

April 2013

Issue 9



Earley Allotment Association Newsletter

EAA News

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You will probably notice another logo at the top of the page. Yes, the RHS has eventually confirmed us as members of the Affiliated Societies Scheme. The Garden Reduced Entry Card is on its way, so they say. When this comes, the card, which will be available to all members on loan, will allow a 30% discount on the entrance fees for two.

Other benefits include reduced entry to the RHS Flower Shows (not Chelsea), as long as we go as a group of 10+.

Free entry for up to 55 people as a group to Wisley, which will have to be organised for later in the year when it has warmed up.

Gardening advice is also available from the RHS by phone or e-mail, Your questions need to be put through a designated person, guess that will be me then.

It was the first day of Spring last week and at the moment it is snowing and the forecast isn't for much improvement. Sowing and planting are stalled, so we can only hope for a decent Summer.

There has been some more deer activity. Thank you to those who reported this. ETC were made aware and additional fencing has been erected at the rear of plots 7 and 24.

You may ask why ETC doesn't just put up anti deer fencing along the length adjacent to the A3290. If ETC decided to go ahead, this idea would have to be put to the committee, maybe more than one, so there would be delays. In the meantime the deer and his mates would have stripped the plots bare!

By erecting extra fencing at the known access points when needed, the cost comes out of the maintenance budget.

You can help. It has been noticed that in many cases compostable weeds, grass etc. have been dropped over the fence which is raising the level to a point which makes a nice stepping over point for the deer. If this practice is stopped then this will also reduce the access points for the deer.

Hopefully he will not cause too much havoc this growing season.

Annual Best Allotment Award

Each year, Earley Town Council has a Best Allotment Award. The judges are three members of the Council Leisure committee and the previous year's winner.

The competition is open to all plot holders and judged over five months, starting in June and ending in October. The winners will receive a cup, certificate and vouchers for seeds or plants. The cups are presented at the end of the year and are awarded in recognition of the continuity of effort and the results achieved during the previous growing season.

The four criteria that the judges are looking for are:

CROPS: Variety of fruit and vegetables.

CULTIVATION: Quality of produce and lack of pests and diseases.

GENERAL: Tidiness of the plot, weed control and grass cut.

GREEN: Evidence of compost production and recycling.

There are two classes: 'Best Allotment' and 'Best Improved Allotment'.

Maybe your hard work this coming year will be recognized.

Seasonal Tips

There are lots of key crops that need to be sowed this month, but the plot is too cold.

Employing the old wives tale, 'If you want to know when to sow, take your trousers down and sit on the ground!' may cause a riot on the plot. Testing the soil temperature with a bare elbow is probably more PC these days.

Seeds that should be sown this month:-

Carrots - try to space seeds widely and cover with fine mesh. The first generation of female carrot flies fly between mid to late Spring and can sniff out the scent caused by thinning out. Alternatively, sow in a dustbin or old bath, as carrot flies do not fly above 60cm (2ft in old money)

Other crops to sow – Beetroot, Parsnip, Turnips, Cabbage, Summer Cauliflower, Kale, Chard and Leeks.

The soil can be warmed before sowing by placing glass or a cloche over small areas, but don't put away the fleece yet, as seedlings and small plants will still need protection.

How about making a seed bed. Choose an open, sunny site, dig over the area to remove all weeds and tread down the soil. Rake in both directions to remove as many stones and lumps of soil as possible. Voila! A perfect seed bed.

If you have thought ahead and sowed your veg seeds in a greenhouse, you're laughing with all that staging to fill.

But if, like so many people, you have sowed them indoors and now potted them on, you can't see out of the windows. Oh the joys of veg growing!

If you are lucky enough to have a greenhouse, sow tomatoes, basil, cucumber and squashes during April. Shade seedlings on sunny days and open vents to encourage good air circulation.

Hardy plants can be moved outside to a cold frame to acclimatize them to the outside conditions, gradually opening the glass more each day until fully open.

Put in Pea and Bean supports, as it's much easier to do this job now, before they are needed.

Slugs will be on the move soon, it has been too cold for them, so get your chosen slug defence in place.

There are alternatives to slug pellets, some more effective than others – nematodes, beer traps, flexi copper tape, oatmeal, salt and more. There is even a book by Sarah Ford, titled

'50 Ways to Kill a Slug'

Keep up the weeding, as they still manage to grow in this weather, by using a Dutch hoe.

Empty the compost bin and use as a mulch.



Cookery Corner

Rhubarb and Custard Tart

Ingredients

150 ml water
200 g caster sugar
450 g rhubarb, chopped
2 eggs
75 ml double cream
grated zest of 1/2 lemons
Grated nutmeg
1 x 25cm blind-baked shortcrust pastry tart cases
icing sugar, for dusting

Method

Preheat oven to 150°/gas Mk2.
Make syrup by heating together water and 100g sugar in a saucepan, stirring until sugar dissolves.
Bring the syrup to the boil, add rhubarb and cook for 3 minutes. Set aside to cool.
Break eggs into a bowl, add the remaining sugar.
Whisk until light and fluffy and trebled in volume.
Fold in the cream, the lemon zest and season with nutmeg.
Strain the rhubarb and spread on the

base of the pastry case.

Pat down rhubarb and pour over the custard.

Dust the tart with icing sugar and bake for 25-30 minutes.

Allow to cool before serving.

Serve with cream or crème fraiche.



Dates for the Diary

The Spring Plant Swap/Sale Saturday 25th May 12-2pm.

The marquee will be sited in the car park next to the EAA shed.



If you have been busy and have any surplus veg seedlings, herbs and garden plants, bring them along, clearly labelled, and swap them. This is a very economic way of boosting your stock and a perfect opportunity to try something new this year

If you have nothing to swap, there will be some plants for sale. Proceeds to EAA.

Free refreshments will be available

Annual BBQ Saturday 7th September 1-4pm.

It might only be April, but here is some news of the BBQ competitions.

This year there will be an extra children's competition, the funniest shaped vegetable as well as the tallest sunflower and the sunflower with the broadest head. So get sowing, or sunflower plants will be on sale at the plant sale in May. The sunflower competitions will be judged by a Committee member.

There will be 'Best Vegetable' and 'Best Produce' competitions and as last year, everyone will have a vote.

During the BBQ, a display of photographs will hopefully be on show, these will cover all aspects of life on the plot throughout the year.

I say hopefully, because that depends on contributions of photographs from the members. Most mobile phones have cameras these days, so get snapping. This isn't a competition, it's just for fun.

Plots for the Disabled

Liz Kerry (plot 60) has suggested that plots could be made available to disabled people, particularly those confined to wheelchairs. Raised beds could be sited next to the EAA shed in the car park allowing for easy access.

ETC were sympathetic to the idea and would be willing to provide assistance with the building of the beds etc., but would like to know if there is any interest before getting involved.

We will of course take advice on the size and height of the beds, which would be able to be tended from a wheelchair.

Do you know of any disabled person that would like the opportunity to join us and tend their own plot?

If so, or if you have any comments on the idea, please contact Liz at kerryje02@googlemail.com or me at linda.pelling@ntlworld.com

Scarecrows

It has been decided to hold a scarecrow competition again this year. The competition is open to all plot holders and their children/grandchildren.

There are no entry forms, if there is a scarecrow on your plot on judging day, it will be judged.

The scarecrows should be in place on your plot by the evening of Friday 19th July ready for the judging on the following day, Saturday 20th July.

There are plenty of ideas and instructions for making scarecrows on the internet, so have fun. You never know it might keep the deer away!



Light Box

If your seedlings are on the windowsill and are getting too leggy and bending towards the light, how about making a light box? This will help to distribute the available light evenly throughout the day.

Take a cardboard box, the height of the windowsill, cut off the top and one side.

Turn box through 90° so the side becomes the base.

Spread PVA glue or Spray Mount on all the internal surfaces.

Press tin foil over glue and smooth out any creases.

Place trays or pots on the base. Turn towards window to get the most of the available light all day.



Edible Weeds

Hairy bitter cress is known an ephemeral weed as it can complete its life cycle in three to four weeks and spread its little seeds from its spring like seed pods. It is able to overwinter and as soon as the temperature is above 6 C it will start growing again. This plant is a member of the brassica family and the flowers and leaves can be eaten raw in salads or cooked as a vegetable.



Gallant-soldier is an annual weed of the daisy family which was brought over to Kew from South America and escaped into Southern England in the 1860's. It is sometimes known as the potato weed as it grows among the crop and uses the potato plants for support as it grows. It is used in the national dish of Columbia, a chicken soup called Ajiaco.



Shepherd's Purse is an ephemeral weed and easily identified by it's little heart shaped seed cases. The seeds contain mucilage and it has been suggested that wet sticky mucilate traps insects which then provide nutrients to the seedlings. This would make it protocarnivorous. It is a member of the Brassica family and is eaten in Shanghai where it is stir-fried with rice cakes.



To control these weeds either hand weed to eat or compost, or hoe before the seeds have set and another generation is on its way.

Thanks to Julia (plot 46a) for this article

Seed versus Plugs

There is no obvious reason for choosing seeds over plug plants, but there are factors that will influence any decision – time, cost and experience.

Seeds

Growing vegetable plants from seed can be a rewarding experience and if you have the time it is worth trying.

Some seeds can be sown directly in the soil and require less attention than those sown in propagators, potted on, hardened off and then planted out.

If time is a constraint then choose vegetables that can be sown direct – beetroot, carrots, cabbages and broccoli.

Also when sowing seeds of course not all seeds germinate so planting many more than you need is the only way, then you find out that you have too many young plants from your seeds. Can be wasteful.

Seed is the most cost effective way of growing vegetables and if a propagator is used, germination can be managed more effectively increasing the success rate.

Root crops do not like to be disturbed once sown, so should be sown direct in their growing positions, as are salad crops – lettuce, radish and spring onion.

If a particular variety is required, then seeds are the better bet.

Plug plants

Plug plants are useful if you don't have the confidence to grow from seed.

They can be an easier option if time is limited. The range available and the delivery methods have improved considerably over the last few years.

Plants which take a lot of time to grow from seed may be easier to buy as plug plants – leeks, cucumbers, tomatoes, strawberries.

With plug plants you can skip the period when young plants are most susceptible to disease and pests.

If plug plants are chosen, these are normally more expensive as a nursery has to grow the plants from seed and the cost shipping and special packing so the plants arrive in good condition has to be added.

As an example 45 Leeks (Musselburgh) plug plants – £8.75 + £4.95pp against £1.99pkt for 350 seeds and are easily available.

With the weather as it has been lately, you can plant plug plants so you can be ahead of the game.

When using plug plants, gluts can be avoided, but there are no spares if any are lost (think Derek).