

Moorside Allotment Association Newsletter December 2009

Welcome to the Winter edition of our newsletter. Our first article is a copy of the speech given by our Chairman to the City Council.

Address to Newcastle City Council in support of more allotment provision.

Wednesday the 4th November 2009.

"Lord Mayor and Councillors,

I am presenting this petition for more allotment provision in Fenham as Chairman of Moorside Allotments on behalf of petitioners on our Moorside waiting list. There are currently 30 persons on our waiting list, meaning that the waiting time is around five years for an allotment. This is a symptom of a citywide problem with rapidly increasing waiting lists meaning that around one thousand people are now waiting for an allotment in Newcastle.

This petition is brought under the Smallholdings and Allotments Act of 1908. The act states that Councils or parishes firstly have a legal obligation to provide a sufficient number of allotments and secondly have an obligation to consider a petition by six electors upon this matter. I would like to speak briefly about the benefits of allotments under four headings.

First good health. Allotment gardening is hard but rewarding physical work and about a quarter of our gardeners at Moorside are retired and a number are disabled and for many this is their only exercise. Allotments are spaces of tranquillity, allowing gardeners to unwind, forget the stresses of modern life and reconnect with the natural world. Our gardeners have a lively interest not just in plants but in the soil, the weather, the seasons, and wildlife.

Second sustainability. Our gardeners increasingly want to grow and eat their own fresh and organic fruit and vegetables at low cost. The last four half plots let at Moorside have been to young local families living in houses without gardens who want to move towards food self-sufficiency. Our gardeners are very aware, as they sow and plant, of the effects of climate change; already our growing season begins two weeks earlier than it used to, and many are concerned this will cause global food shortages in the not too distant future with a pressing need for local food self-sufficiency.

Third a sense of shared community.

Allotments are socially inclusive allowing a broad social and ethnic mix. At Moorside we have a primary school plot, plots for the Comfrey Project, which is a gardening project for refugees and asylum seekers, a scout plot and a plot for a carers association. We have an annual show to which the public is invited, open days involving seed and seedling swap days, and a gardening club where our experienced gardeners can hand down gardening knowledge and techniques learned often from their own parents. You would have to say this is civil society at its best.

Fourth allotments contribute to Newcastle's green space policy, its biodiversity policy and its tree strategy.

Allotments are havens for wildlife and provide wildlife corridors allowing movement of insects and mammals. They are particularly important in our conservation of endangered species such as song-birds and bees.

Overall allotments contribute enormously to the quality of life for its allotment holders and their families. The council could help sustain this quality by finalising, approving and executing its allotment strategy, which has spent the past five years in draft form. It could help by identifying land that could be used as allotments and community gardens, and it could help by investigating how funding can be raised for more allotment provision.

A review of three books on the history of allotments.

1. "Allotments" by Twigs Way: a Shires Library publication 2009

Available on Amazon for £3.99

This is only a short book of 57 pages but is packed full of good quality photographs and is a sort of mini coffee table book on the history of allotments. It gives a good overview of allotment history and is right up to date with a penultimate chapter on "A future for allotments?" At this price a steal and a good stocking filler for Xmas

2. "The allotment, its landscape and culture", by David Crouch and Colin Ward 2nd Edition 1997: a Five Leaves publication

Available on Amazon for £9.99

This is a classic, the thinking gardener's allotment history book. This is the fifth reprint of the second edition, the first edition coming out in 1988 which attests to its popularity and durability. David Crouch is Professor of Cultural Geography at Derby University and is perhaps the leading current allotment academic. The book is over 300 pages long and gives lots of detail. For instance the allotment rules of Rothamstead Allotment club in 1877 included the following two rules:

"Any member getting vegetables in the garden-fields after nine o'clock on a Sunday morning will be fined sixpence."

And:-

"Any member taking tools from another man's garden without leave and not returning them the same day will be fined one shilling."

Later the book has a fascinating chapter on "the allotment aesthetic". He describes allotments as "this organic and loose landscape representing organised chaos" and refers to "the aesthetic and sensual pleasures of being close to the earth". Overall the aesthetic of allotments is one of "violent individualism".

Further on the book has a sizable section describing allotment culture in the North-east and Newcastle, though you will

be sorry to hear that Moorside does not get a mention.

The main drawback of the book is that there are no pictures and very few drawings, but then with the scenes conjured up by the author's crafted words, who needs picture?

3. "The allotment Chronicles: A Social history of Allotment Gardening", by Steve Poole: a Silver Link Book publication 2006

Available on Amazon for £6.99

This book is somewhere between the two books already reviewed both in price and content. It is 200 pages long and is illustrated by the author's excellent drawings. Despite being published in 2006 it ends its history in the 1970's so it is not fully up to date. However the early history of allotments in the nineteenth century and into the golden period of one and half million just after the first world war is very well covered and very readable. A Ministry of Agriculture report of 1922 is reported as saying:

"There is no more deeply seated desire or delight than that which men associate with growing things and this with the quickened interest of competition with their fellow cultivators, makes life very real and vivid and lends a glimpse of poetry and nature worship to men whose lot is otherwise cast in grey and even sordid surroundings."

From a northerners point of view it is a bit disappointing that most of the examples come from the author's stamping ground in the South-east, but that's only a small point given the overall picture the author paints of our allotment heritage.

PW

Plants and artificial lighting.

One of the problems we face at this time of year is a lack of light for our plants. Without adequate levels of light plants will stop growing. Is it possible to supplement the daylight with artificial light so that you can start your seedlings much earlier in the year?

It is possible for gardeners to do so but you will need an electricity supply so you can only try this at home! Commercial growers use expensive artificial lighting systems to force the growth of their plants. Simplified versions of these special lights are available to home gardeners but the high price makes them uneconomical to use.

You can use ordinary fluorescent strip lighting to raise your seedlings but it is important to use the correct lighting tube.

The human eye responds well to the yellow and green part of the spectrum so most standard artificial lights for human use concentrate on this area. But it is of little value to plants which respond to the blue and red parts of the spectrum. A "soft" or "warm" white tube is suitable for plants so you will need to replace the basic white tube that the holder usually comes with, with one of these. Even better is a "natural daylight" tube. These are commonly available in DIY stores like B and Q.

Fluorescent lighting is suitable for gardeners because it is easily available, cheap to run, and does not give out large amounts of heat when operating.

If you have a standard double 4 ft fluorescent light holder you could place three seed trays directly beneath the two strip lights. They need to be 4 or 5 inches maximum from the lights. Seedlings need 3000 – 4000 lux to grow and the light levels diminish rapidly the further you move away from the light source. To cut out any extraneous light I took readings at night from my double 4 ft system as follows: 4 inches from the lights in the centre = 5000 lux , 8 inches from the lights

in the centre = 2000 lux. Leave the lights on for between 12 and 14 hours a day. Connecting the lights to a timer makes this easy to organise.

You will need to construct a suitable wooden frame to safely fix your light holder onto so that you can slide your seed trays underneath the strip lights. Please ensure that you get a qualified electrician to wire the lights up safely. Then all you need to do is plug them in and start raising your seedlings a month or more ahead of everyone else!

Date for your diary:

Our association's Annual general Meeting will take place on Wednesday 27th January. Please look out on the notice boards for further details.

Using Seaweed in the garden.

We are lucky on Tyneside to live close to the sea so it is not difficult to collect Seaweed to use on our gardens. Only freshly washed-up seaweed should be used. Any old material that has been lying around on the beach for a while will be too salty to be of any use. For conservation reasons, living seaweed should not be harvested from rocks etc.

Seaweed is an excellent soil conditioner as it is rich in nutrients and trace elements in a form which is readily available to plants. It improves soil structure and encourages the growth of beneficial soil bacteria. There are also suggestions that it helps to improve plant resistance to pests and diseases.

You can dig it directly into your soil at this time of year. The worms will slowly break it down in time to be of use as a general fertilizer for your plants in the spring.

Alternatively, you can chop it up and add it to your compost heap where it will function as a compost activator.

Seaweed, along with Autumn leaves, is a free harvest from nature that canny gardeners can use to improve their soil at no financial cost to themselves.

Bob Black

We regret to announce the death of a former member of our association. Bob Black died on the 4th December aged 81 years. Bob was of the "old school": he always managed his allotment to the highest standards of cultivation and maintenance. He took great pride in it and it was an inspiration to see. When he was forced to let it go due to ill health it was taken over by George Taylor who has maintained Bob's approach going on to win the City Competition this year for the "best plot with glass". Just prior to his death Bob was able to see photographs of his old allotment as it now stands and it gave him great pleasure to see and hear of its continued excellence.

He would like to pass on our deepest sympathy to his family.



The Garden Club.

The Garden Club met twice this Autumn. The first meeting discussed the problem of "weeds". The point was made that we often miss the real problem here. Our problem is a lack of time and not weeds. The Victorians rightly knew that **"the daily diligent use of the Hoe cures all known weeds"**. Regularly and consistently chopping off the top of any weed will stop it growing and eventually kill it! But this practise is labour intensive and few of us have the time to be so thorough thesedays. The meeting then discussed time saving ways of weed control: for

example, cropping densities, "stale seedbeds", and growing through weed suppressing membranes.

The second meeting discussed the important topic of "soil". Every gardener needs to understand their soil because the better the condition of the soil, the more successful you are likely to be in raising good healthy plants. The meeting learned how to create that wonderful medium of **"moisture retentive but free draining soil"**, which is essential for good plant growth.

Watch out for future Garden Club dates.

Garden tips: did you know?

1. Stick Holly branches besides Peas etc as they deter Mice.
2. Pea seeds: store in small plastic bottles and sow all varieties very closely. Close planting requires no thinning. Enclose within 1 ½ ft high board and plants will hold themselves up.
3. Tomatoes: grow *Tagetes* beside them as a companion plant. Allow some of the fruit to rot as this encourages the others to ripen.
4. Plant Chives between Roses to deter Black spot. Plant Mint between rows of Roses to repel Aphids.
5. Before planting any crop give a small dusting of Blood, Fish and Bone.
6. Take cuttings from Rosemary and plant around your Vegetable garden to deter bugs.
7. Nasturtiums: Plant early and then remove them mid season when they have attracted the Aphids. Plant a second crop to attract further Aphids from your plants.
8. Aphids: fill yellow containers with water. This attracts and drowns Aphids. Coat yellow plastic with "Vaseline" and hang in the greenhouse to catch more insect pests.
9. Comfrey: place leaves in a barrel and leave to ferment for two weeks. Strain the mixture and dilute the liquid 20/1 with water to use as a liquid plant feed. The remains can be placed on the compost heap. N.S.