



Green Fingers

Newsletter of the South Dublin Allotments Association

Vol. 1, Issue 14

Summer 2011

From the Chair

This year, for a change, we have decided to have an allotments gathering in the form of a Summer Picnic, instead of our usual Open Day, which we have staged for the past four years. This year we want to focus on the allotments community – a sense of shared interest and kindred spirit which is always present wherever allotments exist. So we really look forward to our Allotments Summer Picnic on Saturday 23rd July from 4-7pm in Friarstown. We hope to have an afternoon of fun, entertainment, good food and camaraderie, as well having a celebration of the wonderful plots in Friarstown.

So we hope that wherever you have your plot, be it Corkagh, Palmerstown, Tymon or Friarstown, you will pencil in this date for your diary and come along, meet others, and enjoy yourself thoroughly.

In skipping having an Open Day this summer we are also conscious of our hardworking successive committees, and dozens of volunteers, who have given their time and energy in helping to put on open days in the past few years. So this year it will be a day for ourselves to revitalise, to enjoy in the company of other allotment holders, having a chance of a break from the often busy work of keeping a plot, and have time for a really good chat with each other.

As always, the committee of South Dublin Allotments Association has been meeting

every five weeks to discuss, propose, plan and move on the things we want to progress. We are prepared to try almost anything to improve the lot of allotments and allotment holders (that is as long as it works, is legitimate, and we have the time and resources to carry it through!). If you haven't yet served a term on the committee, and you have some good ideas we hope you will consider putting your name forward in advance of our AGM in September.

We are very fortunate this year that one of our members, Des Garry, has made available a room for us in the Belgard Pub where we now hold our meetings.

You may remember South Dublin County Council wrote a letter to all the allotment holders (it accompanied the renewal notices we got early this year) on the issue of representation of allotment holders from all four sites. We regard this as an essential next step which is needed for the smooth running of the sites, in cooperation with the council. It is the standard practice internationally. The first step in the council's proposal was to see if a majority of SDCC's allotment holders favoured exploring this framework, as put forward by the council, for representation and regular meetings.

The results showed a clear majority (67.7%) of allotment holders across the county wanted to explore the outline proposals for representation. Ultimately, each site would

have to organise its representative group and site representatives, and have 70% of its allotment holders signing up to it, otherwise the council was not prepared to enter into the arrangement. So there is an onus on the allotment holders on each site to organise their own representation. From our perspective as the only association currently representing allotments in the county, we would welcome each site setting up its own representative group and electing representatives to meet with the council and see how the site could be improved. If you have the interest and initiative why not try to get a group started on your site – we will give you whatever support we can.

We have lost the services of Kevin Creagh, who had to resign as membership secretary in April due to work commitments, and we want to register again our thanks to Kevin for his valuable work. We have been fortunate to have Rory O'Connor elected as our new membership secretary and welcome his energy.

You will have seen the success of our annual seed scheme and subcommittee has done Trojan work again this year in bringing the freshest, top quality seeds to our allotment holders, at value that can't be found elsewhere. The seed days are also a celebration of the diversity of seeds and a chance to swap

Continued overleaf...

Allotment Updates

Tymon

Tymon Park allotments are in looking great - most allotment holders got "off to a flyer" this year with the exceptionally early spring weather.

The dry weather of course brings its own problems and seedbeds have been crying out for a refreshing period of decent rainfall.

When the rain comes, it is worth saving every drop of rainwater, in any way possible, in case the dry conditions continue during the summer. This is what led the Association to seek funding, under the Environment Partnership Fund (LA 21) for a rainwater harvesting system for Tymon Park allotments and we have been awarded €1,000 in funding. We have met with the council's Parks Department to look at options on how this might be done, and come up with what looks like a workable plan - to catch and store rainwater from the allotment container. The Parks Department have been very helpful in helping to develop this project.

Our hope is to have a 1,300 litre tank installed beside the container and catch the flow of water off the roof using

guttering and a rainwater diverter trap (which has to be one of the cleverest inventions ever for the garden).

If we had water shortages and had to use stored rainwater, how do we get the water to our plot?

Necessity being the mother of invention, one way we have come up with is to use inflatable 40 litre water bags in a wheelbarrow. But of course watering cans and even more multiple trips to the tank might be what we will do. Thinking about it some more - you just can't beat a good downpour for labour saving!

It is also lovely to see some new allotment holders to the site and we extend a warm welcome to them.

Michael Fox

FURTHER NOTES FROM TYMON

Sad to relate a plot holder in Tymon has left rubbish from their plot in a heap near the gate for someone else to deal with. This has been joined in the usual way by further stuff, and it will only get worse.

Corkagh

There is a lot of activity in Corkagh allotments at the



Allotment rainwater harvesting (courtesy of John McKinnie, 'Allotment Heaven'.)

moment. Most of the plots are being used with new plot holders arriving by the week. We would like to welcome them to Corkagh Allotments. Several plots have been divided in half which people are delighted with as they are easier to manage and are now being used to their full potential. The neighbouring plot holders are delighted too as it solves the overgrowing problem from the plots either side of their plots.

We have received top soil and manure from the Parks Department of South Dublin County Council for which we would like to say thanks to them. There is a lot of weeding, tending and watering going on at the moment. We still have a problem with rabbits and squirrels in the allotments but that is nature.

Clondalkin Gardener

From the Chair contd.

and compare varieties.

Lastly, "for everything there is a season" and I have decided I will be stepping down as chairperson at our next AGM in September. The time has come for someone with fresh ideas and energy to bring the association forward to its next stage of development. I have been privileged to serve as chairperson since the association was founded in 2004, and with successive

committees during that time. I want to record my deep gratitude to all those committee members who have served and continue to serve the association, and the cause of allotments in Ireland. I have been fortunate to serve at a time of rebirth of interest in allotments here and it is exciting to see so many new allotments opening up across the country. I am hoping the three month period between now and our AGM will give

you, the membership, the opportunity to consider the person you would like to have as chair of the association and to come to the AGM, on Monday 12th September, 7.30pm, to elect incoming officers and committee.

So here's for another Summer buzzing with all of what allotment life brings, followed by a bumper harvest to crown it all.

Michael Fox

On the Web

Have you ever cursed those lightweight carrot seeds as they blow out of your hand? Have you found that those seed dispensers just don't quite do the job? As for thinning...!

Never fear, help is at hand in the form of seed tape, literally seed stuck onto some biodegradable paper-type material at perfectly spaced intervals. All that is required is to score a groove in the ground, roll out the tape to the length required, cover and sprinkle with water. Some minor thinning might be needed later.

The downside is that it is quite expensive. One supplier lists, for example, a 7.5m roll of Nantes carrots for ST£2.25. Normally one gets over a thousand carrot seeds in a

packet for the same kind of price. The tape might only have c.150-200 seeds. Another



minus is that there is a limited range of vegetable varieties available.

The alternative is to make your own. This is relatively easy. There are several websites which give instructions, such as www.thriftyfun.com, or a video at <http://video.about.com/gardening/How-to-Make-Seed-Tape.htm>. The basic method involves strips of paper or toilet tissue, non-toxic liquid glue or a water and flour paste, and a

ruler to measure spacing. It's the perfect activity for rainy summer days when you can't get out on the plot. It could be a fun activity for children to help too.

Here's a variation on the idea which could make nice presents - <http://www.instructables.com/id/Make-Paper-That-Grows-Recycle-Renew-and-Plant-1/>. It shows you how to make sheets of homemade paper, adding in small vegetable or flower seeds.

By Sinéad Ní Bháin



Water Conservation on the Allotment

It's a re-occurring theme at the moment - water saving, water charges, water shortages etc. Water conservation on the allotment is as important as anywhere else. If we don't do something about it we'll all end up paying for it, in charges or taxes. It's hard to see how it would be fairly charged for on an allotment site as the Council are highly unlikely to put a meter on each and every plot. The simplest way for them to recoup the cost of water is to charge everyone a flat fee. Yet it is very obvious to any observer that some people use a lot more and others a lot less water.

Some people save their own water, with plastic barrels or old bins collecting rain water. Why would such people have to pay a penny for what they don't use?

Others use a watering can at all times, carefully watering each needy plant at its base to ensure only that plant gets the

water it needs. Sometimes a barrel is filled from the tap so that a watering can can be handily dunked for easy filling.

Many hose users are careful, again only watering at the base of plants and having an attachment at the end of the hose to stop the flow in between areas to be watered.

Lastly, there are those who like to make rainbows, like in the Lotto ad with the tug boats spraying their jets on the River Liffey. Hoses are aimed in an indiscriminate manner across beds, watering plants, weeds and bare earth alike. It's even done in the heat of the day



Leave the rainbow making to the experts!

when a lot of the water is going to evaporate before it actually hits the ground. So wasteful!

Unless there is extreme drought, a lot of plants, if started off well, do not need watering once established. They will have sent down decent roots which get moisture from well below the soil surface. Good levels of compost in the soil also help retain moisture. Adding a mulch of compost, straw, comfrey leaves etc. helps prevent moisture loss by evaporation.

Everyone can do something to save water. Having endured a rent hike this year, the last thing anyone wants is to pay for wasted water. If a tap is left running, please turn it off. If it can't be turned off, please let someone know, either the Allotment Association or South Dublin County Council.

By Sinéad Ní Bháin

Food Security and Allotments

One of the great privileges in growing our own vegetables here in Ireland is that we can do it for our own satisfaction and enjoyment. If our crop of, say carrots or onions happens to fail (let's face it - it happens!), we can always go to the nearest supermarket, where there is a stunning array of attractively presented vegetables, at prices most of us are lucky enough to afford. Not so for so many of the world's population, where "growing your own" is a matter of necessity and survival.

Increasingly the issue of food security seems set to becoming an issue for the developed world as well as third world and developing countries.

In fact the "perfect storm" of risky factors is already here for potential world food security problems in the coming years. Firstly the twin challenges of climate change and peak oil are here to stay, and will only intensify as the years go on.

Food prices are considered to be one of the factors behind the civil unrest which has led to political upheaval on North African and Middle Eastern countries this year. Hard pressed families who had to spend 50% of their household budget on food four years ago, have seen that figure increase to 60-70%, leading to dissatisfaction with autocratic leadership. Escalating food prices, largely caused by the increasing world prices for commodities, have sparked food riots and social unrest in two out of the past four years across dozens of countries.

Any major interruption in oil



supply, caused by geo-political crisis in one of the biggest oil producing regions of the world could bring our food transport systems to a halt. In this nightmare scenario there is only enough food in supermarkets to last three days.

World grain supply is reducing in many of the world's key grain producing regions, more affected than ever before by climate instability. Other factors include soil degradation from over use of intensive methods of agriculture, and depletion in water supplies for irrigation.

Population growth will inevitably mean that the planet's capacity to grow and produce food will be pushed beyond limits scarcely thought possible up to now.

With mass migration, countries are realising that real food security only exists when there is food enough for all peoples on planet earth, food for our neighbours as well as for ourselves. If people are hungry, no walls, fences or international borders are secure enough, as hungry

people need to find food to survive. So food security means food security for all – not just those lucky enough to have enough disposal income to buy food, or have a patch of fertile ground to grow food on. In Ireland we talk about getting back to economic growth as if all we need to do is get back to the good old days of what we now know was unsafe, ungrounded and unsustainable growth. Have we even begun to deal with our addiction to fossil fuel driven lifestyles? It is said that the capacity of our farmers and processors to produce and export food is one of our keys to economic revival, but this does not take account of just how precarious our reliance is on an increasingly volatile and unpredictable set of variables.

Surely our continued over-reliance on intensive agriculture and worldwide food trade is a bit akin to our country's reliance on building and property revenue in the recent past, and we all now see the tragic results. Very certainly there are people shouting stop this time and it needs to be heard. At the very least we need a backup – a plan "B".

The question is should we now have a national food security policy here in Ireland, in case of serious developments? We have our energy policy, our nuclear catastrophe action plan, but who can now say a food security action plan is any less urgent?

What is the importance of the allotments system in all of this?

Contd. overleaf

Food Security and Allotments; contd.

Is there a notion out there that if we were to face a food crisis all we need to do is to magically convert our gardens, and open up more allotments and grow it ourselves?

If only it was that easy. It will probably take as many years for our society to re-learn the ability to grow food as it took to lose this knowledge - certainly decades.

We need to remember that small scale food growing has been part of civilisation for 600 generations - it is only in the past 2-3 generations that we,

here in Ireland, seem to have lost the plot - at this point was highlighted by our president, Mary McAleese, herself a keen vegetable gardener, in her address to the GIY Ireland Conference in 2010.

As we become more conscious of food security, is the allotment about to take on a much more pressing importance here in the future - on a scale not seen since the "dig for victory" campaign in wartime Britain?

Should we speculate on how would we survive if we had to live off an allotment plot to survive? Are our allotments big

enough to support a family? How would allotments be best used if there were serious food security issues facing Ireland? Is there a body of skills and knowledge amongst allotment holders which now need to be taught to the rest of society, to help us on the long path back to sustainability and sanity in our food systems?

Maybe cultivating an allotment, talking about how we do it, and highlighting the value of allotments is more important to future generations than we ourselves realise.

By Michael Fox

Lessons from Emergency times

As frugality is the order of the day during this recession, the finding of a little book called 'Food Facts for the Kitchen Front' was very timely. This is a 2009 reproduction of a 1941 publication by Harper Collins.

It is full of all sorts of recipes which mostly use vegetables or small amounts of meat, mainly offal or other less popular varieties - lots of tripe, suet and cow heel!

There is a section on 'Food Values' (i.e. nutrients) and at the end of this the reader is advised that 'What we *can* get is good for us' and 'A great deal of what we *cannot* get is quite un-important'. Very sound advice from yesteryear.

Did you know that there is a type of Irish potato bread called 'Fadge'? It's made with potatoes, just enough flour to make the mashed potato stick together and a bit of salt. It's then rolled out and cut into wedges a 1/4 inch thick and cooked on a hotplate or hot girdle till brown on both sides.

One quite nice-sounding recipe is as follows:

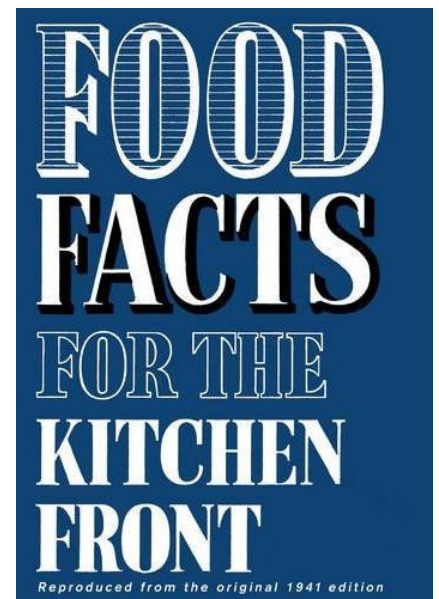
"Dutch Casserole

1/2 lb. cooked beetroot
1/2 lb. cooked carrot
A few dried plums if available
1 small minced onion or chopped spring onion, fried.
1/2 tea cup cooked pearl barley
1/2 lb. cooked potato
2 good-sized sour apples

Layer the diced root vegetables in the casserole with seasoning and raw apple, previously cut into small pieces, and the minced onion.

Add the chopped fruit, and the barley. Sprinkle with a few browned breadcrumbs, dot with a few pieces of dripping or cooking fat in fine shavings, and place in a hot oven to heat through for 15 minutes, in the time the apple should be softened and the flavours well blended, but a little stock can be run in to start the dish if liked.

Other vegetables can be used



in season - replacing the potato as the basis of the dish.

When it can be spared, a small grating of cheese, in with the breadcrumbs, adds to the flavour."

By the way, if you're looking for new ideas for what to do with your surplus courgettes, you'll be out of luck. They, along with broccoli/calabrese and peppers, are not even listed in this book.

By Sinéad Ní Bháin

Compost Tea

Mark Keenan, writing in the Sunday Times, has written more than once about the making of a super brew to add organic life to soil and consequently produce wonderful flowers, vegetables etc. It sounds magical in the results it creates, all without extra fertilizers and further exhausting the soil. In fact he prefaced the recent piece in the paper with a description of depleted earth which had been growing crops for some time. Many soils are naturally diminished very quickly by the heavy rains we experience these days, when the nutrients are simply washed away. Adding manure and compost is of course vital, but this can be

difficult in some situations, and will not be as complete as one hopes, and of course the heavy use of peat is little short of tragic.

Mark was introduced to compost tea by John Evans, a vegetable grower and holder of many Guinness book of Records listings for giant vegetables grown by this method. He advocates using one pint each of garden compost, manure, and top soil and a bucket of water and a few spoons of honey. Mix all together and bubble for three days with an aquarium aerator, and then use in the ratio one to ten with water. This does not sound too difficult though I

expect the quality of the ingredients would make a difference. During the three days the microscopic bugs bacteria etc multiply and it is at this level that the plants take up the nutrients and, we hope, become strong and vigorous. Aquarium equipment can be obtained from Newlands Garden centre and of course pet shops, and would not be a big financial outlay.

Who is prepared to take on the experiment? It would be great to hear from anyone doing so and results would be compared in the newsletter. Ideal for winemakers, and ecologically involved gardeners!

By Hester Scott

End Pieces

Wind-Powered Water

Pearse College Allotments, on Clogher/Sundrive Road in Crumlin, have had a wind-powered water pump installed to bring up water from their newly dug well. This is a very impressive piece of self-sufficiency in action, especially in the current climate of threatening water charges and possible water shortages this summer.

What to be doing now

With the weather warmed up (sort of!) various beans can be sown directly outside, such as runner, climbing and dwarf French. Other items to sow include carrots, endive, lettuce, kale, kohlrabi, peas (e.g. Kelvedon Wonder), beetroot, Swiss chard, spinach, courgette, winter cabbage (early in the month), radish, Swedes, sweetcorn, turnips, salad leaves and spring onions.

Hopefully anything that has already been sown in seed

trays has been hardening off the last week or two and so



ready to plant out. The following can be on their way up to the plot: broccoli, Brussels sprouts, summer cabbages, cauliflowers, peppers, kale, leeks (*darn! I knew I forgot something - ed.*), celery, celeriac, cucumbers, squashes, courgettes, tomatoes, sweetcorn and strawberries.

And so now is the time for netting - fine net on your brassicas (cabbages etc.) against the cabbage white butterfly and not quite so fine on strawberries and other fruit against birds. A word of warning, if constructing your own fruit cage with sticks and

netting, be very careful that the edges and joins are bird-proof. This author already had to rescue a blackbird from one such home-made construction. By the way, has anyone else had their gooseberry bushes attacked by gooseberry sawfly? The black spotted green caterpillars strip the leaves off the branches and should be removed instantly.

Then there's the reward for those who got planting good and early in the season - strawberries, early potatoes, leafy salads, radish, rhubarb and spinach. Enjoy!

Editor's note to the wider membership

If you wish to contribute an article for the newsletter, new writers are always welcome. Feedback on the content is also welcome.

E-mail us at:
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Opinions expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the South Dublin Allotments Association.