FROST IN MAY – must be global warming, then. Despite the unseasonably cold weather we had a pleasant Spring Social at the end of April, and the children especially enjoyed the Treasure Hunt organised by Sue Croft. Next spring it would be good to get a Seedling Swap organised – contact the committee if this is something you’d like. Meanwhile, those of us who are sowing and planting later may be in with a chance after all.

Cultivating Kids

The Plotholder wants your kids! At the Spring Social the younger allotmenteers were out in force and there were some excellent entries to the competitions – the Treasure Hunt, Logo designing, growing the biggest pumpkin and the tallest sunflower, there’s a lot of school age talent and skills out there that we’d like to cultivate! The Plotholder want articles, news and views contributed by kids of all ages – ideas for creative gardening, fun things to do on the plot, wildlife, how to keep the younger children occupied while mums and dads are busy weeding and watering – all contributions will be greatly appreciated! What shall we call the column? – Your suggestions please!

Here are a few ideas to start with:

Save bits of ribbon, string and even human hair from a brush and put them in a mesh bag from oranges or onions. Tie a knot in the top and hang the bag outside in the spring. Birds will pull out bits and pieces to build a nest in the spring.

Make a birdbath by putting an inverted bin lid on top of a clay pot. Keep the birdbath full of water, clean it regularly and it will attract bird bathers.

Birds like dirt baths too, so keep a box or shallow bowl of sand or fine-textured soil handy in a sunny area of your garden or allotment.

Bright, scented blooms attract butterflies. Make sure to select open-face flowers that butterflies can land on to collect nectar, not hanging or tight blooms.

Sue Hoar’s insect raft: collect some corks – 7 or 8 will do. Make a bracelet of the corks with a piece of wire. Float it in your nearest water tank. Beneficial flying insects – bees, ladybirds etc will be able to swim to the raft, scramble on board and take off!

Please email your contributions to jennybourne@beeb.net or post them in the shed by the gates addressed to The Plotholder – Kids.

Make sure to include your name, age and plot number.

MEMO TO PARENTS

If you have a slide, sandpit or other play equipment on your plot, please make sure you’ve cleared all the broken glass etc from the site.

S.O.S.

Does anyone know of any cost effective method of mass producing cheap cards with photos for use as Christmas cards etc. If you have any ideas please let me know.

jennybourne@beeb.net
Plot Z/F
0208 977 0816

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

The Autumn Social will be on Sunday 9 October, between 1 and 3 p.m. Pumpkin and sunflower judging, children’s activities, lunch, drinks and friendly chat with your fellow-gardeners.

The Annual General Meeting of Plotholders will be on Thursday 10 November, once more in the function room at The Lion, Wick Road, refreshments at 7.30 with business and prize-giving starting at 8 p.m.
GOODBYE to Matthew and Melanie Williams (ex 142) who have moved to north London.
WELCOME to new tenants Fleur Davis (4b), Erica Hedley (44b), Tom Samuels (86f), Andrew Antonioades (125), Johnathan and Sarah Lightley (140f), Denise Warren (142), Jennifer Glyshar and Paul Naittress (146b), Andrew Harris (198f), and Tim Cavanagh (E back).
We wish a speedy RECOVERY to George Harmsworth and Bill Jones, who worked hard to get our pumps into action over Easter, despite ill-health and hospital treatment.

PLOT INSPECTIONS – WHAT’S GOING ON?

It’s only fair, the Plotholders’ Committee decided, that tenants should have some warning when one of the regular inspections is taking place – so the May inspection was advertised, and it seems this caused some consternation among new tenants. What does an inspection mean? Do we get marks? Suppose we haven’t passed? Could it be explained a bit in the next issue of The Plotholder? Yes, it could, and this is what happens.

Dividing up the job The Plotholders’ Committee make frequent inspections during the growing season, and one during the winter. With over 240 units (full and half-plots) to look at, keeping an eye on things is a demanding and time-consuming task, and five members of the committee divide the job between them. For each plot or half-plot the inspector will note whether it is displaying a number, whether the surrounding boundary paths are well maintained, and what percentage of the plot is under cultivation. Note will also be taken if there is rubbish lying around, if there are trees becoming excessively large, if there is an unauthorised shed, and if there are a lot of weeding, including grass, which may spread to other plots.

If there is no visible number, or the paths are not properly defined, you will get a reminder. If there is a lot of rubbish, we will ask you to remove it, and we will ask you to trim large trees, or remove self-seeded woodland trees completely from the cultivation area – they exclude light and water, and make allotment cultivation difficult. We certainly are not against trees (see the article in this issue about how the Avenue boundary is being maintained in a wild-life friendly way), we simply need to make sure they don’t colonise the crop-growing area.

Get weeding We are understanding when a new tenant takes over a neglected plot, and will not nag if it takes them a while to get it cleared. We know too that it can be a steep learning curve, finding out just how much time you need to keep a plot maintained. But we will ask you to get going if things seem to be getting out of control.

Some people, even beginners, are staggeringly efficient (and are rewarded at the November prize-giving in the Best Newcomer category). Others take longer to get the hang of it. Some find their circumstances change – they have a new baby, get promoted, have to go abroad for a while. It may not mean you have to give up, and it’s a great help if you can let the committee know in advance. But there are a few tenants who take a plot, and then seem overwhelmed by the task, even if it was in good order when they took it on.

If we find, in two successive inspections, that there is little or no work being done on a plot, we will send a request to start work. Two such letters in succession will, unless the tenant has a good reason (such as illness), mean the committee will insist that work is begun within a specified period.

Applying the rules The conditions of tenancy are displayed beside the site entrance, and all new tenants are given a copy of them. After a year’s tenancy, we want every tenant to comply with these, unless we have agreed that there are extenuating circumstances.

The conditions of tenancy are quite exacting, and it’s rare that we give seven day’s notice – most people realise before that point that their present life-style makes keeping their plot an unrealistic option. But it does happen. It’s our responsibility, as an organisation, to keep the site in good order for future tenants, so we have to apply the rules. There are always people waiting to join us - usually about six applicants on the waiting list at any one time, and we want to get these people started as soon as possible.

Living the dream No-one takes an allotment with the ambition of presiding over a mess – we all arrive with some kind of a vision, of home-grown food and flowers, a little bit of country in the town, a step into community, a retreat from the rat-race, whatever.

Making the dream a reality is the tough part. The Plotholders’ Committee is on your side – we want you to succeed!

DISTRIBUTION

This issue of The Plotholder, as an experiment, is being distributed by ‘self-collection’ – which saves time for the distributors. But maybe we can email your copy next time, which would save both time and trees.

Let us know if you’d like yours sent that way.
Please email jobox@beeb.net
NEW PARKING RULES outside the gates

The double yellow lines, long promised by the local authority Transport Planning Service, are now in place on either side of our entrance gates. As part of a general move towards minimising the visual impact of traffic signing, the lines are narrower than they would once have been, and there is no additional warning notice. However, the lines mean No Parking At Any Time, and should improve our safety on exit from the allotment site.

While people are getting used to the new restriction, if you see a car parked on the lines, please note its registration number and report it to the committee – a note in the mailbox will suffice. It is also helpful if you can put a note on the car’s windscreen pointing out that an offence is being committed. We have a parking enforcement number to call when appropriate.

On the subject of cars, we remind those who drive in the site to be considerate of other tenants, especially children; to park in a way that lets others get past, and to move slowly. If you park a distance from your plot, please put your plot number in the windscreen (good practice at any time). And please remember to lock the double gates both on entry and exit – plots near the gates are vulnerable if they’re left open, especially at times when few people are around, in the evening or early morning.

RHS TOP TEN ALLOTMENT CROPS
The Royal Horticultural Society recommends ten crops as particularly suitable for allotment cultivation, either because they are especially easy and rewarding, or because difficult to grow in gardens, for reasons of space.
They are Raspberries (especially autumn varieties which fruit over a long period and are tolerant of poorer soils);
Asparagus (a delicacy which, like raspberries, needs a dedicated largish space);
Broad beans,
Potatoes,
French beans,
Sunflowers, (all very easy);
Courgettes and Squashes (need lots of space but very prolific);
Tomatoes and Purple Sprouting Broccoli (best flavour if home grown and broccoli doesn’t travel well).
I would add Runner Beans, also far ahead of the bought variety in flavour. See the RHS website for more details.
www.rhs.org.uk/news/allotmentcrops.asp

Plant in Profile

Following up on the article in the last newsletter on companion planting here’s a more detailed look at one of the most useful plants in the organic garden.

Nasturtium (Tropaeolum majus/minus)
The nasturtium is a colourful addition to the vegetable plot with its abundant flowers peeking through a mound of attractive, edible leaves. The visual appeal is not the only reason to include it on the planting plan, it has practical advantages too. It can help to deter white fly, bean & cucumber beetles and cabbage moths. It’s said to improve the growth of celery and if planted next to radish, they become hotter in taste.

The leaves and flowers have a peppery taste and make a colourful addition to salads; while the fresh seeds make an excellent alternative to capers (see recipe for poor man’s capers below). The ripe seeds can be roasted and ground and used as a seasoning.

The children will love pressing the flowers or use them to garnish soups & salads.

Sow from March until June to flower from June to September. Dwarf and climbing varieties are available so there’s certainly one to suit you, it also grows in poor soils, so you won’t need to use up valuable enriched beds, why not try them in that stony patch?

Tropaeolum is from the Greek tropio meaning trophy, due to the round shield like leaves & helmet shaped flowers.

Poor man’s capers (Pickled Nasturtium Seeds)
Gather the seeds while still young (just after the flowers wither). Rinse in cold water and place in a non metallic bowl with a handful of sea salt, leave overnight. Rinse and pack into sterilised jars. Bring 2 pints white wine or malt vinegar to the boil with ¾oz black or green peppercorns, 1” sliced horseradish root and ½sp powered allspice. Leave to cool and strain over seeds, seal jars, and leave for at least 2 months. Replaces capers in all recipes.

ONE YEARS SEEDING means seven years weeding is as true today as it was back then, here are some alarming statistics

Couch grass 80-90%of seed germinates in the first autumn if in the top 5-7cm soil. The seed remains viable for up to 5 years.

Bindweed produces over 500 seeds per plant.
The common poppy produces up to 20,000 viable seeds per plant

So if you have time for anything this weekend make it time for deheading those weeds before they set seed!
An obvious option is to plant a hedge, preferably a double line of native hedgerow species such as hawthorn, blackthorn, hazel, field maple, dog rose and guelder rose. There is a problem, in that in parts the horse chestnut trees in the Avenue overhang quite considerably. Planting under them would not be a success, so the hedge would need to be at the edge of the shaded corridor.

Hedge planting cannot be done until next winter, so what needs to be done now? In the intentionally uncultivated area towards the Cricket Club end there are a number of self-sown young chestnut trees ten to fifteen years old, which are being coppiced before they grow too large. Coppicing is a way of treating a number of trees, such as sweet chestnut, willow, elder and hazel, commercially in the case of hazel. The trunk is sawn down a short way above ground level, and will then produce a ‘bush’ of straight poles, cut every few years. Horse chestnut is not usually treated this way, but so far the technique is working, and regrowth is already sprouting from the stumps. As horse chestnut is a 16th century introduced species it does not support as many varieties of insects and birds as do longer-established species. Oak is said to be the richest, and there is an oak tree near the fence which is being spared for this reason.

The felled trunks are being stacked to form an ‘ecopile’ where they will be left to rot. These piles are much loved by ground beetles (predators of slugs), and even stag beetle larvae could find a home in them. The brash (smaller branches and twigs) have already been used to construct two ‘dead hedges’ at the backs of plots too shady for a hedge to grow. These rectangular stacks provide a neat barrier, and could support ivy or other creepers.

Other smaller trees, for instance hawthorn, which are growing along the line of the future hedge, are being trimmed and retained. The holm oak at the edge of the old plot 16 is too large to remove without professional help, but is being kept trimmed.

Having costed the hedge project, the Plotholders’ Committee has decided to do this over four years, a quarter of the length each winter. The advantage of this is to spread the cost, and to enable us to learn as we go about the growing conditions in the area. Tenants of the plots on that side can be involved as much as they want to be, choosing and buying plants, and joining in the planting, though we will also be getting commercially-supplied hedging plants and tree guards. Subsequent maintenance needed would be watering during dry weather as the plants get established, and weeding where necessary.

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 editorial team jennybourne@beebe.net or jobbox@beebe.net.

HEDGE ALONG THE AVENUE – A WILDLIFE FRIENDLY APPROACH

Last winter we benefited from the Bushy Park regeneration project, when the dilapidated fence along the south side of our site was replaced by some attractive high metal railings. However, in that area it meant an end to the privacy most tenants enjoy, and passers-by in the Avenue were treated to a less than delightful vista of the backs of the plots on that side. The back end of a plot is where one naturally tends to keep the stuff not in current use – but over the years a lot of junk had accumulated, and we were asked by the Park superintendent to do some tidying-up.

The shady corridor under the trees is not taken as part of the cultivation area on that side, and it seemed a natural starting point for a project which would improve the appearance of the area, while restoring some of the privacy both for tenants and wildlife.

Andrew Saunders and Ashley Catto have done a survey of the area, and a good deal of rubbish clearing.

Andrew writes: During the winter months ten trips to the municipal dump were made with a Volvo estate fully loaded with plastic bags, sheeting, bottles, old barrows, watering cans and broken glass. This mountain of rubbish was gathered from the corridor along the fence and from a couple of recently-vacated plots. This has improved the view from the park, but how do plotholders along the fence feel about being overlooked? Some no doubt would prefer some privacy.