

Witney Allotments Newsletter

October 2023

In this issue

Welcome to the second issue of the WAA newsletter. I expect many of you are busy clearing your beds of summer veg and getting ready for autumn and winter. It feels like a better growing year than 2022 but it is strange having a bit of a heatwave at the end of the season!

In this issue, Mary Killick, one of the site reps from Lakeside, has provided us with the Best Kept Allotments judging criteria. Even if you don't wish to be included in this each year, it provides good ideas on how to keep our plots shipshape.

Also this month, we've got a focus on composting: I asked Alex Robinson, a National Trust gardener (and allotmenteer in Cheltenham), for some detail on the composting set-up at the garden he works in and he's provided some great inspiration for both beginners and more experienced allotmentees to use for our own compost bays and heaps!

*Julie Charlesworth
Hailey Road*



Drawing by Ronnie Hackston

Site news

Hailey Road have monthly get-togethers where HR tenants share food and drink. Details are on the noticeboard. Our next one is on Sunday 8 October 12-2.

Interested in joining the Hailey Road WhatsApp group for sharing plants, produce, growing ideas, info on get-togethers? Only for HR tenants. Contact Julie at WAAnewsletter@outlook.com

Sharing area etiquette. An observation from Hailey Road which applies to all sites: please do not leave rubbish, broken tools, furniture etc in communal areas! If you have something other than plants you think might be useful, leave it on your plot with a notice or put a note on the notice board or site Whatsapp group (if you have one). Please take unwanted items home for disposal.

Contact details

Do you have feedback, information or ideas for the next newsletter?

Email: WAAnewsletter@outlook.com

Need to contact your site rep? All their details are on the WAA website: witneyallotments.co.uk/committee/

WAA 2024 Best Kept Allotment plots judging criteria

All the sites will be judged by members from Carterton Allotment Association so there is no bias.

Tenants across the sites need to be aware of judging criteria to aid planning and planting for 2024.

If you don't wish to have your plot included for judging, please let the WAA secretary know before June 2024.

CRITERIA FOR JUDGING (Max of 10 points for each category apart for #1)

1. Plots must be clearly identified with a number.

If appropriate, on a full plot, a number at both ends will be greatly appreciated.
No number = no judging.

2. Cultivation

Plants should be free from disease, pests and damage. There should be a broad range of food crops, flowers (especially pollinators) and herbs.

3. Good workmanship

Soil between crops is weed free. Paths are neat, well-maintained and free from obstruction. Outside borders are neat and weed free.

4. Condition of sheds, greenhouses and other structures

Should be used for their purpose, be neat and well maintained.

5. Environmentally friendly practice

Evidence of compost bins and water collection.

6. Biodiversity

Clear evidence showing encouragement of wildlife, birds and insects. Evidence of planting or structures to encourage wildlife.

Tips for WAA tenants

Two of us from WAA judged Carterton allotments and these are our observations.

- Number 6 is the easiest to gain points for. **If feasible** display a clear label that says 'Wildlife Area' and plant accordingly. Even the smallest pond - be it bucket or purpose-built got - points. Erect a bird table and bird feeders and keep them filled. Put up a bird box.
- The above, of course, is not just for judging but what we should be doing anyhow.
- Clear labels draw the judges' attention.
- Poly tunnels and greenhouses used as dumps or which were unused gained no points.
- WAA committee member plots are not eligible for judging.

Provided by Mary Killick, Lakeside site representative

Interview with Alex Robinson, Assistant Gardener, Chastleton House (National Trust)

You've got a great composting set-up here. How is it all organised?

We have recently switched to a “no dig” system in our vegetable garden. We went to view Charles Dowding’s garden, and realised we needed to produce a lot more compost!

We now have seven large wooden bays – there are two rows of three bays and the final one is a “carbon store” for chipped woody material, which we use as required. The bays have removable slats at the front for access, and the slats between the bays can also be removed when we turn the heaps.

One tip we learned is to fill the first and third bays, leaving the middle one empty. When the green waste starts to break down, after a few weeks, it has usually reduced in volume by half. We then ‘turn’ those bays together into the middle bay, which is then left to mature. Each bay is nearly four cubic metres when full, which is approximately three metric tonnes of finished compost, depending on moisture content.

We hoped to have a sloping roof on the compost area, but this was too intrusive in our historic garden environment. Instead we use tarpaulins to keep the rain out – this stops the compost getting waterlogged.

Finally, we use a simple red/green traffic light system on the bays to let everyone know which bay to use.

What materials do you compost? And what materials (if any) do you not compost?

Pretty much everything is composted, including pernicious weeds and roots. This is down to achieving high temperatures during decomposition. Anything with stems is shredded first to help it degrade. We can also include wood chip if available.

The compost bays are filled in a “lasagne” method: layers of green waste interspersed with brown woody waste. Getting the layers right is a bit of a dark art, but 50:50 is a good start. Too much grass for example and it gets slimy: the reaction goes anaerobic and starts to smell. In summer, brown waste is harder to find, so we use cardboard and shredded paper.

You emphasise the importance of the temperature of the compost – can you tell us a bit more about that?

Within a week of loading a bay, we will get temperatures of 50 to 70 degrees centigrade. This should be maintained for two weeks, which will kill off weed seeds and any nasty material like blighted leaves. Then the heaps will gradually cool, different organisms come in and carry on the breakdown process.

We achieve these temperatures due to the volume of the bays, and also getting the green/brown mix right. With smaller domestic compost heaps, temperatures will be a lot lower. This won't kill weed seeds and will take longer.

We have got a compost thermometer to help take accurate readings.

On average, how long does it take to get usable compost? How do you use the compost?

After three or so months the heap should have cooled to a large extent – by this time the worms should be in doing a lot of the work. After this point we keep an eye on it to check moisture content – you should be able to squeeze the compost in your fist without any water coming out.

We use the compost as a mulch so we don't mind having twigs and stems in it. These take the longest to break down so that's why it's a good idea to shred it first.

“Potting” compost will take up to a year and would need sieving or putting through a shredder. We tend to use commercially bought, peat-free compost for potting.

You've got an allotment yourself - how have you changed your allotment composting set-up based on your experience here?

We've switched from plastic “Dalek” bins to a wooden pallet bay at the allotment but have no shredder so must cut things by hand. We are limited by the low volume of green material generated for much of the year, so have resorted to begging from neighbours! Also we don't get anywhere near the hot temperatures we do at work. As a result the process takes longer and we've avoided composting weed seeds or bindweed.



Alex in action in the compost bays at Chastleton

Forthcoming events

Waterperry Gardens, Orchard Open Day,
Sunday 8 October, 10-4

Millets Farm, Pick your own pumpkins,
during October. See details on their
website www.milletsfarmcentre.com

The Oxfordshire Museum, Woodstock has
a garden discovery session for the Under
5's on Thursday 12 October, 10.30-12.30.
Contact them for information.

If you would like to advertise a
garden/allotment event in the next
newsletter, please contact:
WAAnewsletter@outlook.com

What's cooking?

*I'm sure we've all got our favourite apple
recipes! Here are two of mine.*

Pumpkin, apple and ginger soup

500g squash, peeled, deseeded, chopped
2 apples, peeled, cored, quartered
1 red onion, peeled, quartered
Thumb-sized piece of ginger, peeled
3 garlic cloves
1 tbsp olive oil
½ tsp ground mixed spice
500ml vegetable stock
1 tbsp apple cider vinegar
Salt and pepper

Preheat oven to 180C fan (200C, 400F,
gas 6) and add pumpkin, apples, onion,
ginger and garlic to a large roasting tray.
Drizzle with olive oil, sprinkle over the
mixed spice and season. Gently mix
together, roast for 30-40 minutes.
Once cooked, unpeel the roasted garlic
cloves and add to a blender with the rest
of the cooked ingredients and veg stock
and vinegar. Blend until smooth. Ladle
into bowls and serve with dollop of cream
or yogurt and chopped chives.

Spiced Red Cabbage (Serves 6)

1 tbsp margarine/butter
1 red onion, thinly sliced
2 tbsp light brown sugar
1 tbsp balsamic vinegar
1 tsp ground mixed spice
1 red cabbage, cored and shredded
2 cooking apples, cored and grated

In a large saucepan, melt the butter and
fry the onion for 5 mins. Add the sugar
and balsamic vinegar and cook for a
further 10 mins until the onion is sticky
and caramelised.

Add the rest of the ingredients along with
80ml water and stir well. Turn up the heat
to bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to
simmer gently for 1 hour with the lid on.
check regularly, add splash of water if
looking dry.

Serve immediately or reheat later by
adding a splash of water and warm on the
hob or in the microwave.

Recipes from Aimee Ryan, *Great British
Vegan* or visit: wallflowerkitchen.com

What's in the next issue?

It might be autumn (and winter soon) but
we'll still have a newsletter every month
with ideas to aid planning for next year.
Many of us grow veg during the winter
anyway so the growing season continues!
Feel free to send tips and ideas relating to
what to plant on the allotment in the
autumn, for example: garlic, onions,
broad beans and so on; and also your
favourite squash recipes.

