

# Maintaining Allotments

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On Friday 10<sup>th</sup> June 2011 I attended a course with the above title at the Berkshire College of Agriculture, Burchetts Green. This course followed the “Planning an Allotment” course held last Autumn. The tutor, Graham Noble, was once again full of energy, enthusiasm and good advice which all plot holders would find useful.

In his introduction, Graham made reference to the book “The Half-hour Allotment” published by the Royal Horticultural Society and stressed the need for those with limited time to make a list of tasks and to complete those without becoming distracted. I recall this theme from the “Time Manager” course I was sent on in my youth; it is still relevant in retirement. Graham also supported the view that it is folly to attempt to cultivate too large area and do it badly. It is better to cultivate a small area well and cover the remainder with landscaping weed barrier fabric.

The following topics were covered.

## Watering

- Watering can, hosepipe and sprinkler that scatter water around are inefficient because much evaporates and a wet surface attracts slugs.
- Watering is best done in the early morning. At midday water evaporates quickly and watering in the evening or overnight leads to fungal diseases.
- Rain water is better than chlorinated tap water.
- A buried weeping or soaker hose is by far the best method, which can be fed either from a tap or a rain water butt. The standard size is 16mm for which cheap push-fit fittings are available.
- Water potatoes only when flowers appear.

## Feeding

- Fertilizers are usually allocated a 3 number classification of N P K
  - N: nitrogen for green leaves
  - P: Phosphorous for root production
  - : Potassium to encourage ripening of fruit and flowers
- Fertilizers can be either soluble or insoluble.
- Miracle-Gro and Tomorite are well known soluble feeds.
- Growmore pellets can scorch plant leaves and should be broadcast in advance of planting and watered in.
- A dressing of blood fish and bone in Spring is recommended.
- Chicken pellets made from chicken manure with additional organic material are similarly recommended.
- Chicken manure itself is too strong, but is ideal for addition to a compost heap.
- Insoluble fertilizers might block a soaker hose.
- Feed asparagus when cutting stops to encourage growth of asparagus crowns.
- It is claimed that peas and beans do not require fertilizer containing nitrogen because root nodules fix nitrogen from air. Scientific studies suggest, however, that the plants use a lot of

energy producing the sugars required to support the organisms fixing the nitrogen, so why not help the plants with a nitrogenous fertilizer.

## Weeding

- Very thorough clearance is the best preparation.
- Removing weeds by hand is the certain way of ensuring that weeds do not re-grow.
- Hoeing is only effective if a hot sun kills off de-capitated weeds.
- Hoeing creates a “dust” mulch, conserving moisture a couple of inches below.
- Straw is an effective mulch, which adds humus when subsequently dug in.
- Onions and shallots have narrow leaves which allow weeds to germinate readily and should be kept weed free if possible.
- Roundup contains glyphosphate is the most effective herbicide available to the amateur gardener.

## Pest and Disease Control

- Cover outdoor tomatoes to reduce spread of blight. To infect a tomato plant the leaf surface needs to be wet.
- When watering keep the water off the leaves especially late in the day or overnight to reduce spread of mildew and other fungal diseases.

## Staking and Tying in

- Essential for some plants and best done early so that stakes do not damage roots and plants do not suffer any wind damage.
- The Max Tapener machine is recommended for tying in sweet peas, tomatoes etc.; expensive (around £40) but very quick.

## Pruning

- Remove damaged leaves of all plants
- When thinning carrots, remove thinnings as far as possible from the remaining plants to distract carrot fly.
- Thin shallots in May so that remaining bulbs become larger. The shallots removed can be pickled.
- Fruit trees and bushes can be pruned in the summer. Stone fruits should only be pruned in summer, not at all in winter. Vine side-shoots can be pruned two leaves beyond flower clusters.
- Remove flowers from potatoes.
- Pinch out tomatoes beyond the fourth truss. Tomatoes will seldom ripen worthwhile tomatoes in additional trusses.

## Harvesting

- Generally harvest when the crop is ready. Nothing is gained by delay.
- Lift shallots at end of June / early July.
- Dig main crop potatoes before September rains,
- Harvest crops like courgettes and runner beans regularly to ensure continuing production.

- Grow first early potatoes under black polythene to allow removal of individual potatoes without destroying the plant.

## Follow-on Crops

To make good use of the ground, plan a follow-on crop for each early season crop:

- Second cropping potatoes (Carlingford) to follow broad beans.
- Late peas (Ambassador or Dorian) to follow early potatoes.
- Late French beans (Ferrari or Pongo) to follow shallots.
- Late carrots (Eskimo), beetroot and salad crops to follow early peas.
- Winter greens to follow broad beans or peas.
- Grow late French beans for freezing; they are more tender than early season beans.
- Consider varieties suitable for overwintering to give especially early crops.
  - Broad beans (Aquadulce Claudia)
  - Onions( Radar)
  - Spring onions (White Lisbon Winter Hardy)
  - Coriander

## Other

- Sterilize greenhouse with sulphur candle or Jeyes fluid spray.
- Blanch leeks with a tube of plastic damp proofing.
- Start vegetables like shallots and peas in pots/trays and plant out. Better results are obtained for many vegetables, but not carrots, parsnips and similar with long tap roots.