

DIGGER'S DIGEST

WAHGA 2017 SUMMER NEWSLETTER



Editorial Comment

Welcome to the Summer issue of *Digger's Digest*. Let it rain, **PLEASE!** With rainfall totals being below normal over the past few months, we offer some practical advice from the RHS to overcome the problems of lack of rain.

The Editorial Team

Watering Wisely

At the time of writing there has been a prolonged dry period and if the lack of rain continues it will be worth thinking about how and when vegetables should be watered. Watering too frequently can encourage shallow roots and leafy growth, but some vegetables need a lot of water, so here are a few tips to help.

When sowing seeds, water the seed drill well, allow the water to drain away, then sow the seeds and cover them. After this, leave them to germinate. Once seedlings appear, they need quite a lot of watering until their roots have developed. When planting out young plants, fill the planting hole with water, place the plant in the hole and then water again to settle the soil around the roots. Then water regularly in dry spells until the plants are well established.

Once a plant is growing well it should only need watering once the edible part is developing. The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) suggests that, as a general rule, watering for two weeks before harvesting should be enough but this does vary according to the type of vegetable. It is best to water thoroughly every 10-14 days rather than lightly every few days. Water close to the base of the plant and keep the area free of weeds. Mulching the soil with organic matter will keep the weeds down, stop water evaporating from the surface and, over time, produce a soil that holds more moisture. Leafy crops need water at every stage, as do crops like celery, celeriac and courgettes. Broad beans and peas should be watered as the flowers appear, to allow the pods to set, and again two weeks after flowering begins. Runner beans need constant moisture for the pods to set, but French beans will not mind some dry periods. Tomatoes, sweetcorn and aubergines need watering throughout the flowering and fruiting period. Root crops should be watered every 10-14 days, apart from radishes, which need watering every day. Once established, onions, shallots and leeks only need watering when it is very dry.

For more details, visit the RHS at www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profile?PID=706. If you have any tips about watering or any other topic you think will interest readers, email us at newsletter@wahga.org.uk.

No-Dig Method

Continuing with the lack of water theme, Hilary Hopper, who has an allotment on Maidenhead Road, tells us about advice farmers in Zambia and Zimbabwe have offered to African farmers with no irrigation systems on their plots. 'Farmers are encouraged to resist digging,' says Hilary. 'Their main crop is maize, which is similar to what we call sweetcorn. They are told to start by clearing the plot of weeds. This means digging if necessary, but after that using only a draw hoe to keep weeds down. Seeds are planted in a hole with some fertilizer or compost, then water is added. After that, once the plants emerge, they mulch the ground with any plant material they can get hold of, such as weeds or grass, or compost. All the dead maize stalks are allowed to rot in the ground so the plot can be planted with maize again. They dig a hole for the new seed in between the old stumps. All year they try to keep the soil covered to protect it from rain run-off or wind erosion.'

My Plot



In this issue we talk to Chris Barber, who has had an allotment on Maidenhead Road for 12 years.

Q Do you tend your allotment on your own?

A Yes mostly, although I get occasional help from my wife and daughter. They normally look after the watering in the polytunnel when the weather is warm.

Q How much time do you spend at your allotment each week?

A Around four or five hours.

Q Why did you decide to take an allotment?

A I didn't have enough room at home to grow everything.

Q What's the best bit of horticultural advice you've been given?

A Don't be in a rush to plant or sow – wait until you see the weeds starting to grow. And always double space your rows. This makes it easier to get in between the rows with the hoe.

Q What were your best crops last year, and what is difficult to grow?

A I normally get a good crop of sweetcorn, which I blanch and freeze. I have never been able to grow swedes or asparagus well.

Q What advice would you give to someone new to allotments?

A Don't be afraid to ask other allotment holders for advice and don't try to do too much in the first year. It's better to grow a few veggies well than get overwhelmed by a large plot. I have seen many new allotments taken on and within days the holder has gone to the garden centre and spent vast amount of money on seeds and plants, only to have the plants destroyed by frost or eaten by pests. Within weeks the plot is a jungle of weeds and the allotment holder is never seen again!

Q Do you think that WAHGA could help new allotment holders more? If so, how?

A The association should offer a mentoring process for people who are new to the allotment life from experience holders.

Q What do you find most difficult about your allotment?

A My biggest problem at the moment is an invasion of horsetail weed, which has just about taken over the entire plot. I have tried many methods of control, from digging deep into the subsoil and trying to remove every trace of the root to covering with black plastic, but nothing seems to work. My weeding now mainly involves pulling armfuls of horsetail only to find it to regrow stronger than before. As a last resort I'm trying a specialist weedkiller Neudorff with active ingredients of pelargonic acid and maleic hydrazide. Initial results show that it has knocked back the weed, but it is too early to say if it has any lasting effect.

Q Do you use pesticides or do you take an organic approach?

A I try as much as I can to grow organically. I have six compost bins and you will see me early in the mornings picking off the slugs and caterpillars one by one.

Q What plans do you have for your allotment this year?

A I'm only using half the plot to grow crops and the other half I'll be treating with the Neudorff weedkiller.

Q Do you do anything to attract bees and other insects to your plot, such as planting flowers or putting up bug boxes?

A I haven't needed to do anything special as I grow a wide range of fruit and vegetables so normally there is something in flower from spring until autumn for the bees.

Q Any other comments about your allotment or the association?



A My best investment has been my polytunnel (above), that enables me to have new potatoes and fresh carrots in May and other crops that won't grow outside. I'm able to garden at any time of the year even when the weather is bad outside.

Bonfires

Just a reminder that no bonfires are permitted on allotments in the months of June, July and August. Even outside these times please try to avoid creating too much smoke when having a bonfire and always make sure you put it out before leaving the site.

Tetanus and Working with Soil

Although rare these days, tetanus is a serious condition that can be fatal. The bacteria that cause tetanus are often found in soil and manure, and can get into the body through a cut in the skin. We gardeners are therefore particularly at risk – even more so if we cut ourselves while working with soil. Nowadays, children are vaccinated against tetanus, but some adults have not received the full course of five doses of the vaccine. Just to be sure, why not check with your GP if your tetanus jabs are up to

date? Then, if not, you can arrange to be vaccinated.

RHS Cards

Do remember that there are two Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) Associate Membership cards available for members to use. Each card allows up to two people a reduction of 30% on the standard entry fee to any of the four RHS gardens. Contact the Association Secretary, Fran Hartridge, at secretary@wahga.org.uk if you would like to use them.

Trading Shed News

The new shop area has opened at the Fairground trading shed. Small items such as seeds and packaged fertilizers are shelved in the new shop on open access, while larger items such as bags of compost can be found by walking through to the original shed. We now have more storage room and are intending to expand our range. Do let us know about items you would like to see stocked. We have stocks of composts and farmyard manure. The bagged farmyard manure is sterile and is useful when planting out to provide a locally fertile environment. The manure is now stocked in the Maidenhead Road shed as well.

Sales of seed potatoes have been dropping over the past few years and have been disappointing this year. They are priced very cheaply on the assumption of a high percentage of sales, and if this is not the case we will have to reconsider our options. Bird food continues to be a popular item. We have been able to obtain sunflower kernels, which are proving very

popular with goldfinches, although we still have niger seed, which they also like.

As people retire from gardening, they often bring in redundant tools and books, which we are happy to sell to benefit the Thames Hospice. Over the last year the trading sheds have donated nearly £500 to the Hospice.

Finally, we have unearthed a few items of old stock which we will be offering cheaply in the Fairground shed, so keep an eye open for those.

Dog Owners with Allotments

Please remember that the Association rules state that dogs are allowed on allotment sites only if they are on a lead and are kept under control at all times.

Quiz Night

The WAHGA quiz night, hosted by Dave Morris, will take place at 7:30pm on Friday 20 October in Gardener's Hall. There is a maximum of six people per team and the entry fee per person is £2. We ask everyone to bring along a plate of finger food to share and the bar will be open.

WAHGA is the Windsor Allotments and Home Gardens Association Ltd.
Visit the website for details: www.wahga.org.uk. Summer 2017.
This newsletter is written, compiled and designed by Caroline Jones, Lesley Upton and Philip Upton.