AT NOVEMBER’S AGM it was standing room only in the function room at The Lion, by the time we started on the business of the evening. Landlord Don Wits (plot 4) has a cheerful new room where it was easy to serve refreshments, and the microphone meant everyone could hear the proceedings. We had a great display of photos of plots on 2004, and also of George Harnsworth’s heroic repairs to the seedstore roof during the ‘80s.

Prizes (certificates and Garden Tokens) were awarded by Cllr James Mumford, the chairman of our Management Committee. Full list of winners, in ascending order, (with a pleasing number of new names) is as follows:

Newcomers (judged on the amount of improvement): half plots, Louise Clark and Jim Kay (119D); Alex and Ludmilla Gromyko (76f); Tessa Lash (15b). Newcomers, full plots, Matt and Colette Bassford (118); Jo Box (151); Paul and Nerys Byford (79).

Established tenants are judged on standard and variety of cultivation. Half-plot winners were Dan Read (155b); Neil Grant (33b); Jenny Bourne and Jem Negus (27f). Full plot winners were Sue and Martin Croft (73); Jack Levingstone (102); and Barbara Wood, for plot 184. Barbara also takes the cup once again, and very well-deserved it was.

If any winner would like a photograph of themselves receiving their award, please contact Jenny Bourne (27f).
GOODBYE to Mr Chalkley, long-time tenant of plot 93, who has finally felt age catching up with him.

WELCOME to new tenants David Scothron (3), Caroline and James Greville (26), Deborah Sowman (88), Paul Eve (89), Elizabeth Ellson (93), Rebeka Pang (100F), Chris and Caroline Hodges (100b), Ronald Fenn (117), Ying Pang (143), Jenny Michell (144F), Rita Bray (166b), Siobhan and JJ Ramsland (175b), Jen Colyer (179), and Patrick and Jinty Boyle (200). May they all have a great growing season.

CONGRATULATIONS to Petra and Chandra Thagunna (63f) on the arrival of their new daughter.

BIRDWATCH IN THE PADDocks – PART 2

Part 1 of these birdwatch reports (Newsletter No. 18 – July 2004) presented a list of the birds seen during a walk around the site on a cold Sunday morning in early March. Rather than give a similar morning I thought it might be more interesting to write about four of the most commonly seen, or heard, birds that are similar in appearance and can be confused.

Everyone knows the Wren as one of our smallest birds with its stubby body and cocked tail that creeps mouse-like around and through the dense vegetation. It is extremely active, restless hunting for small insects and other prey. On the allotments it often betrays its presence by a loud scolding call when disturbed, but its true song, when heard, is a pleasant prolonged warbling that usually ends with a trill. Because of its secretive habits it is perhaps surprising to learn that the Wren is one of the most numerous and widely distributed birds in the UK. Both male and female have a slender bill, rusty brown and buff upper parts with dark barring on the back and wings. The male will build several domed nests in his territory, hoping that one of them will attract a female. She will usually have two broods but the male can have up to four mates.

The Dunnock is also known as the Hedge Sparrow, although it is not a member of the Sparrow family but of the Accentors. Again, it is a relatively small and rather secretive ground-feeding bird with a shorter bill and a shuffling gait that will disappear into the nearest clump of brambles if disturbed, from which it then gives a series of loud high-pitched ‘cheeps’. It is noticeably larger than the Wren, being about the same size as a Robin, and is often dismissed as a nondescript bird that is consequently overlooked as not being interesting. However, on closer viewing it will be seen that both sexes have a slate-grey head and breast with rich brown upperparts that have blackish streaks and lighter brown streaked underparts. Dunnocks are clearly not monogamous; the female may have up to three broods per year with both male and female having up to three partners.

We all know the Robin very well – no chance of confusion with any other species is possible. It is a red-breasted, slightly plumper, bird with an upright stance that can become very tame and confiding towards humans. But note that that it can remain very aggressive to other small birds – especially other Robins. The song of the Robin is the most melodic of the three, sometimes sounding very wistful in tone. When sung from a perch it can be very loud but if the bird is close by, as when watching for tit-bits as you are turning over the soil, it can be very soft and subdued. The plumage of the adult Robin needs no description, but that of the juvenile Robin can be very confusing. There is no red breast; it is replaced by heavy spotting on the breast, head, shoulders and mantle. Also the young bird can be very tame, coming even closer to the gardener in its search for food.

It was mentioned in the first of these reports that a cold winter spell can bring birds over the wall from Bushy Park seeking food, including pairs of Stonechats. The male Stonechat is slightly smaller than the Robin but it also has a reddish breast. However, it may be distinguished by its black head and white collar and a very upright stance when perched. The female is less strongly coloured and can possibly be confused with females of other species. The call of these birds is given by their name, it sounds like two stones being struck together.

Keith Birch
(Plots 91 & 92)

COMPANION PLANTING

The practice of choosing plants that have additional properties and functions and using them in combination with one another has been a mainstay of organic gardening techniques. Many plot owners, organic or not, interplant tomatoes with French marigolds, known to repel greenfly and blackfly because they produce a scent offensive to these insects, or we grow nasturtiums and poached egg plants for their beneficial qualities. Here are some more suggestions from various sources – but we’d really like to know what works for you! Please let us have your tried and tested combinations.

Asparagus – prevents a harmful nematode from attacking the roots of tomato plants
Basil – good with tomatoes
Camomile – good with everything!
Chervil – keeps aphids off lettuce
Chives – helps to keep fungal diseases at bay and discourages aphids on chrysanthemums, sunflowers and tomatoes
Coriander – repels aphids and can be made into a spray to use against red spider mite

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Dill – attracts hoverflies and predatory wasps, keeping aphids at bay
Garlic – a deterrent for aphids, good with fruit trees, tomatoes, particularly good to plant with roses
Nasturtiums – keep aphids away from broccoli and squash with their strong smell, also a deterrent to woolly aphid on apple trees. They attract black aphids and cabbage caterpillars, so can be planted near cabbages
Rue – deters rats and raspberry beetle
Tansy, Tanacetum vulgare – the strong scent deters ants
Sage, Salvia – benefits brassicas and carrots because its smell confuses pests e.g. repels white cabbage butterfly
Thyme – protects against cabbage worm
Yarrow, Achillea millefolium – boosts vigour in other plants, accumulates phosphorus, calcium and silica, which are good for the compost heap – also good host for hoverflies, ladybirds and predatory wasps that keep aphids at bay.

Sources:
www.bbc.co.uk/gardening/organic_companionplanting
houseofstrauss.co.uk
Jenny Bourne plot 27f

Raised Beds

Jo Box shares some tips for the board-edged beds which looked so good on plot 161 last year

The best time to begin building a permanent raised bed system is in the autumn or winter if the ground isn’t frozen, temporary beds should be constructed in early spring, after the worst of the British winter weather has passed.

There are many advantages to adopting the system of raised beds, here are just a few:

Most importantly, raised beds don’t require the usual space between rows because you don’t walk in the bed to cultivate or harvest, therefore more production per square foot of plot is achieved.

You’ll find that your raised bed is easier to maintain than conventional row plots. Cultivating is easy since you’ll be able to reach into every corner of your bed and pull young weeds as they appear, and succession planting will eliminate bare spots. For those of us who only have limited time at the plot, going away with visual confirmation of a job well done, even if it’s just one bed, has a fantastic psychological effect.

The soil in a raised bed is more porous because no one ever steps into the bed to pack it down. This allows good drainage so that air, water, and fertilizer will penetrate to the roots more easily.

They keep plants organized. They confine soil, dead leaves and other debris within their borders and they reduce the work of cleaning the plot.

Succession planting works very well in raised beds. For example, once an early crop of lettuce is finished, pull out those plants and plant another crop such as beans. If a plant gets diseased or infested with insects, pull it out immediately and replace it with a different plant so the problem doesn’t spread.

Timely planting and harvesting are easier. Most people avoid working traditional plots in rainy weather to avoid compaction and muddy feet. But raised beds are designed for walking around, not in. So there’s no reason for mud to delay operation.

The raised beds’ narrow dimensions even make it practical to suspend bird netting on flexible conduit frames. You can control weeds with plastic mulch economically, since the width of the bed can be spanned by one roll.

Another great advantage in raising the soil is that the depth makes it much easier to grow deep-rooted crops such as carrots, beets and radishes. In addition; the warmer soil often makes it possible to grow some vegetable crops that you couldn’t grow before because of the colder soil and shorter growing season.

Less effort is involved, when vegetables are planted intensively they shade and cool the ground below and require less watering, less weeding, less mulching – in other words, less drudgery for you. Since the soil can drain sooner and warm up faster in spring, they enable you to plant earlier in the season. You can make an area of permanent or temporary raised beds; permanent beds take more time and money in the short term, but involve less work after construction. Temporary raised beds take less work to construct and no money for materials, but do need to be constructed every year, as the British weather takes its toll.

Temporary raised beds allow you to change the design each year. Shovel soil into raised beds, or bring in a mixture of compost and topsoil. Beds can be any shape you desire: rectangular, curved, or even round. The basic rule of thumb is to build beds about 6”-12” deep and no more than 3 to 4 feet wide. Remove sticks, rocks, and other debris, and rake the tops of the beds smooth and flat.

To make permanent beds use rot-resistant or treated timber wood or bricks, rocks, or railway sleepers to create a bed that is at least 6” deep, no more than 3 to 4 feet wide, and as long as you like. If the beds are wider than 3 to 4 feet, it’s hard to reach the centre to weed, water, and fertilize. To slow rotting of the wood; consider lining the bed’s internal walls with plastic, or painting the wood with a preservative such as copper or zinc naphthenate. (Both are safe to use for food crops.) Then fill the bed to the top with a mixture of compost and topsoil. (“If using traditional treated railway sleepers it is advisable to line the beds with durable plastic as the chemicals used to treat these can leach into the bed and be harmful to both you and the crops.”)

A north-south orientation is best for low-growing crops, allowing direct sunlight to both sides of the bed. Beds containing taller crops such as runner beans, climbing peas or tomatoes might do better on an east-west axis. Thus, lower-growing crops could be planted on the south side of the bed and still get full sun.
The paths between the beds can be left to grow in as grass, paved or for a really low maintenance scheme, covered in landscape fabric and covered with bark chippings or gravel for aesthetic appeal. Crop rotation within the vegetable patch means planting the same crop in the same place only once every three to five years (depending on system and space.) This policy ensures that the same plants will not deplete the same nutrients year after year. It can also help foil any insect pests or disease pathogens that might be lurking in the soil after the crop is harvested.

Finally, we end with the realisation that, although growing vegetables can be rewarding even for beginners, there is an art to doing it well. One of the most important ways of improving your plot from year to year is to pay close attention to how plants grow, and note your successes and failures. Just as drawing a plan each year helps you remember where things were growing, taking notes can help you avoid making the same mistakes again, or ensure that your good results can be reproduced in future years. Write down the names of different vegetable varieties, and compare them from year to year, so you will know which ones have done well on your plot. Saving certain seeds for the next season can be great too, especially beans and garlic, as over time they adapt to the conditions of your plot, and can be more reliable than other seed. Over time this kind of careful observation and record-keeping will probably teach you more about growing vegetables than any single book or authority. That’s because the notes you make will be based on your own personal experience and observations, and will reflect what works best for you in the unique conditions of your own plot. As in so many other pursuits, so it is in the art of growing vegetables: practice does make perfect.

SEED CATALOGUES bring a whole new dimension to New Year Resolutions, not to mention Turning Over A New Leaf, Root and Branch solutions – we all have our favourite metaphor to get us going. With the relatively mild winters we’re now getting, there is no better time to get the ground cleared, the paths straightened, and the plot number repaired than in January, when the days are gradually lengthening, the ground is soft, and the weeds haven’t really got going.

Why not spend the long winter nights perusing the catalogues and ordering your companion plant seed to see if it works for you, and please let us know - We’ll report back later in the year!

RENTS TO RISE IN OCTOBER

It was announced at the AGM that plot rents from next October will be £20 for a full plot, and £10 for a half. Though a rise of 100%, it should be seen in the context of the rents charged by the local authority, currently £66 for a full plot. Rising prices are never welcome news, and the reasons for this decision by the Management Committee, only three years after the last increase, were explained at the AGM.

As an independent site, answerable to our landlord, the Crown, we are run by two committees, the Plotholders’ Committee which deals with day-to-day site matters, and the Management Committee, which is to us what the local authority is to other council-run sites. One of the Management Committee’s responsibilities is to set the level of the rents.

For very many years our plot rents have been low, for the good reason that we have no paid staff, with all site maintenance and administration being carried out voluntarily. But with the need to find money for increasingly urgent building repairs it is clear that we have suffered from not having built into the level of rents an element to provide a contingency fund.

The repair work being carried out at present could not have been done without the foresight of Derek Shall, Management Committee clerk between 1983 and 2000. Using increasingly-stringent economies, Derek accumulated money from site income, which then benefited from the demutualization of the Halifax, and produced its value again in shares. This sum, too small to pay for professional labour, has been just enough to cover the cost of the job being done by building students. Meanwhile, the other building is deteriorating, and parts have been closed off at the request of the insurers.

Some tenants have asked why, if the buildings belong to the Crown, we must pay for their upkeep. The answer is that the buildings, like the site itself, are let to us at what is now a nominal rent, on condition that all maintenance costs are met by us. If we had been saving for this since the buildings were first let to us (1925), we would be in a better financial position now.

Once the repairs to the first building are finished, the space inside can be rented for secure storage as before, though accommodating many more tenants than it did before. There will also be a satisfactory room for the committee to store and maintain the machinery, and to use as an office once again. We hope, too, to have an area where we can shelter from the rain, and consult reference books and our copies of The Garden.

The increased rent will not be charged until next October, when all rents are due, and even at the higher rate there can be no question that we get our money’s worth in fruit, vegetables and flowers.

How to contact us: You can leave mail for the Committee (but not money), in the postbox in the shed by the gate. Our website address is www.paddocks-allotments.org.uk, We welcome all contributions to The Plotholder. Contact the editor on 8977 4675, susan.saunders@fish.co.uk or the new editorial team jennybourne@bee.net or josims@bee.net.