

Grace and Flavour Garden (Organic Section)

The Grace and Flavour community garden in West Horsley is an old walled garden within the grounds of Dene Place on the edge of the Hatchlands estate. Although we have only just signed the 25 year lease with the National Trust who owns the land, we started work on a much neglected garden at the end of March 2010. At present there are two sections to the garden one non organic and one organic. My role is to be in charge of the organic section. The space presently allocated to the organic section is about 60 metres by 15 metres; the non organic section is bigger. The vegetable crop is sold to members, two local retailers and Polesden Lacey kitchens. In addition 10% is set aside for free distribution to those in our community who do not have access to fresh, locally grown produce.

This article is about the issues the organic section has confronted in its first year, not about any rivalry between the two sections.

Timing

One of the most difficult problems we experienced this year was the lateness of our sowing and planting. We sowed Broad Beans in May, which I was sure would lead to us having a significant blackfly problem, sowing them early or over winter often reduces the effect of this pest. Nevertheless we had a bumper crop of beans. Simply by squashing them (a rather messy job) using a hose and water we removed our blackfly problem. Also the vast number of ladybirds helped. The radish and rocket sown in late May succumbed to flea beetle. We did grub out a whole row of rocket (the only crop we lost last year.) The radish leaves were very mottled but the roots were very edible. Later sowings of rocket which missed the flea beetle were very successful

Weed killers

When I joined the group the word organic had surprisingly not been seriously discussed and the gardeners involved were not organic, hence the garden was sprayed with glyphosphate during the autumn prior to our taking over the garden. As a result even if we could afford to get soil association approval (which we cannot) we would fail to achieve their strict demands. However we have since that first spray not used weed killers on the organic section again. Perennial weeds are now dug out by hand.

The garden was then ploughed which although very helpful in allowing us to quickly get the land usable it has cut our weeds into many parts. Our main issues are with nettle and bramble which are easily removed through digging although it will certainly take a few years to completely eradicate them. There is some bindweed but it is limited and thank goodness no horsetail which thrives in my own garden. In the southern section of the garden (not in the organic section) we have inherited Japanese Knotweed, a major issue not resolved at the moment. This is not within the present organic section, but is being sprayed and burnt quite heavily

The Soil and Fertilizers

We have inherited land that has not been grown on for probably thirty years; as a result everything we sowed last year just grew. The soil is a good garden loam fairly neutral and easy to dig. Much of Horsley is heavy clay but there are pockets of sandy and chalky soil. We seem to have struck lucky. We did not incorporate any organic matter or use any organic fertilisers apart from a small amount of comfrey feed we produced for the tomatoes. The big issue will be this year and the future. We cannot produce enough of our own garden compost to meet our own requirements. We have built the usual compost bins from pallets. We have set up leaf mould containers with chicken wire and used Surrey County Council leaf mould bags. However this will not meet the needs of the garden. We are searching for a reliable source of manure. Contaminated farmyard manure can cause damage to vegetable crops. This contamination is caused by application of weed killers to farmland used to grow hay and other forage which are then eaten by stock. We are aware of a group in Farnham who believe they have already experienced the problem, having some crops distorted. We will need to be very careful with our supply.

We are growing comfrey and using it to make fertilizer. At present we have the traditional comfrey which sets seed easily, but we anticipate when we have cleared the perennial weeds we will invest in Bocking 14 Comfrey which only propagates from root cuttings. We will make nettle tea as a nitrogen fertilizer.

We have acquired a wormery from the internet (Freecycle) and aim to get it started during the spring

The soil still has perennial weeds within it. We are digging the soil this year rather than using a rotavator. We hope it will be free enough of weeds by the summer in order to use some green manures to help enrich and protect the soil

Seeds

We were so pleased to have the ground ready to plant, we used any seeds or vegetable plants we could lay our hands on (a seed order would have been far too late). We were given many seeds, and various plants were used. The BUPA care home residents sowed runner bean plants that were put into the garden. We were given a huge number of tomato plants. Alistair the infamous squash man appeared with his left over's. All were successful. We did use some organic potatoes left over from my own order a French variety called Anoe (from Tamar Organics) was very scab free and produced beautiful potatoes in a very dry season. We used some organic seeds but to be honest very few. However this year a large seed order has been made and we hope that next year virtually all our seeds, onions, shallots, Jerusalem artichokes and potatoes will be organically sourced. However, it is not always easy or even possible to get some varieties of seed which are organic. For example we would love to grow Squash Crown Prince but this appears difficult to locate as an organic seed. Consequently a few compromises will be made.

Pests/ Diseases

As already stated blackfly and flea beetle have been issues. Fortunately slugs have not been a problem yet. We used netting to cover our brassicas which has prevented the problem of caterpillars. We used collars around the brassicas to stop cabbage root fly. We used carrot fly resistant varieties to reduce the

impact of carrot root fly. We got a late attack of blight on our tomatoes but not on our potatoes. We had already cropped a vast number, so we picked the last of the crop as green tomatoes and Polesden Lacey made great quantities of green tomato chutney from them.

A four year rotation is planned which will help reduce the possibility of pests. The garden is being divided into 10 metres x 1.2 metres beds. This will help with the rotation and also reduced the soil damage by reducing the treading of the cultivated land. We aim to include some companion planting this year in particular the use of marigold to attract hoverflies and detract aphids.

Peat

One difficulty we have faced is the desire to use peat by some gardeners. The environmental issues associated with peat are well documented, consequently we have not used any peat based composts to sow or plant our vegetables on the organic section. As we were so late getting into the garden last year that was not a great issue. However this year we will be using non peat based composts to start some of our vegetable seeds.

As stated at the beginning of the article the organic section of the garden is still only about 30% of the overall garden, we hope eventually through the success of our section to persuade the non organic members of the benefits and success of the organic approach.

January 2011