

# Blog for the 2010 Growing Season

I guess that I should start with some background. My wife and I look after the plots together. The rough division of work is that she mostly acts as the horticultural artisan (sowing, planting *et cetera*) while I tend to specialise in labouring. We have two modestly-sized plots, the original one is 4.3 poles (~107 sq. metres) and the second is 4.2 poles (~105 sq. metres). We took on the second one when we approached the semi-retirement stage. Fortunately, this was before allotments became flavour of the month some years ago, at a time when there was no waiting list.

The amount of land that you have and the time that you have available to tend it are very important factors that are seldom addressed in books or on TV programmes. Originally, we both had full-time jobs and other interests and time spent on the plot tended to be limited to Saturday mornings. It was only that there were two pairs of hands that allowed us to cultivate the allotment successfully. If you want a very crude measure - allow 30-45 minutes per pole per week from May to September.

The soil on our site is sandy in nature - geologically, we are on what is called the Bagshot Sand, west of London. It is extremely easy to dig; it is almost like cutting cake. The disadvantage is that it dries out quickly, and at times during dry spells in the summer it can occasionally resemble a beach.

We use the raised bed system. Each bed is approximately 4 feet wide and 13 feet long while the paths are just one foot wide. The width allows you to easily reach the middle of the bed from the side path while the length is limited to dissuade you from walking over the bed to get to the other side. The danger with very long beds is that you are often tempted to take the shortcut.

Finally, being in SE England we can make an earlier start in spring than those who are further north.

## December 2009

With the exception of garlic planting which took place on October 17th, 2009 our allotment year really begins at the end of November when I dig over the majority of the plots and Janet does some fruit pruning.

Heavy rains in the second half of November delayed the commencement of digging by a week this year. There are various underground springs in the area - some 19th century houses across the road from the site used to have wells in their back gardens. This, and a high water table, leads to surface water in various places on the site after significant rainfall, particularly in winter. Our plots are both partially affected by this excess water. Fortunately, the sandy nature of the soil helps to dry things out relatively quickly. A case could be made for not digging at all given the sandy nature of our soil. Indeed, quite a few plot holders manage to avoid digging. Perhaps I am just a horticultural luddite but there is something quite therapeutic about digging. I employ the bastard trenching approach. This is not the same as double digging, as some people would have you believe. In essence, you single dig (turn over the soil to a depth of one spade or spit). In this process you throw the soil ahead of you, leaving a trench behind. You then use a fork to break up the soil in the trench, going down a further spit. This method means that you are uncompacting the lower level without bringing this inferior soil to the surface. It only takes me about 40-45 minutes to dig one of my beds in this way and I managed to complete the task by the middle of the month. In fact, I luckily finished the day before the first snows arrived.

During early December Janet did some pruning of fruit: blackberry plus apples grown on dwarf rooting stock. In addition, she planted some replacement raspberry canes and strawberry plants.

## January 2010

Having got the main winter work out of the way by mid-December, the period through to the end of January is usually very quiet except for picking winter veg. such as leeks, sprouts and parsnips - a good job as the weather was arguably the worst since 1963. Our leeks lasted until the end of January - we have been eating them since the beginning of November. We never cease to be amazed by the number of plot holders on our site who grow excellent leek crops but never come to harvest them during the winter. A good 50%+ disappear in October and seldom come out of hibernation until late February / early March, and even then they tend not to harvest them.

Our only job this month was to help clear the plot of an allotment holder who had passed away in December. He was a real hoarder and there was loads of rubbish, heath robinson contraptions (wooden frames covered with corrugated plastic or chicken wire), timber, spades and forks that had never been used and much more besides. Clearance was slow due to the snows and the freezing conditions. There is a park bench adjacent to the main car park on the site where a plot holder can leave surplus crops, plants and consumables for others to take. During January this area resembled a chandler's shop as we tried, successfully as it turned out, to recycle as much of his stuff as possible.

## February 2010

Gooseberries were pruned at the beginning of the month, followed by the raspberries. We only grow autumn raspberries and so pruning is very straightforward; you simply cut the canes down to the ground in early February.

Conditions had improved sufficiently by the second week in February to allow me to prepare two of the drier beds. By prepare, I simply mean using a fork to roughly level the bed and a plank to create the sides - we do not have proper wooden or plastic surrounds to our raised beds. Having done this I put a couple of cloches in place to warm the soil prior to doing some early sowing.

Heavy rains in the second half of the month prevented any further work except for sowing some leeks under one of the cloches and the planting of onion sets on a bed that tends not to get too wet.

## March 2010

A dry first week eventually allowed the two beds that I levelled last month to be raked, fertiliser applied and for sowing to take place. Mangetout, carrot, beetroot, land cress, spring onion and lettuce were sown while several lettuce plants which had been started at home were planted under one of the cloches. Fleece was then put over the two beds. The accompanying picture shows the beds and the cloches. We dug up all the remaining parsnips, not wanting to leave them in the wet ground, and stored them in the garage.



In the following week plot 2, which gets wetter than plot 1, had dried out sufficiently to allow the first early potatoes to be planted. We are growing Rocket again this year, having been quite impressed with it last year. We also managed to sow sprouts and some radish.

By the third week of March both plots were quickly drying out, allowing all the raised beds to be levelled. I have also made a start on preparing the positions for fruiting vegetables, e.g. courgette, squash, cucumber, tomatoes, *et cetera*. I simply dig a hole (one spade wide x one spade long x one spade deep), put a forkful of manure in the hole, replace the soil and place a 5 inch plant pot in the soil next to the hole to facilitate any necessary watering later in the season. See pictures below. Spinach was the only outdoor sowing this week. Most of the sowing activity at the moment is indoors: aubergine at the beginning of the month, celery at the end of the 1st week, melon, sweet pepper and marigold mid-month, and chilli at the end of the 3rd week.



The final week of the month started with the first mowing of the grass. Our plots are surrounded by grass paths which we are responsible for. I probably could have left it another week but the forecast of unsettled weather made me bring it forward. I continued and completed the preparation of the positions for the "fruiting" vegetables. The other main task this week was to put up the canes for our climbing beans. We

have double rows of both runner beans and climbing french beans; each occupies an entire bed. We

also grow yin yan beans (also called orca or calypso). I make wigwam constructions for them. Finally, the garlic and asparagus beds were weeded. Janet picked some chives, the first crop of the year, although we are still harvesting last year's Jerusalem Artichokes.

March has been a mixed month weather-wise; the first half was dry with a short mild spell while the second half was unsettled, quite wet and on the cool side.

## April 2010



Our successes with early outdoor sowing and planting over the last couple of years have not been repeated this year. Something has been chewing our emerging onion sets, quite what we do not know thus far. Germination of mangetout, sprouts and spring onion is very patchy, while carrots, beetroot and lettuce are just about satisfactory, albeit nowhere near as good as in the recent past.

Outdoor sowing in the first week of the month was limited to a row of dill and some more lettuce and radish. We sow salad material successionaly up until August.

Indoors, the month started with sowings of courgettes, cucumber, tomato and basil.

Early April has seen slightly warmer temperatures and the first indications of weeds seeding themselves, a sign that outdoor sowings may be more successful from now on.

The second week of April saw the outdoor resowing of various crops to fill in the gaps left by the patchy germination plus the initial sowing of parsnips. We sow a small amount of radish along the parsnip rows. The reason for this is that parsnips are notoriously slow to germinate (28 days or more) whereas the radish are quick (7 days) and they act as markers to show you precisely where the rows are, thus allowing weeding to be done - the weeds will be up and thriving long before the parsnips. The parsnip seedlings are usually visible by the time the radish are ready to eat.

The picture above shows our mangetout bed. After some transplanting and resowing we erected our structure. This consists of chicken wire along the rows to provide support to the plants while the whole bed is surrounded with netting to protect against the pigeons who would otherwise strip them bare.

Maincrop potatoes were planted - we are growing Romano this year. In addition, we planted half a dozen Jerusalem Artichoke tubers. They are not everybody's cup of tea but they have the advantage that the tubers can remain in the ground over the winter and dug when required - we are still eating last year's crop.

Our old asparagus bed has been slowly producing spears and there was enough to warrant a small picking today (17th April). We also picked our first rhubarb. It is a later variety than most others on our site. We inherited it and hence do not know what the variety is. The other outdoor activity was to transplant some of our poached egg plants. They attract hoverflies which in turn help to battle the aphids. Oh, I nearly forgot - as if one could! - weeding has commenced.

Mid-month indoor sowing consisted of butternut squash (Avalon F1) and sunflowers.

Apart from weeding, mowing of the paths is now in full swing. Meanwhile, the early potatoes have at last started to show through, perversely at the same time as 4 or 5 nights of light ground frost, resulting in a little bit of damage to the leaves. I earth them up so that the foliage is protected for a short while longer. Asparagus can also be damaged by frost so we decide to cover them with fleece until the spell of cold nights abates.

Warmer days (around mid teens centigrade) is encouraging asparagus growth and we get to have a very first tasting of our new asparagus, a variety called Backlim, a week or two earlier than we thought. The plants are now 3 years old and we will



crop them moderately this year, but hopefully fully from next year onwards. You certainly need patience to grow asparagus but as a bed should last for 20 years (possibly more) it is ultimately worthwhile.

We have always used freestanding compost heaps, i.e. without the aid of wooden or plastic bins. However, this spring the birds have been making a real mess of the area as they scratch around, a sign presumably that there is a shortage of food after the cold winter. Anyway, we have now installed several wooden compost bins to tidy up the area.

The main outdoor sowing activity today (24th April 2010) was the sowing of beans. We grow yin yang beans (also called Orca) and dwarf borlotti beans (Firetongue), in both cases for the beans rather than the pods. We also sowed half of our runner (Enorma) and climbing french beans (Cobra). It is a bit risky sowing them this early - I recollect that 12th May is the appointed day for outdoor sowings of runner and french beans - as they will not survive any frost damage. We do another sowing in a month's time and will make good any losses at that time.



The end of the month saw temperatures in the high teens and low 20s centigrade. This encouraged germination, particularly of the items that we had to re-sow, and general plant growth; the early potatoes are moving rapidly now, and we were really pleased to see the tarragon bursting into life, as we were beginning to wonder if it had failed to survive the winter. One task this week was to put the roof netting back

on the fruit cage. Some plot holders on our site did not remove their netting before the snows and so suffered some damage; the roof supports completely snapped on one cage.

## May 2010

The first 3 weeks of the month have been dominated by a range of problems. Someone or something has taken to removing the tips from the asparagus spears on our new bed. It started with the odd one or two and developed into all of them. As far as I can tell other plot holders are not similarly affected. This, plus the fact that I have never suffered from this problem in twenty plus years and it does not seem from my research to be a known issue, makes me wonder if it is an animal on two legs. We have now netted the bed.

Something, probably a mouse, is taking our borlotti and yin yang seeds as they germinate. Second sowings at home are in progress.

On May 8th, we picked our first early lettuce and radish.

The heavy frost on the night of Tuesday May 11th 2010 was a problem for everybody. Early potatoes were frosted although ours were less damaged than most for some reason - they will come again although the yield may be down. The main crop potatoes had not really come through so they should be ok. We went away for a week just before the frost and Janet had persuaded me - against my better judgement - to plant out aubergines, sweet peppers, some courgettes, several melons and a single cucumber before we went. They were all protected in the sense that they were under cloches or in a cold frame. As extra insurance we put a double layer of fleece over the plants. We lost the cucumber but everything else fortunately appears to have survived reasonably well apart from the odd singed leaf.

In our absence about half the pots that we sink into the ground for watering purposes had been dislodged. We usually get a couple that pop out in a very windy spell. Anyway, I put them back in the ground only to find the following morning that a further 11 had been pulled out - I say pulled out because it was a calm night. The upshot of all this was that I have weighted them all down with large stones to see if that stops the problem.

May 19th saw the start of the wholesale planting out of half-hardy plants. Tomatoes (Tornado and Tamina) were first, followed by cucumbers (Burpless Tasty Green) and chillies - all go out under 5 litre water bottles with the bottoms cut off which make for useful mini cloches. Butternut squashes (Avalon)

were put out the next day. Meanwhile, I transplanted the borage plants that we require for this year. We use borage simply to attract bees and other useful pollinating insects. We bought a single packet of seed back in 1991 and they have self-seeded ever since. We just have to take care that we do not hoe up the seedlings in the spring. Around now they are large enough to transplant. After doing this and offering some to neighbouring plot holders the remainder are hoed up.

We have lost some of our melons due to neck rot - a common problem with melons, cucumbers, courgettes and squashes - and have had to purchase some replacements from the garden centre. Celery (Golden Self-Blanching 3) was planted out on May 22nd. We grow self-blanching varieties because they are easier to grow than the normal trench varieties. The main disadvantage is that they are tender and the first autumn frost usually wipes them out.



We also planted out marigolds, close to where the runner and climbing french beans will go. It is generally accepted that they help to minimise black fly on the beans although they are not

a total solution. On the subject of flowers, we planted out sunflowers early in the month - they are reasonably hardy and survived the heavy frost ok.

Finally, our poached egg plants are in flower. They attract hover flies which in turn will help to keep the aphids in check. However, the theory sounds better than the practice - they really need to flower next month when the aphids really get going!

We, and a number of neighbouring plot holders, have been having lots of trouble growing beans this month. Directly sown beans have been pulled out or cut off at ground level. Similarly, young plants from indoor sowings have suffered the same treatment. The current conclusion is that magpies are causing the damage. Netting has been deployed, along with any necessary re-sowing, to get round the problem. We also netted our asparagus to stop the tips from being removed. This worked for a while but in recent days several spears on the edge of the bed have suffered. I can only assume that the culprit is managing to get at spears with are next to the net. We have stretched the net outwards in an attempt to ensure that no spear is close to it.

As usual the weeds really get going around the 2nd week of May and so weeding takes up increasing amounts of time. I noticed one newbie's plot the other day. She did a lot of sowing in March and April but has done no weeding whatsoever. While there are signs of some crops, most noticeably broad beans, the overall impression is of a plot that is about to become seriously overgrown very shortly unless corrective action is taken. Unfortunately, this is the point that discouragement kicks in for many newbies ... I hope that I am wrong in her case.

On the fruit front, there has been no apple blossom this year on the Tydeman's Late Orange (which cropped well last year) and little fruit set on Discovery. The other varieties seem ok. The gooseberries have been sprayed twice to prevent mildew, a problem with some varieties. We use a homemade concoction which can be found on the [garden recipes page](#).

Meanwhile, harvesting is being led by rhubarb which is in full flow now with enough going into the freezer for winter crumbles. Oregano and tarragon are both being picked along with land cress now joining lettuce and radish on the salad front, while the first spinach of the season was eaten on May 30th. The sprout plants (Brigitte) were moved from the seed bed to their final planting positions. The sprout bed is netted to keep the pigeons off - they will make mincemeat of any brassica plants if they get the chance. A neighbouring plot holder has just had his pak choi chewed by them - I did not realise that it is a member of the brassica family.

Finally, the weather has been not untypical for May - a mixture of cool conditions, occasional short warm spells with some damaging overnight frosts (actually the worst in May for about 5 years) with quite a few plot holders losing early courgettes, tomatoes and other tender plants. In addition, there has been little rainfall this month and we could really do with a good soaking at the moment.

## June 2010

Janet has told me off - this time because I have failed to mention that parsley was picked on May 8th ... I consider myself dutifully chastised. It may have something to do with the fact that I am not overly fond of parsley. While on herbs, the first picking of dill has taken place.

The first week has seen some rain (about 13mm), though not really enough. The foliage on the early potatoes has now recovered fully from the frost damage last month, although I expect the yield to be down.

The most noticeable thing on the fruit side is that our strawberries look as if they are about 3 weeks behind - we would normally expect a first picking at the beginning of June. They are probably not being helped by the presence of black fly. This is the first time that we have had them on strawberry foliage. There are, needless to say, signs of them on the runner and climbing french beans. Gooseberries and blackcurrants are showing some signs of ripening. The main job with these, and indeed any soft fruit, is to make sure that they are protected from the birds. I remember one year when a new plot holder complained that all her gooseberries ("every single one of them") had been stolen ... well yes but by our feathered "friends".



The second week sees the first picking of mangetout - they are roughly on time - and some carrots. The carrots are quite small but they are ideal for using in salads. This is a well-established way of thinning carrots, i.e. you eat the thinnings! This is about the time when the warmer conditions bring on the first noticeable growth in many vegetable crops, particularly courgettes, squashes, tomatoes, beetroot and spinach. It is as if they have at last decided to live. We have also managed to put out various bean plants from our secondary sowings.

Initial pickings of beetroot, courgette and basil occur in the 3rd week, a couple of weeks earlier than usual. We also try some of our early potatoes. While they are very tasty, the weight is disappointing due to frost damage in mid-May and the dry weather. Strawberries are now cropping well although a couple of plants do not look particularly healthy.

The final week of the month sees the start of gooseberry cropping, a satisfactory rather than a bumper yield. We also manage a modest picking of blackcurrants from a bush that we planted last year. Leek transplanting is completed at the end of the month - we do this in two halves, the first being in mid-June.

June was a dry and warm month.

## July 2010



The beginning of July sees many crops showing signs of distress through the exceptionally dry conditions: potatoes, jerusalem artichokes and basil being particularly noticeable as they are normally reasonably adept at coping. Courgettes are also struggling with some fruits failing to mature, going soft and rotting.

Garlic was harvested at the end of the first week. Our plots, along with several other plots on the site, suffer from onion white rot. This is a soil-borne fungal disease which gradually kills the roots and covers the underside of the bulb with a furry white mould. Unfortunately, the disease only shows itself when the plants start to bulb up. We lost about 60% of the crop this year. There is no cure for this disease and the

fungus can remain in the soil for 10 or more years after you have stopped growing garlic or onions.

While on the subject of problems, blackfly has been a particular problem to us this year. Apart from runner beans which they attack perennially, spinach, beetroot and strawberries (this is a first) have been affected. The tips of new growing points on gooseberries and blackcurrants have also been hit by aphids. We try to squash aphids wherever possible but resort to spraying where they are inaccessible. There have also been several other problems on the plots which I shall not bore you with.

The harvesting of gooseberries, blackcurrants, strawberries and mangetout was completed this week while a few autumn raspberries are now ready to pick, again this is a couple of weeks earlier than normal.

In the second week of the month the outdoor cucumbers were beginning to fruit. We also harvested the onions. Fortunately, losses attributable to onion white rot disease were a modest 25%, i.e. better than the garlic.

The major job in the second half of the month was to dig out the roots from our old asparagus bed. This was seriously hard work as many of the roots were a foot or more across and almost as deep, and all are simply a mass of fibrous roots which prevent a spade from being used.

Our two plots have suffered minor but persistent damage throughout this growing season. I dismissed the thought that it was simply the wild life some time ago and events over the past month, most of which are self-evidently not due to the wild life, have led me to report the problems to the Parish Council and to our Police Community Liaison Officer. My view is that we are talking about another plot holder on the site being responsible. At a rough guess, my three year stint as the site representative (which finished at the end of February) has something to do with it.

The dry weather has limited the growth of weeds, but time spent weeding has simply been replaced by time spent watering. On the harvesting front, courgettes are now rampant, the climbing french and runner beans have got going and the first sweet peppers (Gypsy) have been picked. On the soft fruit side autumn raspberries and blackberries are slowly ripening as we reach the end of the month.

The weather for the month can be summarised as warm and very dry.

## August 2010

This has probably been one of our better years for outdoor cucumbers - they have been quite productive. Another plot holder, a Japanese lady, gave us one of her cucumbers to try (a variety from her homeland). We enjoyed it; it was sweet and did not suffer from the tough skin that forms on British varieties.



Melons were harvested this month. While the number of fruits was down on the usual figure the individual fruits have been significantly larger than normal. The variety is Sweetheart which is very yummy. Melons need a good summer (June and July) and this is the best crop since the last warm summer in 2006. We also keep them under cloches / cold frames apart from a short spell when we want to encourage the insects to pollinate the female flowers.

The second half of the month brought much needed rainfall, but with it the danger of blight on tomatoes. I subscribe to the free automated email alert service that is provided by [www.blightwatch.co.uk](http://www.blightwatch.co.uk). I have received 1 partial alert and 3 full alerts that the conditions are ideal for blight in my area. So far, blight has not appeared on our site. I have attempted to minimise the likelihood of blight damage by removing all the leaves on the plants - as I am not interested in plant growth at this stage of the season.

The change in weather seems to have heralded initial signs of autumn as many plants have slowed right down, e.g. cucumbers and french beans, and by the end of the month there were early signs of mildew on courgettes, pumpkins and squashes around the site.

This is peak time for blackberry picking. We have frozen enough for the winter and several friends and other plot holders have been to pick for themselves. Our next door neighbour at the allotments has around 14 plants ... I can only assume that she likes blackberries!

We have started to harvest the celery which can at best be described as moderate this year. The plants are not particularly large - the dry conditions have not helped - and there are occasional signs of rust.

## September 2010

This is the busiest month of the year for harvesting.

We dug up all remaining early potatoes (the variety is Rocket) in the first week of the month. Purely visual evidence would indicate that the total crop is around 30% down on a typical year. This is probably attributable to the hard frost in mid-May which decimated any growth above ground, coupled with the very dry conditions in June and early July.

The dwarf borlotti bean plants started to die off in late August. The pods dried fairly quickly and the crop was harvested by the end of the first week of the month. The climbing borlotti beans were a week behind with the yin yang beans a further week back. All these beans are dried and used in soups and stews over the autumn and winter.

Our courgette plants are now getting powdery mildew, just like everybody else's. I cut out the diseased parts, and although the plants tend to look well and truly massacred, it encourages them to keep producing if the weather is not too cold. Some other plot holders look at me as if I am mad for doing this - perhaps they have had enough of courgettes by this time.

In the second week of the month we dig up the main crop potatoes, variety Romano. There are some signs of scab. Similar to the earlies, the volume appears to be around 30% down on a typical year, which again I put down to the dry weather in June and early July.



The aubergines, as they did last year, did not produce any fruits until the beginning of September. We only grow them under cloches until late June when they are bursting to get out and then they are open to the elements. As you can see from the picture, the variety, Listada de Gandia from Mr. Fothergill's and Thompson & Morgans, is quite attractive. The fruits are up to 10cm long and, despite the late fruiting, they do seem more reliable and productive than other varieties that we have tried over the years. Moussaka seems to be the order of the day at the moment to use up some of the crop.

The chilli pepper crop is harvested by mid-month. They, along with the melons, really appreciated the warm conditions in June and July, and consequently the crop is more than double what we managed to produce in the poor summers of 2007 and 2008.

The climbing french beans have virtually come to a standstill. We may just get the odd meal out of them between now and early October when they normally stop for good. They have done very well once again and I would recommend the variety - Cobra - to anyone. The runner beans (Enorma) are also just about producing. It is one of the worst harvests of runners that we have had. I put this solely down to the damage that has been caused by the person who has been targeting our plots all season. Meanwhile, other plot holders are enjoying a bumper runner bean harvest.

We have two grape vines and picked the first bunch early in the month. The variety is Phoenix, a white seeded grape. The fruit is on the small side; we would need warmer summers to produce larger grapes. Autumn raspberries are in full swing now while the blackberries still produce sufficient to fill a couple of bowls twice a week until around the 20th of the month when they slowed down markedly and the fruit started to go increasingly mouldy.

Amongst all the harvesting we find some time to carry out a few other tasks: some weeding - the rain rapidly encourages the weeds - although some plot holders choose to leave them at this stage and

bury them as part of their winter or early spring digging; thinning out the massive amount of poached egg plant seedlings and trying to stop them from spreading; tidying up the strawberry beds; and mowing the grass paths around the plot which we are responsible for.

Sweet peppers continue to be harvested; the majority are picked green but some are left to ripen on the plants. Gypsy is a reliable and quite prolific variety; it also freezes ok so long as it is only used in soups, stews and pasta sauces. All in all, it is a variety which can definitely be recommended.



Spinach tends to get ignored from mid-July to mid-September when there is so much else to harvest. If it gets out of hand we simply cut it down to ground level and it regrows and is usually ready to pick again around mid-September. We have had a couple of meals out of it recently.

In the middle of the month the site is visited by year 5 from the local primary school. It is a chance for them to see how some of the fruit and veg. that they take for granted are grown. The reactions of some of them, treating encounters with a slug or a bit of mould on some soft fruit as potentially life-threatening, are somewhat amusing. Pumpkins are, probably unsurprisingly given their visual appeal, their favourites. We have a number of plot holders who have grown excellent pumpkins this year.

The final picking of tomatoes occurs in the third week of the month. This is earlier than normal; we are frequently still picking them in early October. Surprisingly, given four or five blight warnings for this area, the site seems to have been spared the disease this year. Even stranger is the fact that a community garden which has been set up at the Parish Council only several hundred yards away has suffered from it. Our crop is about average, although roughly 20% down on last year's record harvest. This is partly attributable to damage to a number of plants by our two-legged "friend" and also to incidences of theft.

All the celery is dug up by the end of the third week. Self-blanching types are not hardy, and so the first frost will kill them off. The later plants have been more substantial than the earlier ones that we dug up a month ago.

Our apple crop has been harvested, Sunset at the beginning of the month and Fiesta in the second and third weeks.

The weather in September (up until the 24th) has been kind to growers; while there has been some welcome rain, particularly in the first half of the month, there have been many reasonably warm days in this part of the country, allowing crops to ripen. Except for butternut squashes in our case. Many of the plants have been uprooted - not totally such that it would be obvious - but enough such that the roots no longer have any purchase and the plants eventually die. As some of the plants are starting to die anyway around this time it is difficult to spot the problem quickly enough to take any remedial action. This means that we have been left with a non-trivial number of unripe fruits, and a number of people who have a liking for our squashes (roasted) will have to go without this year. Like many other plot holders we distribute a large amount of surplus crops to family, friends, neighbours and other plot holders, including courgettes, butternut squashes, aubergine, salad material, french beans, runner beans and blackberries. The unripe squashes will hopefully be OK in soups and stews.

The northerly winds and cold nights from the 24th bring most crops to a virtual halt; it is as if autumn has descended upon us overnight. By the 28th the grapes have finished and we have the final pickings of sweet peppers, aubergines, yin yang beans and blackberries, while the raspberries have slowed right down.



### October 2010

All plots on the site are looking quite sorry after the heavy rains at the beginning of the month. When the

ground dried out sufficiently the gradual clearing of summer crops from our beds began in anger.

Final pickings of beetroot, runner beans and french beans take place in the 2nd week of the month, after which the bean structures are taken down. Meanwhile, the latest evidence of the wanton damage to our crops is the poisoning of some of the Jerusalem Artichokes. Ordinarily, they are a troublefree crop.

the 3rd week of the month sees the start of the annual cleaning process, a very mundane, unromantic but essential job. The majority of canes, glass and corrugated plastic are done by the end of the week; I use a solution of water and Jeyes Fluid for cleaning purposes. The first ground frost of the autumn occurs on the 17th. Our courgettes, which have managed to keep going - enough to produce a small number of fruits, finally give up the ghost. This is the sign to pick the final two butternut squashes before a serious frost arrives ... which indeed it does on the 21st when the first air frost occurs. The contents of one of the compost heaps which have now rotted are tipped onto a couple of the beds. The first leeks and sprouts are harvested while bits of salad and parsley are still available.

The last week of the month starts with my ordering manure from the local farmer - the farm conveniently backs on to the allotment site - I get a load every other year. On the plot Janet plants the garlic while I clean the cold frames and strawberry cages with a solution of water and Jeyes Fluid. At home the same solution is used to continue the cleaning process, this week it is all the pots and seed trays. Finally, the manure arrives and the month ends with me making a start on putting some of it on several of the beds.

## **November 2010**

During the first week we start looking at the seed catalogues and thinking about what changes we may make next season.

The weather is generally very wet and windy towards the end of the first week, continuing through most of the second week. This is the time of year when maintenance jobs around the allotment site tend to be undertaken, and advantage is taken of a dry and sunny day in the middle of the second week to start pruning some of the hedges around the periphery of the site. This is the Parish Council's responsibility but I am quite happy to lend Graeme, the groundsman, a hand. There are a couple of other plot holders who help out from time to time, one majors in all things woodwork (he recently put a new door on the site notice board) while another looks after site bonfires.

Site-related jobs continue in the third week which sees several typical foggy November days. The largest plot on the site was recently surrendered and is now being split into two, and hence it is necessary to build a path between the two halves. Time is spent clearing the area where the path will go. The plot is already quite overgrown and hence progress is slow. Another job this week is to clear the channel which carries away any water run-off from the main car park - it gets clogged up quite quickly and really needs to be cleared two or three times a year but it has not been done for 12 months. Meanwhile, work on our own plots is limited to harvesting all remaining carrots.

Keeping the ditch between the allotment site and the neighbouring farm reasonably clear was the main job in the last week of the month. This includes the cutting back of any encroaching brambles, hollies and other foliage. However, the week actually started with the discovery that the garden shed of one of the adjacent properties to the allotment site had been broken into and an expensive mower stolen. The perpetrators had got into their garden from the allotments, ripping the site deer netting and cutting various ties that attach the netting to posts in the process. They subsequently went into adjacent gardens and stole items from their sheds. In addition, the tool chests that several plot holders use to store stuff were broken into. Away from this unpleasant episode, the other tasks this week were the removal of our spinach and the final session of cleaning all residual items which have recently been removed from the plots, e.g. corrugated plastic sheets, posts and canes. This coincides with the weather getting much colder with threats of snow in the offing - snow eventually reaches us on December 2nd.

## **The End**

I have now come full circle, having started this blog back in December 2009. I have tried to present a realistic view of a year on an allotment although any "newbie" should realise that we have more time

to dedicate to growing than somebody with a full-time job and possibly a family to look after. I hope that I have presented a balanced picture, highlighting the problems and failures that we have experienced, as well as the relative successes. I have also touched on the darker side of allotmenting: the recent intrusion onto the site by thieves / vandals is unfortunately not unknown in the allotment world, particularly on urban sites; and as for my own problems, I am not the first, and I am sure that I will not be the last, to suffer at the hands of somebody with a grudge.

The main objective for any grower should be to seek to improve. I have been growing for 37 years and I understand that there is always scope to learn from others. While it is usually from an experienced plot holder - Joseph is the best grower on our site by some distance - sometimes surprisingly it can be from relatively new growers who come with fresh ideas. However, it is always important to realise that there will always be some crops that one will struggle to grow, whether because of problems in the soil, the tastes of the local wild life or simply because of one's own lack of skill.

Good luck with your own growing.

**Final update on December 4th, 2010.**

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