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Issue 20



Earley Allotment Association Newsletter

A Word from the Chair

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Welcome to the new season down on the allotments. When I was at our plot harvesting parsnips around new year I was the only person on the site (it was fairly early and a dull Saturday morning), but more recently there have been other people about, getting their plots ready for the new year and it is starting to feel like the new season is upon us. I also observed that the weeds have noticed the new season and were starting to show – some things don't change.

It is time, if you have not already, to be looking at the seed catalogues and deciding what this year's planting plan will be. As I write this it is snowing outside, however, it feels like it is already spring as we debate first the crops we want to grow and then when that is resolved, the variety to choose. As with much in life more choice does not necessarily make things easier.

I have already renewed my membership at the Huntley and Palmer trading shed. When I was in there the guys were having a big tidy up ready for the delivery of seed potatoes and other stock. Please make the time to join, or re-join for the new year and support "our shed". You know the prices are good and nothing beats having the shed only a few yards

from the plot. See the separate item for details of their new season offerings.

If it is not too late for a new year's resolution please think about buying yourself a bucket for the allotment, if you don't already have one. Perhaps I had better explain.

Most of us like to clean up our vegetables before we take them home and it may seem like an easy solution to swish them round in one of the communal water tanks. However, if you're tempted to do this please think again, because it may spread diseases (e.g. the dreaded onion white-rot or club root) to other plots.

For this reason some allotment sites specifically ban the washing of vegetables and tools in shared tanks. Apart from the disease risk, using the tanks in this way leaves a residue of soil and bits of vegetable, making the water unpleasant to use for the next person. So please think of other plot-holders and wash your veg in a bucket of water rather than one of the tanks.

I look forward to seeing you down on your allotment, preparing for the new season.

Richard plot 46, tredgett@gmail.com

HPHS News

In the previous issue, it was stated that the Membership fees to HPHS for 2015 was £1. I am sure that most of you will have found out by now, it is in fact £1.50, this is still the cheapest in the area and I am sure you will agree, well worth it for the convenience.

Seed potatoes are available in the shed now .

Earlies, main crop and a popular salad variety - Charlotte.

500g bags of onion sets and shallots.

Also available Pea and Bean seeds,

sold by weight and packaged seeds, if they haven't got the seeds you want, they'll order them for you.

As well as all the usual allotment requirements.

So please support John and Tony, they work hard for us.

Seasonal Tips

Now is the time to start a bean trench. It will provide moisture as well as nourishment for the beans later on. Dig a trench about 30cm deep and wide. A lining of newspaper will help to hold in moisture through summer. When the trench is almost full, heap the soil over it. It will sink down as the compost rots and flatten out.

There is not a lot of point sowing seed this month unless you are in a race to get ahead. One exception is the sweet pea – these can be sown in a heated greenhouse or on a south facing windowsill.

Order onion sets and seed potatoes if not yet done

The question of whether to chit or not still rumbles on, the following article from JBA, a seed potato supplier may be useful when making the decision.

“Seed potatoes may be planted without chitting. Not chitting may cause some potatoes not to grow which can cause gaps to appear in the rows, others may produce as many as seven or eight shoots that become tall and spindly. Too many sprouts will cause you to have a yield of smaller tubers. Some people believe that this technique is a thing from the past that should no longer be carried out but I think it can help provide better crops.

Chitting of seed tubers is one of the vital factors in successful potato cropping. As potatoes are half hardy in Britain, to have good sturdy sprouts before planting will get the crop off to an excellent start. Early cultivars will mature up to two weeks earlier from properly chitted seed than from unchitted seed. Chitting potatoes gives them a good start from which you can select the strongest sprouts from”.

Garlic and shallots can be started off in pots in a cold frame

Give a potash dressing to strawberries, gooseberries and currants (white and red).

Rhubarb can be forced now. Use a large pot, dustbin or decorative rhubarb forcer to cover the crown, it will encourage the plants to make early growth.



Avoid forcing a single crown of rhubarb for two years in a row. Leave it to crop naturally and always have more than one crown so you can force in alternate years.

Cookery Corner

Hands up those who spotted the mistake in the previous recipe? It described how to make the icing but I omitted to include the quantities of butter and icing sugar used. Well done to Jean Hackett for spotting this. For those who would like this information - 200g butter and 300g icing sugar. Many apologies for the omission.

Now for this month's recipe.

Moussaka-style Vegetable

Pasta

Ingredients

200g pasta shells
125g broccoli
190g jar Sacla Spicy Pepper & Tomato Stir-through Sauce.
150g pot natural yogurt
1 medium egg, beaten
100g feta, crumbled

Method

1. Cook 200g pasta shells in boiling, lightly salted water according to the packet instructions, adding 125g broccoli, cut into small florets, for the final 3 minutes, until everything is al dente.
2. Drain well, return to the pan and toss with 190g jar Sacla Spicy Pepper & Tomato Stir-through Sauce.
3. Tip into a 1-litre ovenproof dish.
4. Meanwhile, preheat the grill to medium-high.
5. In a bowl, mix together 150g pot natural yogurt with 1 medium egg, beaten, and 50g feta, crumbled. Season with freshly ground black pepper and pour over the pasta.

6. Crumble over another 50g feta.
7. Pop under the hot grill for 5 minutes or until the topping is set and golden.
8. Serve with a mixed salad,

Serves 2



Community Compost Heap

The observant amongst you may have noticed a wood and netting structure by the gate.

At the request of the allotment society the ETC have built two containers which we can use as a communal compost heap.

The idea behind this is that the bigger a compost heap the hotter it will get and therefore the more effective it will be and better compost will be produced.



Compost Material needed.

Any organic waste **but please avoid** the following;

- Perennial weeds eg. bind weed, horses/mares tail, ground elder and dandelions. The leaves of the weeds can be used but the roots must be avoided at all costs.

- Plants where the seed heads have already formed, just cut the heads off.
- Diseased plants eg. tomato plants which have blight.
- Woody stems unless shredded or chopped very small. This is because they take much longer to rot down.
- Remains of meat or cooked food as they will attract pests such as rats.

We need to build up the compost heap in layers, approximately 15cm of green waste followed by a thin layer of something such as soil, paper, cardboard or grass cuttings.

Every so often it will be good to turn the heap, when one container is full to the top turn it into the next bin. Volunteers will be needed for this job, so if you are interested in using and helping with this project please speak to Sandra Christopherson Plot 6.

Please note that this is **not** a dumping area for plot waste that should be taken to the tip, only the above material should be placed there.

If you add to the heap **and** volunteer to help with the turning, then you will be able to benefit from the results.

Crop Rotation

The principle of crop rotation is to grow specific groups of vegetables on a different part of the vegetable plot each year. This helps to reduce a build-up of crop-specific pest and disease problems and it organises groups of crops according to their cultivation needs. Do you know which group certain plants belong to?

Brassicas: Cabbage, kale, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, kohlrabi, oriental greens, radish, swede and turnips (Swede and turnips are brassicas too - look at the flowers and you can see why, many people think they are roots).

Legumes: Peas, broad beans. (French and runner beans can be grown wherever there is space).

Alliums: Onion, garlic, shallot, leek.

Potato family: Potato, tomato, (pepper and aubergine suffer from fewer problems and can be grown anywhere in rotation).

Roots: Beetroot, carrot, celeriac, celery, Florence fennel, parsley, parsnip.

Move each section of the plot a step forward every year so that, for example, brassicas follow legumes, onions and roots. Legumes, onions and roots follow potatoes and potatoes follow brassicas.

Year One

- Potatoes
- Legumes, onions and roots
- Brassicas

Year Two

- Legumes, onions and roots
- Brassicas
- Potatoes

Year Three

- Brassicas
- Potatoes
- Legumes, onions and roots

Certain annual crops such as (courgettes, pumpkins, squashes, marrows), salads (endive, lettuce and chicory) and sweetcorn can be grown wherever convenient, avoiding growing them too often in the same place.

Rhubarb and asparagus do not fit into the rotation.

Plot 69

When Richard asked if I would write something for this newsletter he mentioned our “no dig” method, so let’s start there...

When we took it over about four years ago Margaret and I divided our plot into a number of roughly 1.5 x 2m beds and treat them, I suppose, much as people treat raised beds. We try not to walk on them, to help the soil retain air and moisture, and that means it’s also easier to pull up the weeds. And, yes, no need for winter digging to break up the soil again, though they sometimes need a lot of fork work to get out the weeds after a month or two of winter neglect!

In terms of what we grow, let’s start with the successes. Climbing beans are (literally!) head and shoulders above almost everything else in terms of yield. That’s runner beans and climbing French beans (usually Blue Lake). We eat some of the latter young and fresh but then once the harvest is overwhelming us we leave them to ripen and dry, giving us something useful to do over a few otherwise guiltily lazy autumn TV evenings.

Leeks always do well and last us throughout the winter. So far we’ve had a bit of rust in some years but thankfully no weevil. Our other winter staple – parsnip – usually does well but we had poor germination this year. After several attempts at carrots we’ve almost given up due to

the root fly damage but we’ll have another go this year using fleece. I thought that keeping it lying over the plants all summer would keep out too much light, but our friends Martin and Linda on 69“B” got a good crop last year doing this.

We always plant two or three beds with onion sets, but sometimes they don’t seem a lot bigger when we harvest than when we planted them! I think we just don’t water them enough in dry weather. I don’t like the idea of using lots of water on them (I work for the company that puts a lot of effort into making every drop fit to drink!) but I need to get over that and recognise that if you’re trying to grow something that doesn’t grow here naturally then you’re often going to have to modify its environment.

Our least successful crops are the brassicas. In mid-summer they can look quite good but the cabbage hearts usually turn out tiny, under layers of slug-crawling outer leaves, and our sprouts were again too small to make it to the Christmas dinner table. Our netting does a good job of preventing caterpillar damage but I’m wondering if the white fly are sapping their energy more than we realised. We’ll be trying to control them better this year with yards of yellow sticky fly paper!

Richard and Margaret, plot 69

Grow your own Loofa!

Luffa cylindrica, is part of the Cucurbitaceae family, along with cucumbers, squash, pumpkins and other gourds, it looks like a cucumber and is easy to grow.

Luffa cylindrica is native to India and grown commercially in China, Korea, Japan and Central America.

Sow seeds in pots in a cool greenhouse and put up some wire supports.



Luffas require a long, warm growing season.

Each plant produces either male or female flowers but not both, so to get a crop one of each is needed.

The young fruits are edible if picked when no longer than 20cm. Peel first and use in salads or stir fries. Luffa is said to have a delicious flavour.

For bath sponges, leave the fruits on the plant until they are well past their best and turn yellow. Peel off the outer skin and a moist, fibrous sponge is inside. Rinse in a bucket and squeeze repeatedly to remove the remaining flesh and seeds.

Dry by hanging it up in the sun for a few days, then exfoliate to your heart’s content!



And finally!



It won't be long!