

THE ALLOTMENT

HAMPTON COURT WAY ALLOTMENT ASSOCIATION

WELCOME TO THE NEW YEAR!

Here's hoping for successful sowing and planting followed by abundant and tasty crops!

With the beginning of January comes the planning and preparation for the months ahead. If you want to be ready for planting out in Spring now is the time to be clearing, repairing, digging and pruning.

Some would say a tidy plot is a healthy plot and perhaps the following will help to explain why. It is also an opportunity for a reminder on why crop rotation is important. Some pests will be killed off during the frosts and cold weather but watch out for those that survive. There are many critters, eggs and spores which are capable of staying dormant until conditions are favourable. Do not compost infected vegetation or leave it lying around to rot; it will harbour all sorts of pests and



fungal or bacterial diseases lying in wait to feed on your crops.

A recent problem has been the allium leaf miner, this attacks all members of the onion family; leeks, garlic, onions, chives, shallots and ornamental alliums. Early indications are distinctive lines of white spots on foliage, if you see this it is quite likely that white headless maggots and brown pupae are in the stems and bulbs of your plants. The flies appear in March and April having overwintered in the soil

or on plant debris. The females lay eggs near the base of young plants. The eggs hatch and the larvae begin their feeding journey. After about a month the larvae pupate and in late September to mid October new flies emerge which again lay eggs near the base of the now mature plants. The larvae feed on the bulbs then hibernate during the winter ready to emerge as flies in spring.

Once the crop has been infested there is no curative treatment, chemical or otherwise. All parts of the infected crop must be removed and incinerated or disposed of off site. Alliums should not be planted in the affected area for at least a year although some would recommend waiting longer.

Plants can be protected by covering them with insect proof mesh or protective fleece during the two risk periods (March to May and September to November).

JILL, Site Manager

On a rather more serious note I have also been asked to warn members about the potential hazards posed by fungus spores, in particular *Aspergillus Fumigatus*, which is commonly found growing on dead leaves, compost piles, decaying vegetation and woodchip. Inhalation of the spores can cause allergic reactions, asthma attacks, hayfever type symptoms and, in rare cases, a more serious condition called aspergillosis; symptoms include difficulty breathing, chest pain, muscle pains, fever.

It can also lead to a life-threatening condition known as sepsis. People with weakened immune systems or lung diseases are particularly vulnerable. I would not wish to panic anyone but please take extra care and perhaps wear a face mask if you are moving substantial quantities of these substances. Should you become ill within 24 hours of any such activity please see a doctor and mention the possibility of aspergillosis – I am no expert or authority on this but better to be safe than sorry!

Finally, on a much lighter note, our annual general meeting will be held on Monday 15th January at 7.30pm Thames Ditton Lawn Tennis Club. This year we have a guest speaker, Jean Griffin, who will be giving a talk entitled Tales from the Potting Shed. Do come along, show your support and enjoy a bit of a social with your fellow plot holders. If you need an extra incentive there is a licensed bar and buffet food is provided.

**AGM - Monday 15th January, 7.30 pm at Thames Ditton Lawn Tennis Club.
Guest speaker: Jean Griffin. Licensed bar. Buffet food provided. Hope to see you there!**

STRAW BALE GARDENING

Crop rotation, as Jill mentions overleaf, is important to deter soil borne diseases and pests. However if your plot is quite small or seems prone, year after year, to certain problems maybe you would like to try another method of growing crops - straw bale gardening.

This method of gardening is not new and is said to have been practiced by the ancient Egyptians and Aztecs. It seems popular in other parts of the world, but not in the UK. You may know about straw bale gardening but never thought much about it.

In the 1960's, Joel Karsten (American horticulturist) became interested in this method and has become quite an expert on the subject. He has written books and in America, runs a business around straw bale gardening. Bunny Guinness even wrote about it for the Telegraph in January 2015.



For those of us who don't know, the straw bale is both the container and the growing medium.

For two weeks prior to planting, the bales they need "conditioning". This is a process where nitrogen (in the form of fertiliser) and water are applied to the bales. Once saturated with water the straw starts to decompose and heat up in the centre. This in turn feeds the natural bacteria in the straw. The bacteria will colonize the bales. 10 to 14 days later, the bales are ready for planting.

Conditioning a bale

Day 1: Spread 4oz of a nitrogen-rich lawn fertiliser evenly over the top before gently watering it in with 1-2 gallons of water. When water runs out of the bottom, stop.

Day 2 - 9: Continue watering. Some days add fertiliser, some days not.

If you go organic, add organic fertiliser instead but increase the quantity six fold and use organic straw.

Day 10: Use warmer water from a water butt or water that has been in a bucket overnight.

Days 11 - 14: The conditioned bale(s) should be ready for planting

Before sowing seeds: Spread a 1-2" layer of multi-purpose compost along the entire top of the bale.

To plant seedlings: Make a hole in the straw with a trowel and make it wide enough to take the plug/pot and push the plant in. Remove straw if necessary.

Certain rules should be followed:

1. Check the straw is untreated.
2. Condition the bales correctly.
3. Do not introduce soil from the ground of your plot/garden
4. Use any straw but do not use Hay.
5. Choose crops carefully. Sweetcorn is not good for this method.

The negative press

There is controversy centred around allegations that some straw may be treated with pesticides and therefore harmful. So if you do decide to try this method check with the supplier to see if your bales are treated!

The positives are many.

1. Free of soil borne diseases & weeds.
2. Plenty of nutrients available for healthy growth and a good crop.
3. Good to use in heavy clay soil areas as the drainage is good.
4. If an early crop is desirable, growing can be advanced by up to 4 weeks.
5. Great results for root vegetables and potatoes.
6. No digging required so may suit less physically able people.

The bales can last for up to 2 years but eventually break up. All the decomposing straw can then be dug into the soil. How simple?

Literary Compost

*A slug is always on its own.
It's a lonely insect.*

Karl Pilkington

What would be left of our tragedies if an insect were to present us his?

Emile M. Cioran

SITE REMINDERS:

5mph site speed limit
This applies to everyone!
Please respect the limit.



Bonfires - permitted until 30th April.

Please don't wash your veg or tools in the water tanks.

Please make sure
your plot number
can be clearly seen



DIARY REMINDERS

AGM - 15th January 2018, 7.30pm
Thames Ditton Lawn Tennis Club

Who's Who

CHAIR - Julie Smith
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Marie Mullard & Tom Appleton

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DO YOU HAVE ANY NEWS, VIEWS, CARTOONS, STORIES, PHOTOGRAPHS or POEMS you would like to share?
If so we would love to publish it. Please forward to either sheenaclarke0@gmail.com or macanjill@ntlworld.com