



## It's that time of Year

Last year was the second warmest on record but, so far in 2024 we've had two of the coldest spells of weather in the past twelve months are heading into February - often the coldest month of the year. But we can be encouraged by the knowledge that the days are starting to get longer and spring is on its way.



There is not much to harvest from allotments between January and May – the so-called “Hungry Gap” but there is still plenty to do.

Outdoors this is the time to plant fruit bushes, onions, garlic and hardy beans, and it's a good time to start working on the soil – removing weeds, adding nutrients, digging in organic matter and taking advantages of the frosts which will help break down the soil. Seedlings can be started under cover, and you can start chitting potatoes which can be planted out when soil temperatures rise above 7°C.

It's also a good time to plan for the year ahead: thinking about what to plant where, how to adapt our plots including the introduction of raised beds and other constructions. It's easier to erect climbing frames and re-establish borders/edges when the soil is soft.

The association has constructed a means of centrally collecting rainwater at Digswell using industrial IBCs – see photograph in article below - and we will be encouraging members to do as much as possible to conserve water. Water represents the largest single spend item for the allotment team at the borough (WHBC pays the water bills for both our sites) and is becoming increasingly valued as a resource as we experience longer spells of warm, dry weather as a consequence of global warming.

## **Jobs**

February: Dig over your plot and add well-rotted organic material, chit seed potatoes. Last chance to prune hard fruit trees.

March: Prune berries, prepare frames/ cloches/ fleece. Weed, remove large stones and rake seedbeds and apply fertilisers. Dig bean trenches.

## **Plant**

February: (outdoors) Garlic and shallots, broad beans, fruit trees and bushes, (under cover) peas, spinach, broccoli, tomatoes.

March: Broad beans, peas, early chitted seed potatoes, onions, root and stem vegetable, cabbages and cauliflowers, lettuce and salad crops.

## **Harvest**

February: Winter salads, kale, Brussels sprouts, swedes, cabbage, leeks, parsnips.

March: Early rhubarb, kale, sprouting broccoli, leeks and spring onions.



## Update from the Committee

**Annual Subscriptions:** invoices for the 2024/25 season's subscriptions and rent will be sent out to Members at the beginning of March together with payment details. The cost of the sub and rent remains unchanged, and that prompt payment would be much appreciated, ideally by bank transfer.

**Annual General Meeting:** This will be held on Wednesday, 24<sup>th</sup> April, at the Jack Lee Hall, Woodside House, WGC, at 7 pm. Light refreshments will be provided.

This is an opportunity for all our members to hear about plans for the Association and to voice your thoughts on how it can be improved – please attend if you can.

If any member would like to give a short informal talk at the AGM or knows of someone who would do this, please let us know.

**Work Parties:** We will be scheduling work parties at both sites during April, July and September – exact dates yet to be confirmed.

**Mower volunteers needed:** We are seeking volunteers to help with the maintenance of our mowers. The works involve blade sharpening, oil changes etc., and do not require any knowledge of engines. If you would like to help the association please tell your site rep or contact us via the WhatsApp group or by email at: [email@longcroftallotmentassociation.org.uk](mailto:email@longcroftallotmentassociation.org.uk).

**Lock Combinations:** The combinations at both sites remain unchanged from 2023 but we plan to change them next year. If you have forgotten the combination please contact us via the WhatsApp group or by email.

**Digswell:** Two IBCs (intermediate bulk containers) have been delivered to site and guttering installed to collect rainwater for all ploholders at Digswell. The storage capacity is close to 2,000 litres. Immediately following the installation (and possibly during) there was heavy rainfall and the containers collected 400 litres overnight - an early indication of the system's effectiveness.

Some large trees were felled by storms late in 2023 but the council were quick to clear the areas affected and we are now waiting for the council to reinstate the fence.

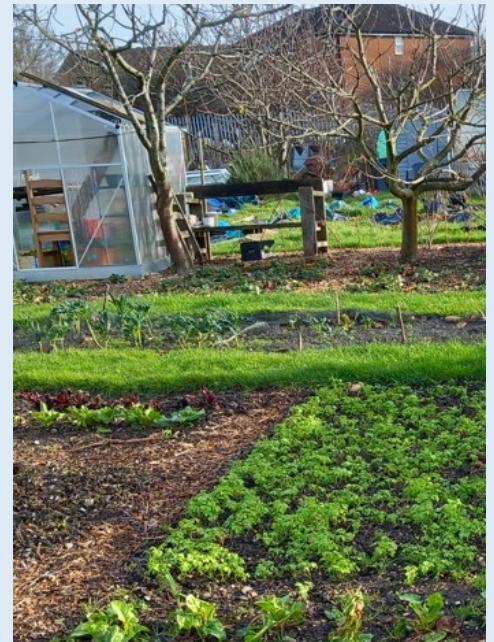
The "iron bench under the big oak tree" been restored to its former glory for the benefit of all. Many thanks to Bindra for his generous contribution to the cost of materials.

**Broadwater:** The council has attended to the dropped gate and is in the process of repairing the fence bordering the residential properties at the south eastern corner of the site.

**Work Parties:** Extensive work has been done to create a nature pond at Digswell and to restore the pond at Broadwater. Many thanks to those who helped with these initiatives. Dates for future work parties will be shared via email, web-site, WhatsApp group and newsletters.

**New Members:** Since the last newsletter Charlotte Austin (D159), Lilly (Lelija) Lankauskaite (B18), Judy and John Honeychurch (D157), Ian and Vanessa Prior (D116), Peter Nemeth (D178) and Tosh Sherwin (D162) have joined us - welcome to the Association and let's hope you have many enjoyable and productive years with us.

Our waiting lists are slowly reducing and there are now sixteen applicants on the waiting list for each site, with nine people on both lists. Waiting times are now approximately 18 months.







## Successful Harvesting Using Less Water

Water is essential to crop growth but it is a precious resource and there are steps we should take to ensure that it is not wasted.

The timing and nature of watering is critical. Watering around the base of the plant will ensure that moisture quickly and effectively reaches the roots. The best time to water crops is at the start or end of the day when the air is cooler. Occasional (e.g. weekly) thorough watering is better than more frequent light watering because it soaks into the soil encouraging deeper root growth.

Applying organic matter down around the base of plants helps to retain moisture and insulate the soil from high air temperatures. As the mulch encourages bacteria it will eventually decompose, improving soil structure and enhancing plant growth in future seasons.

Not all plants need the same amount of water, and some plants need more/less water at various stages of their growth cycle. The National Society of Allotment Society web-site contains specific considerations for a range of commonly grown crops:

<https://www.nsalg.org.uk/growing-advice/gardening-advice/water-use-on-allotments/>

Also, planting in blocks rather than rows can make watering easier and reduces water loss - the water escaping from each plant will provide some benefit to neighbouring crops. In the case of sweetcorn, planting in blocks aids pollination.

Finally, we should all harvest as much rainwater as possible from the roofs of our sheds and greenhouses – it is condition on our plots.

For more information see the links below:

<https://www.allotment-garden.org/gardening-information/water-conservation-garden-techniques/>

<http://livingwithajude.co.uk/vegan-lifestyle/how-to-save-water-in-your-allotment/>



### LAA Shop (“The Shed”)

The shop has re-stocked following the last opening of 2023 (when all bags of manure and peat-free compost were sold) and will open monthly from February through until October on Saturdays between 09.30 and 12.00 on the following dates:

February 24,	May 18	August 24
March 16	June 22	September 21
April 20	July 20	October 26

In association with shop, the latest seed scheme was also well patronised; many thanks again to Barbara Wilton for organising.





## Perennial Kale

Perennial Kale is one of the few crops that can be harvested during the Hungry Gap. Better still, it is actually a provider throughout the entire year. It is thought to be so prolific because it rarely flowers, so the majority of its energy goes into plant growth.

The infrequent production of flowers and seeds means that Perennial Kale is most commonly propagated from cuttings. Side shoots can be cut just below a node. Remove outer leaf growth and dip the stem in rooting hormone/compound (some people use honey) and set in a small pot with fresh compost. Lightly water frequently and the shoots will form roots after two weeks or so.

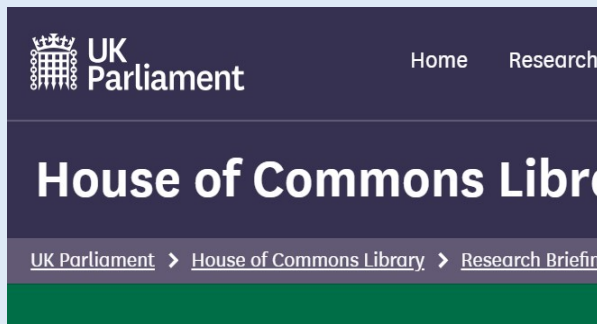
It was once widespread in the UK but became unpopular until they were rediscovered late in 20<sup>th</sup> century. At this time, because many plants were imported it was commonly thought to be non-native. In fact, where it was grown overseas, its origins were often traced back to the UK.

Also known as Taunton Deane and Tree Kale, the plant resembles a small tree and grows over 4-5 years to a height (and width) of 2m (6') so they can require staking. Growth stops at this stage but they can continue to provide for several more years.

Once the plants are established the plant is easy to maintain but may need some protection from frost. The leaves are highly nutritious but the stems are not pleasant. It can be cooked as other 'greens' or fried and seasoned as a crunchy snack. Alternatively, smaller leaves can be eaten as a salad crop or added to fruit smoothies.



## Asset of Community Value



The Association is in the process of seeking designation as an Assets of Community Value (ACV). An ACV is subject to additional protection from development.

An ACV is defined as “a building or area of land that is used to further the social wellbeing or social interests of the local community and could do so in the future”. This can include cultural, recreational and sporting interests and examples of ACVs include pubs, sports grounds, areas of woodland, village halls, village shops, libraries, churches and allotment sites.

Our sites benefit our members through providing the opportunity for exercise and to grow fruit and vegetables in an outdoor environment which allows us to socialise other like-minded plot holders. The knowledge and experience of gardening provides long term benefits to our members after they have left the association.

We also engage with the wider local community by: hosting visits from classes of local primary school children; liaising with the local Beekeepers Association and accommodating their beehives. Each plot provides valuable local green space with a range of plants to support wildlife and our natural ponds provide a local habitat for various animals and native plants. We would like to more and are currently exploring options to donate excess produce to local food banks.

The Association continues to seek other ways to engage and enthuse the local community. If you have any thoughts comments or suggestions then please let us know.



## Comments and Feedback



With thanks to Andrew Hepher for the image of the IBC rainwater collection system at Digswell

If you have any news, tips, features, recipes or photographs that you would like to submit for future issues of the Newsletter please send them to :Newsletter Editor: [email@longcroftallotmentassociation.org.uk](mailto:email@longcroftallotmentassociation.org.uk)

Visit the Longcroft Allotment Association website: [www.longcroftallotmentassociation.org.uk](http://www.longcroftallotmentassociation.org.uk)

