULT to germinate, and prone to carrot fly when they do. And yet our soil is the right kind for carrots – light and sandy, which favours long tapering unforked roots. (I once visited a small island in the outer Hebrides where the only inhabitants, lighthouse keepers, had a vegetable garden with carrots flourishing in beds of sand enriched with seaweed. Probably the carrot fly got blown away if they tried to make the trip across.)

There have been some fine carrots about in the Paddocks this season. Barbara Wood sowed hers in a V-shaped drill filled with potting compost, with good results. The Harpers grew some beauties too, companion-planted with marigolds and onions to discourage pests. They fed plenty of thinnings to their rabbit, but clam they didn't do anything unusual – must be green fingers, then.

Annemarie Locher's carrot bed was a picture, with the elegant, delicate carrot leaves framed with a border of African marigolds. Her way with carrot seed is pre-germination. She sprinkles the seed onto wet kitchen paper, on a plate, and covers this with clingfilm or a polythene bag. The plate stays on the windowsill, with the paper kept damp, until germination is just beginning. This may take anything from one to three weeks.

As soon as it starts, she rinses the seeds off the paper into a jar of water, and brings them down to the allotment, where she sows them (with a spoon) in the prepared carrot bed. Carrots should not be grown in recently-manured soil, as this causes forkling. She discourages carrot fly by earthing them up as they grow, and by companion planting. Labour intensive, says Annemarie – but I intend to give it a try next year.
WELCOME to Paul Short and Victoria Rylott (1b), Don Witts (4), Liz Rissien (8), Joseph and Amy Chouinard (20), Patrick Dacey (21f), Andy Barnwell (30), Arusha Javadi and Harry Anstey (38), Greg Dowden (43b), Petra Tenveldt (63f), David and Clare Collier (100f), Amanda Kidd (100b), Howard and Lori Fredricos (101f), Doreen Bose (119f), John Greenhalgh (120f), Jessica Kazimircevski and Sonia Exell (129), Mrs N Ash (130), Rossy and Aran Bell (131), Mike McMinn (145), Rosemary Sandiford (146b), Nicholas and Jilly Usherwood (151), Hilary and Geoffrey Gillies (161), Megan Cutriss and Simon Pock (167b and 168b), Jaffrey Kimpton (D), and Les Haworth (E). Yes, 24 new lettings in one summer, and on the day the mercury climbed above 100°F we added four names to our waiting list.

CONGRATULATIONS to Martin and Marina Dawson (166f, 167f) on the arrival of Oliver, a brother for Henry. GET WELL SOON Henri Wan (86), and Angie Barker (123). GOODBYE not only to Susan Staples, but also Nicola Ramsden, Bill Rutledge and Betty Hockley-Hills.

Kathy Thompson is giving up 140f, sadly, following the death of her husband John. Neighbours will remember him sitting on the plot under the parasol last summer, when he was already very ill. Kathy has looked after the plot diligently, and we send her our great sympathy.

RESTORATION 2 The Victorian buildings, which were on the site when it was first purchased for allotments, were maintained for many years by George Hamworth (among his many talents were re-roofing and bricklaying). But since he hung up his builder’s hat we have had to look elsewhere for the know-how, and as the roof of the lockups deteriorated, how to fund repairs became a growing cause of anxiety. This summer, work began on the lockups at the north end of the site. It is being carried out by students and tutors from Rathbone Training in Mitcham. The arrangement is that they use the project to learn a trade, providing free labour, while we pay for materials and equipment like scaffolding, toilet, and skips to remove waste. Another valuable resource we are getting for nothing is the professional services of Matt Allchurch, a tenant who also has a local architectural practice. We could not manage without him and we are extremely grateful. David Harned, chair of the buildings sub-committee, has put a lot of time and energy into finding the best deals for equipment hire. All this means that we have been able to fund this phase of the work from our own savings.

There was a sometimes tricky period of adjustment to our long-term visitors, and our sympathies are with the small number of tenants who have suffered problems. Now things have settled down to a steady pace of work. However, some tenants have raised questions - here are some answers.

WHY IS THE WORK SO SLOW? Because the students are learning, and the tutors are careful to see that proper standards are met. The boys are on site three days a week, and in college for two.

WHY ARE WE PAYING FOR THE WORK WHEN THE BUILDING DOESN’T BELONG TO US? The agreement, when we were allowed use of the buildings, was that this association would meet all the costs of their upkeep. In view of the very low rent we pay for use of the whole site, this seems perfectly just.

WHY CAN’T WE LEAVE THE BUILDING TO FALL DOWN? It would still need to be fenced off safely, which would cost money and would be a waste of a useful resource. Additionally, we bear part of the responsibility as an association for any injury caused by the collapse of the buildings. Timbers fell in as the roof was being removed, showing how dangerous it was becoming. WHY DO WE NEED BUILDINGS ANYWAY? We need shelter for the equipment we own, and we need an office for site administration (committee members will be glad to tell you how much of this there is). The space can also be used as shelter and storage by many more tenants than used the building before.

Once this repair is complete we shall have somewhere to move essentials from the other building, when its turn for repair comes. To fund that, we will almost certainly be looking for grants.

MACHINERY INSURANCE – Problems solved
Using the strimmer is an effective way of clearing a prairie, the mowers are vital for keeping established grass down, and the rotovator has its aficionados too. But, to the consternation of a number of tenants, the committee had to take them off for some weeks this summer, while the insurance situation was clarified.

Following discussions with the insurers, we have established that our public liability insurance as a society places responsibility on every tenant to be certain that he or she is competent to use the machinery safely, wears the goggles provided, and appropriate long trousers and sturdy shoes, and returns the machinery in satisfactory condition, reporting any faults, so that future users are not injured as a result of them. Please sign out on the sheet to the left of the office door for anything you borrow, and make sure that any fuel you use is the right kind. Joe Sell (plot 68) will advise you, and will also take donations towards the cost of fuel and servicing.

BERRY COMPOTE WITH RHUBARB In late summer there can often be a few strawberries and raspberries, as well as blackberries, but maybe not enough to make a full serving. A good way to stretch them is by using rhubarb. Cut the rhubarb into chunks, and poach it gently in a strong sugar syrup, taking care it keeps its shape (this is about the trickiest part of this dish). When tender allow it to cool a little. Tip into a serving bowl and gently stir in the berries. As the mixture cools, the berries impart their fragrance to the rhubarb, making it unexpectedly delicious. It looks pretty, too.
WELL, WELL, WELL — A FOURTEEN ACRE SITE irrigated entirely by handpumps must be unique in this area, and the pumps themselves are something people pay money to see in Living History museums. Yet our water supply works so smoothly, is better exercise than going to the gym, and costs us virtually nothing. The man who has made it all possible for 57 years is George Harmsworth. Newly-demobbed, he was recruited in 1946 by Mr Wenham, the then Hon. Clerk, to increase the number of water-access points to a level of one for every 10 plots. We now have 22 working pumps, 14 of them depending on wells which were dug, or re-dug, by George, with the help of past tenant Dougie East, and in the early years, Mr Harmsworth senior.

You don’t spend long with George before you realise what a genius he is with practical things. His first well, by plot 108, was unusually deep, 24 feet down. Mostly the water lies at a depth of 17 feet, and getting to it involved making an oblong hole with sloping sides, and a shelf halfway across, where his companion stood to pull up the buckets of soil as the hole got deeper. The soil was raised on a jenny wheel and tripod (sorry if I’ve got this slightly wrong, George. I could see you smiling as I took notes). When the water level was reached, a 2inch pipe was driven in, to which the pumping apparatus was attached up above at ground level, and the trench filled in again. (I won’t attempt a description of the part played by the driving shoe.)

Once the pump is in place that’s far from being the end of the story. George and a friend (Bill Jones, these days) take two working days a year to close them up for winter, storing the working parts in the shed to prevent frost damage, and another three days to replace them, usually around Easter. That’s excluding other maintenance needed from time to time. Though the replacement parts for the pumps now have to be ordered from Czechoslovakia, he produces the washers himself, from reinforced rubber sheet. And all this costs us nothing except George’s minimal expenses, and a small honorarium once a year.

What advice would you give us to ensure we get the best out of the pumps, and respect their workings, I asked George? ‘Don’t pump with a lot of little strokes’, he advises. ‘A full stroke, at an even pace, produces a better flow of water, and is kinder to the mechanism. And make sure no stones or dirt get into the pipe, which damages the washer.’ ‘What about making the most of the water? In dry weather, give plants a really good soaking, preferably in the evening, when it can do most good, and not in the heat of the day.’ George waters a good deal, but people in full-time work can probably still fit in a half-hour stint with the watercans every other day in a drought.

People sometimes ask what it would cost to go onto a mains water supply – the local authority sites have self-filling tanks, though you’d still need to take a can to them. Even without taking into account the cost of connection and piping (anything up to £50), a site of our size could pay upwards of £3,800 a year in water bills. We knew George was good value, and this is an indication of just how good!

THE ART OF THE BONFIRE There was something elemental about the day I interviewed George about his work on the pumps. As we sat on the bench at the tidy wall end of his plots, the talk turned to fire. Though close to the houses in Church Grove, he has the art of making bonfires that burn quickly and discreetly, without upsetting the neighbours — a skill we need him to share. What’s the secret, I wanted to know. No surprises about his advice: a good, dry wood base which will get really hot; the wind blowing towards the north- or south-east; no paraffin, no green stuff, no carpet or plastic. ‘Have your bonfire between 11 and 3, when people are out at work’, he suggests. For those tenants who are out at work themselves, evenings can be a good time, when the wind tends to drop naturally. Don’t choose a very hot day, when the smoke won’t rise, and people want their windows open.

If you live nearby, let us know what you think is the best time of day for bonfires. Does it help if people use the incinerator? It would be good to work out a bonfire protocol which suits tenants and neighbours alike.

Thanks, Spademan!
Sympathetic Magic?
It must rain again
one day...

To contribute to The Plotholder contact the editor,
Susan Saunders 0977 4675

Spademan

For the best results the plot should be watered regularly.