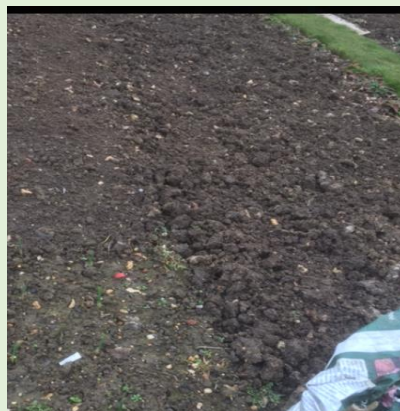




It's that time of Year

Winter is making way for brighter, warmer spring days and the ground is getting warmer. The days are getting longer – there's even time now to visit our plot in the evenings. It's time to prepare our seed beds for the coming year and starting to grow plants under cover. In April the first seedlings start to appear and established plants will need feeding, seeds need to be sown, and young seedlings will require potting on. But there is still a danger of frost and pests are on the rise.



There's not much to harvest – April is the so-called 'hungry gap' when there is little to harvest (and not much is growing!). The most important job is getting the ground ready: dig over beds; lift any weeds; apply organic matter (compost/manure) and apply plant feed. There is also a chance to make some early preparations by erecting climbing frames, preparing cloches and cold frames, and re-establishing borders and edges.

Spring is the perfect time to visit the shed at Digswell on a Sunday morning between 11:00 and 12:30 to stock up on canes, compost, fertilisers, grow-bags, slug pellets, seeds and other essentials.



Jobs

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

April: erect pea-sticks and bean supports, prune cherry and plum trees. Keep an eye on pests – slugs/snails, aphids.

Plant (under cover)

March: root and stem vegetable, cabbages and cauliflowers, lettuce and salad crops

April: tomatoes, aubergine and other fruiting veg

Plant (outdoors)

March: bare root trees, broad beans, peas, early chitted seed potatoes, onions, shallots and garlic.

April: second earlies and maincrop potatoes, carrots, beetroot, parsnips, squashes, French & runner beans, sweetcorn.

Harvest

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

April: more rhubarb, spinach and chard, spring cabbages, asparagus



LAA Update

Annual General Meeting - the AGM was held on 2nd March. There was a chance to reflect on the year's achievements: the completion of the waterless toilet at the Broadwater site and its successful Lottery Fund grant application led by Roger Edgson; the works completed on the trees on the southern boundary at Digswell and the successful summer barbecue (to be repeated in 2017).

The year has also seen the introduction of smaller 'starter' plots to encourage new members to join the association. They will have the opportunity to 'upgrade' to full size plots at a later date.

Life Membership Awards have been received by Helen McClean, Colin Pope and John Meers. All three of whom have expressed their thanks for the awards.

Roger Edgson and Debbie Eustace stepped down from the Committee towards the end of the year - we thank them both for their support and involvement over recent years.

Very sadly Jan Porter died unexpectedly in February. She had a plot at Digswell for many years and was a very well-liked member. Our condolences were sent to her family.

Broadwater - Storm Doris hit the Broadwater site on Thursday 23rd February. Here are some images showing some of the turmoil it created.

Digswell Work Parties - the next work party at Digswell will be on Saturday 8th April: a skip is planned to arrive during the week before that date so that all plot-holders have an opportunity to dispose of any large items of waste. Others are planned for Saturdays: 13th May, 1st July, 2nd September and 28th October - so make a note in your diaries.

New members - Since the last newsletter was sent out we have been joined by Miss Karen Crowley, and Mr Phong Nguyen - both at the Broadwater Site. Welcome to the Association and let's hope you have many enjoyable and productive years with us.



Controlling Slugs

In almost any year Slugs are the most troublesome pests on our plots. A cubic metre of soil can hold up to 200 slugs. Most of these are below ground during the day only surfacing in the evenings.

The best way to keep them in check is to tackle them on several fronts: removing them by hand at dusk when it's damp, applying bran barriers around vulnerable seedlings, slug-traps (sunken pots filled with (cheap!) beer, and slug pellets (ideally environmentally friendly ferrous-phosphate varieties).



Success with Seeds

Most of us grow our plants from seed – it can be a challenge but it's the cheapest and most rewarding method. The following tips can give your plants a head start and valuable extra days' growth:



- Clean any containers and trays to remove any traces of pests/diseases
- If you are sowing directly onto the plot, the soil temperature will need to be consistently above 7degC (usually early-mid May). Horticultural fleece or clear plastic sheeting can help warm the ground sooner.
- If you are planting in trays, put the compost in a warm place prior to planting
- Space your seeds at the distances recommended on your seed packets
- Large seeds that are wrinkled (e.g. peas and beans) can benefit from soaking prior to planting

Down at the Shed

Winter is over and the Shed re-opened on Sunday 5th March. Come along to see Helen and her helpers - shop stock now includes more organic products and seeds, also peat free compost.

All goods are top quality and are excellent value compared with local garden centres and DIY stores.

Shop opening times: The Shed opening hours are **11:00am to 12:30pm on Sundays** until 1st October.



Planting Potatoes

Potatoes are a versatile vegetable, and the process of preparing the ground and growing potatoes helps to break up the soil. By now, seed potatoes should be well chitted – with several short, plump roots sprouting from their 'eyes'.

Before planting them, ensure that some well-rotted compost or manure has been dug in. The potatoes should be planted in 'V' shaped trenches at least 12cm (5") deep. Trenches should be at least 30cm (12") apart for early varieties, 37cm (15") for maincrop varieties.

When to plant and harvest:

- First earlies – plant in late March, harvest June-July
- Second earlies – plant early to mid-April, harvest July-August
- Maincrops – plant in late April, harvest August- October



Water the potatoes during dry weather and apply a liquid feed every few weeks to increase the yield and the quality of tubers. As soon as the green shoots start to appear, earth up to cover the stems with a ridge that is ~15cm (6") high – this is stop light reaching the potatoes.



Polite reminders

Subscription letters are on their way and our rents are due on 1 April. Please make every effort to pay these promptly (and remember that those of us above pension age are entitled to a 50% discount).

Greener Fingers – the 'No Dig' Method

Soil is a living mixture of diverse organisms and works better when it's not disrupted. No-dig gardening can bring many benefits to your plot and is gentler on your back than traditional methods of growing vegetables. Nutrient rich materials – compost, manure, etc. – are applied at normal rates but only at the surface of the soil. Worms and other organisms do the work of bringing the nutrients into the ground.



The basic requirements are:

- Avoid treading on areas where plants will be grown – this generally requires beds to be no wider than 1.2m (4')
- Regularly apply organic matter – well rotted horse manure, spent mushroom compost or maybe garden compost - over the ground surface to a depth of about three inches compost, manure and mulches
- Apply nutrient rich fertilisers in the spring when plants are growing at their fastest and the weather is less likely to wash them away
- Gently ruffle the surface when preparing seed beds
- When beginning beds, apply opaque coverings (cardboard, carpets or sheeting) to kill of any weeds
- Beds that can be reached easily from both sides, avoiding the need to tread on growing areas
- Regularly hoe out any weeds, and Hoe in – rather than dig over – any green manures

Earthworms, bacteria and fungi, all of which contribute to health soil, can be adversely affected by disturbance such as digging and by compacting soil. Most soil life is closest to the surface, and digging can bring poorer quality soil to the surface. Digging can also help seeds from weeds to find ideal conditions for growth.





Crop Planner

Key:

	sow
	plant
	harvest

	MAR	Apr	MAY	Jun	Jul	AUG
Broad Bean						
Runner Bean						
Pea						
Potatoes						
Leek						
Onion / Shallot						
Garlic						
Beetroot						
Carrot						
Swede / Turnip						
Courgette						
Pumpkin / Winter Squash						
Tomatoes						
Chilli / Aubergine						
Chard / Leaf Beet						
Cabbage						
Kale						
Black/Redcurrants						
Raspberries						
Strawberries						
Fruit Trees						



Comments and feedback



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...

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