

The Grapevine



Newsletter of the Finchley Horticultural Society

Winter 23/24

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

by Robert Frost

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.



The Magpie by Claude Monet

Despite an occasional cold spell, the snowy evening of the Robert Frost poem is not something we are likely to enjoy much in the UK in the future. Like last year, this winter has been marked by warm and wet weather, with many parts of the UK experiencing heavy and persistent floods. This increase in extreme weather events associated with climate change, such as droughts and floods, is perhaps a bigger threat than the gradually shifting seasons that we have all observed.

One of the growing problems in winter is waterlogging. What can we do to mitigate it in the future?

One way to improve drainage on our allotments is to work in a lot of organic matter – thus improving the soil structure. Mixing in compost, well-rotted manure, wood chips or other organic material will result in soil that drains better, has larger air holes, is easier to work, and is looser for the roots to establish in.

Another method is to mound up the beds and create a ditch around the perimeter. This will allow excess water to drain away from sitting and puddling in the middle of the beds.

One can also dig ditches at the highest and lowest points of the plot. This will stop excess water from running down the plot and will also distribute any water standing at the lowest section.

Raised beds are another solution. They have many advantages, including raising the crops off the ground, making weeding easier, and being able to fill the bed with a good mix of soil that plants will thrive in.

It is also important not to leave the soil bare – bare soil exposed to the elements is quickly affected by frost, snow, rain, and sun. A layer of mulch or a cover of cardboard or a sheet of polythene will help protect the soil from being eroded and washed away. Keeping your plot planted up all year round (with winter veg such as kale, spinach, chard, broccoli, or winter salads), also gives a good cover and keeps the nutrients in, while providing you with extra greens in winter.

With climate change resulting in more changeable weather than ever, it seems that we, gardeners, need to get more and more used to extremes. Whether it is extreme heat, cold, or wet, we will all have to adapt our growing methods and styles as a result.

In this issue of the Grapevine we look at water at the allotments, discuss recycling and land reclamation, look forward to spring flowers and remember events and people who have left a mark on our lives. Happy reading!

In Memory of Jacky Hurst

By Catherine Schmitt (with contributions from Felicity Nock)

I was saddened to hear of the death of Jacky Hurst, just as I had been by news of the death a year ago of her friend, housemate, and fellow plant enthusiast, Liz Thompson. For many years Jacky was central to the working of the Society, not only as Secretary and sometime Newsletter Editor but most especially regarding the annual Plant Sale.

It is only fitting that we include Liz here because it was always "Liz and Jacky" or "Jacky and Liz". When Liz retired, she volunteered at the local NSPCC office. In September 1997, she organized an Open Day at Gordon Road to raise money for the NSPCC. Members donated produce for sale, served tea and homemade cakes, ran a raffle, and raised just over £200. This was the beginning of a series of annual Open Days.

For a few years Liz served as Society Treasurer, coordinating the Tesco Community grant that secured a large section of the Gordon Road perimeter fence.

Two other people were important to the origins of the Plant Sale and in Jacky's life: Ivor Kitchener and Joyce Pankhurst. For many years Ivor, who lived in one of the houses overlooking the allotments, was a dynamic force in the Society. In 1980, he donated his greenhouse for raising plants, with Joyce acting as chief seed sower and Ivor himself mixing compost. At that time that involved mixing peat, sand, and a fertiliser base, at first by hand but eventually with a cement mixer. Jacky took over from Ivor, inheriting the compost-making job and eventually becoming the Society's Secretary. Jacky and Ivor both worked at the nearby Medical Research Institute at Mill Hill, and Jacky would come home during her lunch break to help with watering and pricking out the seedlings and then again to help Joyce in the evenings. They were a great team.

While productive with vegetables, Liz and Jacky also enjoyed experimenting with flower combinations on their allotments. Jacky's eschscholzia poppies and Liz's sophisticated combinations brought joy to all who saw them.



Their contributions extended beyond the Plant Sale, including hosting committee meetings and an annual lunch after plant sales for key workers.

For a few years, Jacky enjoyed horse riding, even owning her own horse, and was quite distraught when the horse died.

Jacky and Liz were very hospitable, hosting committee meetings, and an annual lunch after plant sales for key workers.

Jacky continued to help, despite increasing ill health, until she and Liz moved to North Wales in December 2017. Their London neighbours fondly remember them as "absolute gems" and miss their gentle presences in the neighbourhood.

Jacky was a very shy person, and there are few photos of her. The picture below was printed in Barnet Press Group, 26 March 1987 when Ivor stepped down as Chairman at the AGM and was made President.



Left to right: John Ram, Treasurer: Henry Newman, past Chairman: Joyce Pankhurst, Vice-president: Jacky Hurst, Secretary: Ivor Kitchener, President: Ted Smith, Chairman.

In celebrating Jacky's multifaceted contributions, personal attributes, and the lasting impact she had on the Society and her community, we remember a remarkable individual who left an indelible mark on all who had the privilege of knowing her.

A Small Community Orchard On The Gordon Road Site

by Philip Cuttall

The corner of our allotment with Dollis Road and the Dollis Brook access path has long been neglected. For many decades it was a rubbish dump and after that an overgrown area with brambles as high as the fence. Bordering the fence was a row of dead sycamores.

The position being so close to the road and semi shaded by the remaining living sycamores, it was decided it was unlikely to make a good vegetable growing plot, so I conceived the idea of replanting it with a hedge and fruit trees.

The first task, which was done in 2020, was to fell the dead sycamores and these were then sawn into hardwood planks which are seasoning in the garage awaiting inspiration as to how to best utilise them. A group of us cleared the rubbish and the brambles over several volunteer sessions.

We then had a volunteer morning in November 2020 and planted a mixed hedge of native species' whips along the entire length of the Dollis Road boundary. They included dog rose, beech and hawthorn and despite a stolen car being driven through the fence and the hedge the following year, it is now establishing nicely and this winter we will prune the hedge height to encourage it to thicken lower down. It will eventually form a screen from the road and provide a habitat for birds and insects.

We followed the guidance of the 'No Dig' allotment pioneer Charles Dowding and laid cardboard 3 sheets thick over the whole site, and then covered it with a mulch of wood chip 20 cm deep to smother the worst of the weeds and improve the soil. This too was a slow business and took innumerable barrow loads of wood chip.



In September Felicity Nock and I put together a grant application to the Tree Council to cover the cost of the purchase and delivery of the new fruit trees, compost, stakes etc. Our bid was successful, and we will soon receive £480 from them. We followed their very helpful advice on varieties suitable for pollination in the location and on the choice of semi dwarfing rootstock to produce trees which will not outgrow the space.

Earlier this month another group of volunteers finally planted the fruit trees: two apple varieties, James Grieve and Adam's Permain, a Stella Cherry, a Merryweather Damson, an Old Green Gage and an Evereste Crabapple. In the fullness of time, they will delight us with their spring blossom, and we can harvest the fruit once the trees mature either for ourselves and/or the Food Collection Scheme.

We may need to add irrigation using redundant FHS piping. The trees will die if we do not water regularly for at least the first two years until they are established.

In the Spring we hope to sow wildflower meadow seed over the area, allowing it to naturalise to a woodland margin habitat and just mowing once annually after the seeds have dispersed in late summer. Buttercups, bluebells, and cow parsley should appear in the longer grass providing summer forage for our bees. The grass will, we are assured, outcompete the bindweed eventually but we anticipate needing some selective weeding.

Next Autumn we hope to plant spring bulbs too.

Helen Skelton has kindly made us a donation and dedicated one of the trees, a James Grieve apple, to her father.

The project has been a lot of fun and has brought together many volunteers. I would never have been able to accomplish this task without their expertise and enthusiasm, so a huge thanks to the entire team. You know who you are!



RECYCLING, LAND RECLAMATION AND THE ORCHARD PROJECT

by Felicity Nock

A significant part of our phased Gordon Road Fence Project 2010-21 was to clear the boundaries to make best use of the whole allotment land. In the first phase Andrew Brown cleared a massive, fence high bund dumped from years of pernicious weeds, plastic, carpet and metal and he successfully reclaimed the Dollis Brookside land for Raised Beds. When it came to the third phase along Dollis Road, Jason - who had reclaimed large parts of his own plot - knew exactly what to expect; a tangled knit of rubbish all stitched together with ground elder, bramble and bindweed. This restoration is a tale of changed attitudes to waste disposal 1940-2010, we no longer build these massive waste disposal tips but are completely reliant on non-compostable waste being taken off site by the Council or private skip. The more we can recycle on site the better. The more plastic we can avoid or re-use even better! We also have to think harder about how to use marginal land in favour of nature and the wider community.

Back to the Orchard! In 2019 with dead elms felled and a mini-digger to help clear the rubbish bund an encouraging chunk of ground bordering the Dollis Road appeared, yet the site felt exposed to the road on the corner by the viaduct. The Team felt that the best way to use it would be to grow a live shelterbelt filtering the noise from cars and Philip had a vision of planting a hedge of native species hard against the metal fence with a small orchard inside. From the outset we felt it important that plot holders and pavement pedestrians would share a view of seasonal blossom and autumn colour. The plot is essentially north-facing, so the fruit we may hope for will be a bonus.

There followed a period of several years while the land lay fallow blinded off with cardboard sheet covered with barrow loads of woodchip when available. Weed suppression was slow and finally we resorted to black plastic sheet in 2022. In September 2021 a car took the sharp corner too fast, smashed into a lamp post which crumpled the fence. Then we realised the shelterbelt would also provide a safety buffer! In 2021, with the fence mended, the wildlife hedge was planted and in 2023 we admitted that the bindweed had won the battle, if not the war, so we planned the small Orchard.

The hedge is planted with the following native plants with a few garden species, sourced online and bare root from a wholesale nursery in Hertfordshire. We intend to keep the hedge trimmed below fence level. The nursery provided more robust plants:

Acer campestre – field maple
Amelanchier canadensis Prince William
Carpinus betula – hornbeam
Cornus sanguinea Winter Beauty
Cotoneaster franchettii
Corylus avellana – hazel
Fagus sylvatica – beech
Ilex aquifolium - holly
Rosa rubiginosa – eglantine rose



In planning the Orchard, the Team were grateful for the guidance of Lesley Wertheimer of the Orchard Project who visited to lead a pruning workshop and suggested that we might submit a grant proposal to the Tree Council. Both Lesley and Geraldine Creaven at the Tree Council offered invaluable advice in the planning phase, indeed the instructions for the Tree Council application were particularly precise and quite a learning curve. The plot had to be measured, growing conditions defined and rootstock selected from their range of semi-vigorous specification. Moreover, a list of preferred specialist fruit tree nurseries was provided, and the tree planting needed to be shown to be of value to the community. The selection of varieties was left open to the applicant, but advice and assessment of the application were done by a professional horticulturalist.

When measured with the trees plotted on a four-metre grid what looked like a great space boiled down to a selection of just six fruit trees! Our first selection included pears and an experimental apricot-plum cross which we thought would be interesting for plot-holders to see perform under changing climatic conditions. Our suppliers Frank P Matthews advised that these new crosses still need protection and a south-facing wall as they are bred for patio planters or small sheltered gardens. The pears were felt to be higher maintenance and their specification replaced. Our final selection included damsons and gages for much hardier conditions and a staggered flowering season.

Below is the final list:

BR Apple – ‘Adam’s Pearmain’ Frank P Matthews / MM106 / 2 year / Bush
BR Apple M116 or M106 – ‘James Grieve’ Frank P Matthews / MM106 / 2 year / Bush
Container grown Crab Apple – ‘Evereste’ Frank P Matthew 12L (pollinator)
BR Damson Prunus insititia ‘Merryweather’ 2yr Bush St Julien A to 5m
BR Gage ‘Old Green Gage’ Rootstock VVA -1 Bush
BR Prunus ‘Stella’ / Root stock Colt (H to 4.5) / 2 year / Bush



The Tree Council budget also covered sundries as advised by Frank P Matthews.

For each tree their kits included a sachet of Rootgrow mycorrhizal or Empathy rootgrow mycorrhizal fungi, stakes and ties.

The trees arrived as good healthy specimens and were planted on 10 December 2023. Jo, Jason, Edo and Helen joined the planning Team to weed and prepare tree pits. For the last task we asked James (Robbins) for advice on groundcover against bindweed. He suggested that we should plant the trees first, [seeding for strimmable grass] then allow a certain amount of recolonisation of the area by weed species and selectively weed to remove anything too invasive, while allowing the plants we want (bluebells, grass, buttercups, cow parsley) to recolonise and set seed to establish the woodland margin type of habitat that would be appropriate in the long term.

There is still lots to do come Spring!

Our Precious Water

by Eric Hess

Perhaps this seems a strange time to think about water and how it relates to the allotment and gardens. Time moves quickly, though, when one enjoys growing vegetables. It is natural for me to think ahead to spring and onwards. One can't know what the weather will hold.

In mid to late February, I will be looking to sowing. At our allotment site we turn on mains water at the beginning of April. In the meantime, I have my water butts that have collected rainwater.

Water is an issue. The cost is high, and it is better for the environment and crops to use it wisely.

From my experience different types of soil have different holding capacity. For example, sandy soil dries out quickly. Clay soil, on the other hand, holds water longer.

Overwatering in a greenhouse causes 'damping off' (a fungus). I have learnt one of the most useful watering tips from Terry who places pots and such on trays allowing the water to be absorbed from underneath. I have also discovered that it is still worth doing a finger test to make sure your seedlings don't dry out.





I have also found that various vegetables have different needs. It is all too easy to just water everything and hope for the best. A thorough watering is one thing; watering for a while and flooding is another. It causes erosion and is not suitable for various vegetables.

To sum up, for the most effective watering, try to use the following simple rules:

1. Water closer to the roots: focus the water at the soil level and try to make sure the entire root ball is thoroughly watered.
2. Check the soil before watering: even when the soil surface appears dry, test the soil a few inches deep. If it is dry, water, if not, wait a day or two.
3. Water early in the morning: this way the leaves have time to dry out during the day which makes it much harder for plant diseases to spread. If you cannot water in the morning, water in the evening. Watering early in the morning or late in the evening minimises evaporation from the soil surface, thus conserving water.
4. Water slowly: if the surface is dry, water may run off and not be absorbed, so try to start slowly and gradually increase to a proper soak.
5. Use the water efficiently; use drip irrigation or soaker hoses where possible. Shielding plants from wind or using a thin layer of organic mulch such as compost, shredded leaves or shredded bark also help to preserve moisture.

Happy growing!

Snowdrop Season and Peat Free Planting

by Felicity Nock

Do you ever yearn for the spring bulbs to open, heralding the new season? In our garden, if the local cats haven't tramped them, *Iris reticulata* and snowdrops (*Galanthus nivalis*) vie for the honours of first show. These are quickly followed by the flowering shrubs: false quince (*Chaenomeles japonica*), witch hazel (*Hamamelis* x *intermedia* 'Arnold Promise') and willow (*Salix gracilistyla* Mount Aso). Then once the hellebores are up the rush is on!

There are several places you can get a quick hit of fine snowdrops, especially if you can make a journey into Hertfordshire. While not listed for snowdrops, perhaps the closest is The Bothy Garden in Inky Stephen's Avenue House Park where Catherine Schmitt has a hand. Further north near Clockhouse Nurseries is E. A. Bowles' Myddleton House cared for by the Lee Valley. This is a great place to see spring flowers, especially those with varieties bearing Bowles' name, and attend a special snowdrop sale on 27 January.



Many other gardens worthy of a snowdrop pilgrimage are listed on the NGS website (ngs.org.uk). Some like Benington Lordship delight with carpets of the most well-known *Galanthus nivalis*. One listing, recommended to me years ago by Liz Thompson is at 8, Gosselin Road. This is a tiny personal garden planted by the owner of Daisy Roots Nursery. Be prepared to jostle shoulder to shoulder on each of this season's monthly spring open days.

But it's worth it, as you would expect from an expert gardener who shows widely in fairs and festivals - the garden delivers new gems on each visit. Here you can pre-order to pick from the collected specialist varieties and join the tribe of galanthophiles. If you do and delight in the detailed variations offered by these flowers, you may be doomed to a new Spring addiction!



On a completely different but still seasonal note, Eric Hess has long championed the benefits of home-made compost and recycling on the allotment. At present he is sowing cabbages in compost sieved from the untidy heap next to the Raised Beds. With a little added manure, he claims strong speedy germination. In summer Eric shares workshops on compost-making from scratch. Latterly Eric drew attention to the excellent articles featured in the RHS publication 'The Garden' January 2024 on sowing in peat free planting mediums. This presents an examination of the journey to peat free growing and we are keen to emphasise that this is essential information for all gardeners now. The FHS is a member of the RHS and the publication is usually put in the Green Room. And, looping back to garden visiting, don't forget you can also borrow the FHS RHS membership card to visit RHS gardens.

Myddelton House Gardens, Bulls Cross, Enfield, EN2 9HG. Monday – Sunday 10.00 – 16.00.

'Ultimate Snowdrop Sale' 27 January 2024, 10.30 – 12.00.

Benington Lordship Stevenage SG2 7BS, 6 February.

8, Gosselin Road, Bengeo Herts SG14 3LG 7 February, 13.00 – 16.00.

Nursery: daisyroots.com



CHRISTMAS LUNCH 2023



On Sunday 17 December the Gordon Road site held yet another marvellous Christmas Party. The weather was dry if a little chilly, with plentiful and varied food and drink that helped to keep us warm. There was an abundance of soups, succulent chicken dishes, the much-loved Singapore noodles, and a cornucopia of sumptuous deserts. Many thanks to all plot holders who provided the food, served teas and coffees, washed the dishes, and contributed in any other way to make it a huge success!



Future manure deliveries – any takers?

Chris Ouseley has been responsible for the autumn manure delivery to the Gordon Road site for the last 16 years and is now ready to pass this 'fragrant' job on to somebody else. The job entails ordering the manure, collecting money from those who order it and, on the day of delivery, ensuring the trailer loads are unloaded in the best place. This year there was less demand for the manure than in previous years - we're not sure why. The manure comes from a farm in the Totteridge Valley. Chris will hand over all the relevant information.



Many thanks to Chris for all the time and energy he has spent on this task. If you think you might be willing to take on this job, please email us at finchleyhorticulturalsociety@gmail.com

Notices

PLANT SALE MEETING

It's the time of year when we need to think about our forthcoming Plant Sale. As you probably know Christine is stepping down after many years of amazing work supervising the many different aspects of sowing seeds, pricking out etc. So, we need to think of a way forward to keep the Plant Sale going. It's both a wonderful event for us and the local community, and a good money earner for the allotments. It's a great way to learn about all aspects of growing vegetables too.

We are inviting you to a meeting at the Piggery at **12 noon on Sunday 21 January**. We hope you can make it. If you can't come but are interested in taking part, please let us know.

NEWS FROM THE TRADING HUT

The new season will bring some changes to our Trading Hut at Gordon Road Allotments. Erika Mansnerus and Julie Datta will be looking after the Trading Hut and its volunteers. A big thank you to Tuuli for her efforts over the past years.

Over the following months, we'll engage with a new supplier and plan our orders for the new season. We'll send out a questionnaire for the members to tell us what products have been helpful to buy at the Hut and what might be needed. Erika is keen to develop an organic range of compost and fertilisers alongside suitable, affordable peat-free composts, bulk-buy fertilisers and other products required on our plots.

Before opening the Hut for the new season, we'll be reaching out to volunteers. It would be lovely to create a network of volunteers and encourage some Sunday morning social engagement with cups of tea and friendly chats. If you're interested in volunteering, please keep an eye on FHS members' emails in early March.

PLANT HERITAGE FAIR

The London Plant Heritage Spring Plant Fair will be held on **Saturday 27 April from 9.30am - 2pm** at the usual venue: St Michael's C of E primary school, North Road, Highgate N6 4BG. The Fair will be open from 9.30am - 2pm. Everyone welcome.

AGM 2024

The Finchley Horticultural Society AGM for will be held on **12th or 19th March 2024 at Finchley Tennis Club, Brent Way**. The date will be confirmed as soon as possible. If you know of a speaker who could give a half-hour talk on a topic of interest to an Allotment Society, at the AGM please inform Jo Cuttall at: finchleyhorticulturalsociety@gmail.com

NEW MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY REQUIRED

We want to give huge thanks to Sylvia Berente for all the work she has done as the Gordon Road Allotments Secretary. Sylvia volunteered to take over from June Brookes when the latter retired from the role in 2020. Sylvia has been instrumental in getting our membership system computerised, and accurate. She has worked tirelessly to build the waiting list into a manageable and up-to-date document and transformed the Gordon Road list of plot holders so that invoices can now be sent out efficiently by email.

Sylvia is stepping down from her role in the summer as other demands on her time have increased. This means that we need a new Allotment Secretary for Gordon Road. The Gordon Road Allotment Committee have taken on many of the responsibilities June Brookes used to do as Secretary. The job of the Secretary today is mainly to do with plot allocations - managing people who are leaving the site and allocating plots to those on the waiting list. It is an interesting role that provides an opportunity to meet and interact with existing and potential plot holders and promote the values of our terrific allotment society. The new Secretary will be ably supported by Sylvia during a handover period while the Allotment Committee will provide ongoing help and support.

Sylvia leaves the role with everything in good order.

If you are interested in this job, please let us know by e-mailing finchleyhorticulturalsociety@gmail.com or speaking to one of the following: Rosa Baden Powell, Sylvia Berente, Jo Cuttall, Philip Cuttall, Sophie Dave, John Hale, Eric Hess, Felicity Nock, Christine Williams or Catherine Schmitt. There is usually one of us on the site on Sunday mornings.

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Royal Horticultural Society

Events Diary

RHS Garden Hyde Hall

18 January
Living Willow Sculpture

20 January
The Living Soil Lecture/Demonstration

RHS Garden Rosemoor

18 January
Apple Pruning Workshop

Gilbert White's Garden
High Street Selborne
Alton
Hampshire
GU34 3JH

17 January
Rose Pruning Day

Hidcote Garden
Hidcote Bartrim
Chipping Campden
Gloucestershire

6-28 January
Winter Morning Exclusive Garden Tour

For more information visit rhs.org.uk/shows



Newsletter

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