

# The Grapevine

*Newsletter of the Finchley Horticultural Society*

Summer 2023

## Thistles by Ted Hughes

*Against the rubber tongues of cows and the hoeing hands of men  
Thistles spike the summer air  
And crackle open under a blue-black pressure.*

*Every one a revengeful burst  
Of resurrection, a grasped fistful  
Of splintered weapons and Icelandic frost thrust up*

*From the underground stain of a decayed Viking.  
They are like pale hair and the gutturals of dialects.  
Every one manages a plume of blood.*

*Then they grow grey like men.  
Mown down, it is a feud. Their sons appear  
Stiff with weapons, fighting back over the same ground.*



Our summer is in full swing. There was a long rainless spell after the end of April which was both good and bad. Good because everything was ripening fast and some plot holders were already harvesting courgettes, cucumbers, carrots and beetroot; bad because there was a lot of watering involved, the weeds were growing at Jack-and-the-Beanstalk rate and there was the spectre of a hosepipe ban hanging over us. Luckily, our prayers have been heeded and we have now had some much needed rain, with cooler conditions.

It has been a successful few months: the Piggery canopy is finally done and looking splendid; the Plant Sale exceeded all expectations and yielded a whopping £3,300; the shop is running smoothly, and many plot holders have again embraced the Veg Box Scheme, growing extra to donate to charity.

In this issue of the Grapevine we review our recent activities, provide advice on how to look after your veg in hot and dry weather, and suggest how to make your own liquid plant food.

Good reading!



## Another Successful Plant Sale

*By Jo Cuttell*



*This picture says it all!*

Our plant sale on 14 May was a great success. We sold out of almost all our flower and vegetable plants, and we are still selling the leftover plants on Sunday mornings. We have made about £3,300 but money is still coming in and the costs for compost, seeds etc. are still being calculated.

Christine Williams was the driving force behind this event and none of it would have happened without her. Catherine Schmitt, our President, was also instrumental in making the Plant Sale a huge success, taking charge of perennials and house plants that always attract a lot of interest.





A positive innovation was the setting up of the Plant Sale WhatsApp Group. Many people agreed to help with the Plant Sale at a meeting in January and the WhatsApp group enabled Christine to ask for help whenever it was needed. The response was always positive and generous. Many of us have learnt new horticultural skills and hopefully, next year shall be able to build on this expertise.

We have made some changes to the event, and it is no longer the enormous show that it used to be. We grow fewer plants overall and less variety, too; this is where Claudine is sorely missed as she was a huge inspiration behind the plant sale and a dedicated, green-fingered grower of produce. Next year we would like someone else to take on the running of either the flowers' or vegetables' schedule so that it does not all fall on Christine's shoulders. Holding the event on a Sunday afternoon seems to work well as the sale can be set up and run on the same day.



We had plenty of people queuing to come in and our thanks go to Winkworth for their help with advertising, as well as to those of you who posted the sale on social media and/or distributed leaflets.



Happily, the Piggery Tea Hut shelter was finished just in time for Elaine and her many helpers to provide as much tea and cake as was demanded, despite the broken kitchen tap and water heater. They were run off their feet for the three hours of the Sale. The light and airy shelter provided much needed shade and it was generally agreed that the paving slabs underneath were a great improvement on the uneven wood chip. Many thanks to everyone who had baked delicious cakes and to all of you who helped make the day such a success! See you at the next year's Plant Sale!



# How to make your own liquid plant food (inspired by the RHS Garden magazine)

As we are moving towards a total ban on bonfires at our sites), we might wonder what to do with all the weeds that pile up on our allotments. (The vast majority of our plot holders have already stopped burning their plant debris, appreciating the urgency to cut greenhouse gas emissions because of the climate change crisis). One of the best and most eco-friendly ways to get rid of the even most pernicious offenders is to use them to feed your plants. By doing this, you are winning on three fronts: destroy the weeds, stop relying on commercial products with their associated carbon footprint and save money that you would otherwise spend on fertiliser.



Any plant material when left to decay, will release its stored nutrients. If you steep that material in water the nutrients are leached into the liquid, making a solution which is easy to apply to your plants.

All you need is a bucket or a bin with a lid and a watering can for application. Comfrey and nettles are two of the best plants to use, because of their higher nutrient content, but the rest (dandelions, bindweed, purslane, chickweed, etc.) will do just as well. Fill the bucket with green material, cover with water and leave to steep for 6 weeks. Use the resulting liquid by diluting it 1 part liquid fertiliser to 10 parts clean water. The liquid can be quite stinky, so keep a lid on the bucket and wear gloves when handling.





# Vegetables: Care During Droughts

*(inspired by the FHS Garden magazine)*

Despite the fact that vegetables are mostly made of water, and therefore suffer a lot from lack of water, there are ways of making the best use of the scarce water resources.

## **Soil preparation**

Digging in plenty of organic matter such as well-rotted manure per square metre will add to the water-retaining capacity of the soil. As much as two weeks moisture for subsequent crops can be retained, as well as adding sufficient nutrients for good growth.

Any soil disturbance after the beginning of April leads to severe moisture loss. We have already written in the Grapevine about the No Dig Method of growing veg. It is particularly relevant to dry spells. It is much better to loosen any soil compaction by wiggling a fork and scratching a seedbed with a light hoe.

Fertilisers are also helpful in droughts. Adequate nutrient supply allows plants to make the most efficient use of available water. However, adding excessive quantities brings no extra benefits and may damage crops and the environment. Best to use your own liquid fertiliser (see the article in this issue of the Grapevine on how to make one from you own weeds!).





## Sowing

Sowing early, before May where possible, will allow crops to root out into moist soil before severe drought arrives. Drought stress becomes severe from June onwards. This is especially applicable to crops such as carrots that will stand in the ground until ready to use, but less useful where you make successional sowings of spinach or salads for continuity of supply.

Later sowings, typically after May, might have to be made into dry soil. Where this is the case applying water down the drill (groove cut in soil) before sowing is a water efficient way of ensuring good germination.

Successional sowings might be problematic if the soil is dry in mid-summer.

## Spacing

Do not crowd your plants. Spacing plants more widely, usually by about 50%, allows each plant a greater volume of soil to explore for water and therefore more drought resistant, even if this will reduce the overall yield.

## Choosing crops

Vegetables vary in their ability to cope during a drought.

- Carrots, beetroot, parsnips and other root crops are relatively drought tolerant
- Salads and other leafy vegetables are particularly vulnerable
- Plants that set fruit or pods are most vulnerable at flowering time. Examples include peas, runner beans and sweetcorn
- Peas and onions have notably poor roots and low yields must be accepted where drought occurs unless watered
- Amongst brassicas **cabbage and calabrese are less vulnerable than Brussels sprouts and cauliflowers**, while turnips are notably deeper rooting and more drought resistant than swedes
- **Chicories, endives and chards are likely to require less water than lettuces or spinach**
- There is usually not much information on differences in drought tolerance between cultivars. An exception is potatoes where some cultivars are notably better at using water; 'Desiree', 'Marfona' and 'Robinta' for example

Growing baby leaf crops of salads such as lettuce, chicories, endive and oriental greens in a small area is a more efficient use of water and space than growing more widely spaced heading crops on a larger area.



## Weed control

Weeds consume large quantities of water and a high level of weed control is especially valuable in periods of dry soil.

**Areas of bare soil awaiting planting can be kept covered in black plastic until needed.** Carpets are no longer recommended for use in vegetable gardens as it is unclear if the glues used in their manufacture are environmentally benign.

Often there is the opportunity to mulch soils around widely spaced crops such as tomatoes or courgettes either using organic materials such as mushroom compost or black plastic sheets. This will control weeds and prevent loss of moisture from the soil surface.

Any soil disturbance will lead to moisture loss, but weed control by very shallow hoeing is usually acceptable.

## Shelter

Water loss is especially severe in windy weather and shelter from winds will help slow loss of moisture from crops. *The use of insect proof mesh to cover carrots and parsnips to exclude carrot fly and brassicas to keep off cabbage root fly and caterpillars will reduce airflow over plants and thus conserve moisture.*

## Long term planning

*Established permanent crops are less susceptible to drought and devoting a larger proportion to soft fruit, rhubarb, globe artichokes and asparagus is worth considering.*





## Visit to Sissinghurst *by Judy Woollett*

On 23<sup>rd</sup> June this year 27 FHS members, friends and other garden enthusiasts gathered for a coach trip to Kent to visit Sissinghurst Castle Gardens and Hole Park Garden.

We have been so lucky with the weather for our garden visits on previous visits and this year didn't disappoint; we had clear blue sky and sunshine all day.

Sissinghurst was the home of Vita Sackville-West and her husband Harold Nicolson who bought it in 1930. Although its history goes back to Saxon times when it was a pig farm. Vita and Harold created the garden which consists of a series of small garden rooms all uniquely different.

Despite several weeks of very little rain the gardens were splendid. The white garden was almost luminescent, (although we couldn't help giggling at the rogue purple poppy which had seeded itself in the middle) "....



The rose garden was probably at its best and we spent hours admiring all the interesting plants in the cottage garden. Truly wonderful gardens.

Some of us climbed the 78 steps to the top of The Tower where we were able to admire the view and, on the way, up, we were able to glimpse into Vita's writing room where she created her novels, poetry and gardening articles.

After lunch in the café our coach driver took us to Hole Park Gardens.





On arrival we were welcomed by two lovely black Labradors who scuttled into the coach to say hello to everyone. We were then given a brief history of the house and gardens which were designed and created by Col. Arthur Barham, the current owner's great grandfather, in the early 1920's  
Different to Sissinghurst, these consist of 16 acres of formal gardens with extensive yew hedges, broad lawns, old walls and woodland walks.



A wonderful escape into a tranquil and beautiful world far removed from today's hustle and bustle. And of course no garden visit would be complete without a cup of tea and a slice of beautiful home-made cake.  
A really lovely day.



# *Work party to get ready for the BAF competition*

A bunch of volunteers answered the clarion call to help get our site ready for the BAF competition inspection on 15 July and Summer BBQ on 16 July. They tidied up communal areas around the toilet, raised beds, mowed the paths and weeded the Piggery garden.



Their work was generously rewarded by Rowena's fabulous sesame doughnuts.





## NEW PIGGERY AND OUR SUMMER BBQ

by Jo Cuttell

Philip, Alina, and Felicity worked hard to soften the look of the new Piggery shelter and to make the path safer by planting a new beech hedge in June. This will match the beautiful beech hedge that borders the Piggery Garden. Thanks, too, to Natalia for watering the hedge and keeping the Piggery kitchen so clean.

Our President, Catherine Schmitt, has planted dahlias and cosmos in the beds by the patio. We're hoping that others might find a bit of time to pull up some weeds and make the beds look like we, allotmenters, know what we're doing!



We hope you welcome and admire it at the Summer BBQ at 1pm on Sunday, 16th July. Look out for more information coming soon.



# Plant Diseases Explained: Gummosis

By Felicity Nock

This is quite a descriptive name for the jelly-like resin globules that glisten as they ooze from lesions in the branches and trunks of stone fruit trees. If you touch them, they feel soft and yet resilient. These are the evidence of bacterial canker infection caused by pathovars of *Pseudomonas syringae*. Further details can be found here:

[https://www.niab.com/sites/default/files/imce\\_uploads/PressOffice/plum-best-practice-guide-bacterial-canker.pdf](https://www.niab.com/sites/default/files/imce_uploads/PressOffice/plum-best-practice-guide-bacterial-canker.pdf)

## **Trees affected**

Stone fruit trees, especially plums and apricots.

## **When**

The globules tend to appear at the start of the growing season, but we first noticed them on a new young apricot supplied in October by an on-line nursery.

## **Why it happens**

Generally speaking, bacteria tend to infect the trees when they are stressed. Water-logging, frost damage, drought and general damage and pruning wounds can all cause lesions or breakages where the pathogen can enter.

## **How to deal with it**

The best advice seems to be to plant in a free-draining soil, giving the trees adequate space. The nursery specification is to plant 20m apart, which is a bit impractical on an allotment. On mature trees damaged limbs can be pruned out to a point 15cm below the visible lesion. Unfortunately, young trees must be discarded as they are unlikely to recover. The removed branches should be destroyed by burning or, if impossible, by putting them in a green bin destined for high temperature recycling.





# The Wider Picture

by Felicity Nock

It is a two-step thing. You unlock the gates and step into a green bowl, your heart slows; you walk to your plot and there is your world. Quiet peace. The things that bug you in the outside world are banished - for a short time you can focus on an exchange of care and produce with the plant world.



## *Time*

Yet, we leave and the land remains; that much became apparent as Neville, Sylvia, Jim, June and many others left the stage over the years we've cultivated our plot. On Andrew Brown's plot I began to appreciate the quantities of brown Council dirt he had shovelled that was now nourishing and mulching my beans several years on. Equally, the bindweed that had escaped from his fork was the same white spaghetti jumbles that I dig each winter.

For each of us on the allotment this private rented heaven that gives us an outlet for our creativity is really a caretaker role. Good or bad husbandry, it's up to us, and the people who come after will grin or bear it.

And this, strangely, is how I got into judging the BAF allotments competition.

## *Place*

June Brookes edged me into the judging. At first she wanted a lift to the BAF meetings at night when her eyesight couldn't quite cope with keeping her tiny mini on track. As Social Secretary she knew everyone on site; who had time to cultivate, who needed a bit of extra time and who had great intentions that remained as dreams. June strung the individual heavens together for me into a whole green allotment space that benefits each and every one of us and spills out as a lung for the rest of the local community.

## *Space*

Once you appreciate that your allotment is healing beyond the gates, it's a simple step to the wider network. How much more important to spread the benefit across Barnet in a series of green spaces? The important point here is to recognise that now the allotments are independently leased from Barnet each allotment is very much stronger when we share help and information. And beyond that? Last year a fellow judge drew comparisons with her work in Islington where green space is at a premium and every hanging basket makes a difference. Here, every one of us plot holders helps to maintain our part of the lung. Let's hang in here together. If we don't use and protect our green spaces they will disappear.



In the last couple of years Barnet Allotment Federation judging has adjusted in response to ideas about horticulture bubbling up from conversations like re-wilding, no-dig, climate change and the vagaries of water supply. Step aside manicured edges and mammoth vegetables - today you are more likely to be congratulated for ingenious water-saving storage.

*'Feedback from last year's competition judging brought to light that our criteria was perhaps too harsh, with too much emphasis put on straight lines of vegetables, neatness of growing areas and plots completely free of weeds, and not enough appreciation for plots with strong biodiversity elements, wild flower planting schemes, nettle patches and long grasses, areas for wildlife such as ponds, bird feeders, etc.'* BAF Instruction 2023

The spread of ideas is very much a part of the discussion between BAF judges. Let's look in more detail at some of the issues:

### *Bonfires*

We all know that hay fever is on the rise and air pollution is a problem in the borough. Many allotments have banned bonfires or are in the process of doing it, but this isn't easy because there are pernicious weeds, diseased plant material and perhaps herbicides and pesticides in the green waste we compost or ship off site. All of this returns to the earth unless it is processed at high temperature and properly recycled. How do we ensure this is done? This is one problem; the cost of shipping material off site is another. We talk about these issues and share ideas. So far there are no quick recipes to efficient composting and waste management but it is in debate.



### *Water shortages – who pays*

This is a big question we are all increasingly aware of. How can we encourage plot holders to be more engaged in harvesting rainwater? Allotments vary widely over the efficiency of their water conservation. Some of the large allotments permit large sheds and cabins so rain can be harvested from quite sizeable roofs. Imaginative solutions such as rain filled water butts hosting watercress are just one of the productive ideas generated from tiny Fursby allotment.



Allotment members are also experimenting with ideas spinning from forest gardening and re-wilding. Is there benefit in tolerating some ground cover from weeds to preserve moisture at ground level or do the weeds outcompete young vegetables for water with no overall gain? At Cat Hill there is a fascinating forest garden to learn from. For those short of space, companion planting offers a more cultivated version of associating plants, we all know of the 'Three sisters' but courgettes love dill, cucumbers grow well with tomatoes say Polish neighbours - who knew? Let's listen and learn.



The benefits of mulching being now commonplace we all look forward to winter deliveries of manure to mulch, condition and add nutrients. Cat Hill have taken this step further, they have a partner relationship with their local riding stable, horse manure in one direction, excess produce in the other. Green manures are also gaining in popularity, but don't be deceived, they are hard graft to dig in and more than one green plot has been left over the season because it was too hard to process. Has anyone had greater success? It's a question to ponder.



### *Why people win best individual allotment prizes*

The short answer is attention to detail; exemplary horticulture, tidiness, robust and productive plants but it is also about imagination: how to interpret new and traditional gardening methods, construct raised beds, devise insect hotels, involve the children. In recent years individual plot winners are also encouraged to join the BAF judges to help spread their standards and ideas.

### *And finally, which allotments win whole allotment prizes in their category - Large, Medium or Small*

There are many ways to judge an allotment by its outward appearance but fundamentally appearance, communal spaces, shops, involvement with the wider community - with schools, food banks etc each indicate a common purpose and the sense of a living productive community. So the reason I continue to judge is to reward this sense of community and link it with others.



## Charity Veg Box Scheme

As previous years, our sites are again taking part in the Charity Veg Box Scheme. The Barnet Food Hub will collect excess vegetables and fruit from Gordon Road. They have a centralised distribution network throughout Barnet that helps to ensure that all foodbanks can provide nutritious food to everyone who uses their services.

We have had a late start to the growing season this year, but if you already have extra veg, especially courgettes or potatoes, please donate them to the food bank. A crate will left outside the Green Room on Saturdays, and if you are worried about leaving perishable items out for too long, please use the fridge. Collections are midday the following Tuesday. If plot holders at Nethercourt and Brent Way have excess produce, please let us know.





## **BAF HORTICULTURAL COMPETITION AND SHOW 2023**

BAF are holding the annual horticultural competition and show on Sunday August 20th 12.00 – 4.30 at Rathbone Allotments Ryalls Court, Oakleigh Road South, N20 0RY. Entry fees: Adult Classes: 6 entries £2.50; Single Entry 50p; Junior Classes: Free.

There are vegetable, fruit, cut flower and potted plant awards, as well as awards for home-made wine, beer, jams, jellies and cakes.

### **SATURDAY 19th AUGUST**

SETTING UP OF HALL: 10.00am-12noon

STAGING: 12noon – 5.00pm

### **SUNDAY 20th AUGUST:**

LATE STAGING\*: 9.00am-10.00am

JUDGING: 10.30am-12noon

SHOW OPEN FOR VIEWING OF EXHIBITS: 12noon-3.00pm

PRIZEGIVING & AUCTION: 3.00pm-4.30pm

Details of the competition rules and prizes are available on our website.





## BARNET HORTICULTURAL SHOW: CHILDREN'S COMPETITIONS



Try making a  
miniature garden  
in a seed tray

Barnet Allotment Federation Horticultural Show will  
be held on 20<sup>th</sup> August, at Rathbone Allotments,  
N20

Competitions for children include: ugliest vegetable,  
garden in a seed tray, largest sunflower head, best  
fruit scones, and more.

See Barnet Allotment Federation website for  
details, or speak to a member of your committee.



# Notices

## PLANT HERITAGE FAIR

A great opportunity to add some late summer/early autumn plants and colour to your garden.

Plant Heritage will be hosting a Plant Fair on Saturday 2 September, 9.30am - 2pm, at St Michael's C of E Primary School, North Road, Highgate N6 4BG (the school is by a mini roundabout and opposite Castle Yard).

Entrance fee: £2.50. If paying by cash, please bring the correct amount. Most nurseries, but not all, will have card readers - to be on the safe side bring both card and cash.

Free to Plant Heritage members, under 18's, disabled and their carers. All money raised goes to: [www.plantheritage.org.uk](http://www.plantheritage.org.uk)

Nurseries attending: Edulis, Rose Cottage Plants, Rotherview, Dyson Salvias, Monksilver and Mathew Spratt.



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For all Finchley gardeners and for plot holders at  
Gordon Road, Nethercourt Avenue and Brent Way

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Royal Horticultural Society

## Events Diary

Book 2021 Flower Show tickets this autumn:

RHS Flower Show Tatton Park  
(21-25 July)

RHS Garden Hyde Hall  
Flower Show  
(4-8 August)

RHS Chelsea Flower Show  
(21-26 September)

RHS Malvern Autumn Show  
(25-26 September)

Look out for on-sale dates in the members' e-  
newsletter or visit [rhs.org.uk/shows](https://rhs.org.uk/shows)

In order to run Covid-secure shows in 2021 the  
RHS have introduced enhanced measures  
across all their sites to ensure that these  
primary outdoor events can operate safely for  
everyone.



### Newsletter

If you received a paper copy of this newsletter  
and are now able to receive it by e-mail, please  
inform Christine Williams,  
[finchleyhorticulturalsociety@gmail.com](mailto:finchleyhorticulturalsociety@gmail.com)  
This saves us time and money.

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