Allotments Newsletter
May 2023

The Community Plot is up and running.

With a big thank you to Pauline and Tony Butcher (Plot 29) for the incredible amount of work they have put in to creating the Community Plot, I am pleased to say that the plot is up and running.

We now have potatoes planted and growing. and beds available for the tomatoes, runner beans and beetroot that Albert is growing in his greenhouse for us.

Once all are planted, we're hoping for a good harvest so we can provide the Food Bank with a healthy supply of vegetables.

During the summer, if you have a few moments to help water the Community Plot it would be greatly appreciated. I'm sure Pauline and Tony would be very pleased with a helping hand.

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A1 end seating area.

We have now established the seating area at the far end of the allotments down at the A1 end. With magnificent help from Ray (Plot 39), Pauline and Tony and the Handymen (Martin and Nigel) we have managed to clear the corner of brambles and branches and cut the grass so that there is a nice seating area for those at the far end of the plot to sit and take a break when you've spent a hard morning, or afternoon, tending your plot.

I'd like to say it's a nice quiet spot to stop for a coffee break but, with the noise from the A1, it's not very quiet!!

When clearing the area, we uncovered what we thought were three apple trees, but we've been reliably informed that one is an Elm tree, so I don't think we'll get many apples off that tree.

The plan is to leave the far corner of the area to run wild for the wildflowers, insects, and animals to enjoy.

However, if you have any plants of shrubs that you're looking to rehome then please bring them to the allotments and we'll give them space in the wildflower area.

I'm sure the wildflowers won't mind sharing their spot with a few established shrubs.

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The wormery is back!

The wormery is back in position by the gazebo, and allotment holders are welcome to add a bit of fruit or veg peel if they look hungry.

When they're hungry the worms are visible on the surface wriggling about looking for food, but no onion, garlic, citrus, dairy, meat or processed food please.

They've stopped having coffee grounds as they are too acidic (but these are great to feed your acid-loving plants).

Feel free to lift the lid and have a look inside - see if you can spot them before they squirm away into the compost. Then please make sure you close the lid securely in place as they're very shy and like it kept nice and dark.

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Fertilisers

Fertilisers are concentrated sources of plant nutrients that are usually in the form of pellets, granules or liquids. They are used to improve plant growth and yield.

Organic fertilisers only contain natural products derived from plant (or animal) sources.

Inorganic, or artificial fertilisers, are manufactured products containing man-made chemicals (such as Growmore, Photrogen and Tomorite – plus many more besides).

Both types of fertiliser usually contain:

Nitgrogen - to support leaf growth;
Phosphorus - to promote root growth; and
Potassium - for flowering, fruiting and general hardiness.

You can also get 'compound' fertilisers that contain a mixture of nutrients, so look on your packet it you are buying.

It is also useful to look at fertilisers according to how they are used:

a. Liquid fertilisers that are watered on. These tend to act quickly.

b. Controlled Release or Slow Release fertilisers tend to be pellets or granules and act more slowly. These can be used as a 'base dressing' and dug into the soil before planting or alternatively scattered around the growing plants, being careful not to touch the plant for fear of scorching it.

How to make your own fertilisers:

1. *Comfrey.*
   Use 1kg leaves to 15 litres water.
   Leave for 6 weeks in a sealed container, then drain and use diluted.
2. *Nettles.*
   Add 1kg nettles to 10 litres water.
   Leave for 2 weeks, strain and dilute at 10:1.
3. *Liquid from a wormery.*
   This should be diluted 10:1.
4. *Manure.*
   This is best composted as raw manure can burn your plants.

Alternatively, you can make a liquid by mixing in a bucket.
2/3rd manure and 1/3rd water.
Leave for 1 week and dilute 5:1.

5. *Grass clippings.*
   Spread ½ to 1 inch around your plants.
   As well as being rich in nitrogen, these also act as a weed-blocking mulch.
6. *Collect fallen leaves in the autumn.*
   Either dig them in, add them to your compost or use as a mulch.
7. *Coffee Grounds.*
   You can 'top dress' with these.
   They are particularly useful for acid loving plants such as tomatoes and roses.

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Heard it on the grape vine…

We're now in our third growing season since Julia and I cleared down the brambles and re-planted the vineyard at the top of the allotments.

Last year we took our first crop, which, despite it being a year earlier than we would have in a commercial vineyard we were very pleased with the yield and quality of the fruit.

Vines don't usually reach maturity to deliver a full crop until the 5th year, but you are usually able to take half a crop in year 3.
We had good first year growth, so we were able to bring harvest forward a year for some of the vines. This is most likely due to the sheltered nature of the allotment vs a commercial site.

The key markers showing vines are ready to produce fruit is that they grow to the top catch wires and are the thickness of a pencil in the previous season.

So, we laid down the vines (attached to the fruiting wire) which met that criteria (about half of the vineyard) ahead of last year's growing season.

The remaining vines were either taken back to two buds growth (shin level) or pruned to the fruiting wire (waist height) to grow the trunks to a sustainable thickness.

This year, those of you who pop up to see the vines will notice three different ways we have tied them down to the fruiting wire.

Julia and I run different experiments in the vineyard each year to further our viticulture education while we search for a larger site to expand the vineyard.

After growing grapes and making wine for others we're keen to start up our own wine label. For this we'll need a few more than the 70 vines on the allotment but it takes time to find the right site in a marginal climate like the UK, particularly when we need it to also be within a 10 mile radius of Buckden, so we'll keep learning and working for others in the meantime.

The main method of tying down the vines we are experimenting with is called the Pendelbogen system. Compared with single (one arm) or double (two arm) guyot

systems which you will see on the rest of the vineyard. This meant we had to install a second fruiting wire and bend the cane over this to attach it to the lower wire.

The main benefits of this system should be a higher yield, removal of a-typical dominance (better balance than more growth at the start and end of the cane), less bud loss as you usually lose some of the primary buds as you wrap the cane around the wire in the guyot system. The vines have a secondary and tertiary buds but these are less fruitful. The impact of the buds not being next to the cold fruiting wire as they would be with the guyot system will also reduce damage if frost occurs.

Frost is one of the biggest risks when growing vines. Particularly in a marginal climate like the UK. The commercial vineyards I work with will use various methods to move the cold air away from the vines.

You may know they even fly helicopters over the vines in New Zealand to achieve the required air movement. For our little vineyard, sadly, helicopters are out of budget so we are reliant on the air movement from the lorrys going past on the A1, this (so far!) seems to work for us!

One of the risks we might see with the Pendelbogen system is a denser leaf canopy which will make us more susceptible to fungal diseases such as mildews.

We can help combat this to a degree by leaf stripping around the fruiting zone to promote airflow (healthy leaves and pruned cranes are mulched back into the soil as a good source of nitrogen for the vines).

Often the mildews first originate on tomato plants then the spores spread across the allotments so it's important to tackle this early before a large culture builds. So please keep on top of this for your fellow allotmenters as I'm sure it's not just the vines which risk catching the infection. :-)

If you have an issue like this, I'm always happy to try and help.

In the future we are interested to experiment with cover crops to find out how we best use them in the alleyways to protect the vines and support their growth.

I'm just on my way back from a trip working in a winery in Stellenbosch in South Africa so writing this has been a good way to break up a long journey back.

Mark's original ask was to give some high-level info about our plot and growing grapes.

I hope the above is useful and interesting.

If anyone has any specific questions about growing grapes feel free to reach out. You can also follow our journey on my instagram account @vineyard_nick if you would like to.

Wishing you all a happy and productive growing season ahead.

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Articles for the next Newsletter.

I hope you have enjoyed this edition of our newsletter.

If you would like to contribute with an interesting article or have ideas on what you would like to see in the next edition then please email me at buckdenallotment@gmail.com