



Allotment News

Churchfields 'blessed' by special guests *Birds 'of pray' home in on our site!*

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WAHGA is a membership association, offering plot-holders and members friendship, expertise, advice and social events

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THE Churchfields Allotment site has been playing host in recent months to a pair of peregrine falcons. The raptors are roosting in the spire of St James' Church — but their focus is clearly on feeding on prey in our allotments.

As well as the news that one of the most fiercely protected species in the UK is present in our midst, the first soundings of a survey of bats at Churchfields suggests that we have at least eight of the UK's 18 species of bat onsite. Both developments underline the degree to which our site is a biodiversity jewel — just 100 yards or so from Weybridge High Street.

Peregrine falcons normally prefer the uplands of the north and west rocky seacoasts of Britain but there have been increasing instances of their moving into more urban settings. There has been a well documented example in recent years of peregrine falcons settling on a building site in Woking — complete with live Webcam. However, there are probably only 1,500 breeding pairs in the UK.

Peregrines are between 15 and 20 inches in height (39-50cm) with a wingspan of up to 45 inches (115cm). They swoop at a remarkable speed - in ideal conditions allegedly up to 200mph. It means their prey, which tend to be medium-sized birds, such as pigeons or ducks, don't stand much of a chance of escape.

WAHGA's Wildlife and Biodiversity expert, James Higgins, believes that the presence of peregrines in Woking could be a factor. They have been breeding there now for six years and the recovery of the species means that they are more often found on urban 'cliffs', such as office and residential blocks, cathedrals and churches. Peregrines were close to extinction in the UK in the 1960s due to human persecution and the impact of pesticides but they are now a

Schedule 1 listed species under the Wildlife and Countryside Act. This means that anyone harming or killing one faces an unlimited fine, up to six months imprisonment or both.

Many of you will have seen bats flying across our site, usually as dusk begins to set in.

James and Sophie Murphy contacted and consulted with the Surrey Bat Survey team

because they were aware of the richness of the bat population onsite. The team's estimate at present, based on results from sophisticated audio equipment, is that we have eight species onsite, including one really rather rare species. Once the report is complete, we will share its detailed findings with you



WAHGA's Summer social whirl!

Work-party and barbeque show plot-holders' community spirit

By WAHGA vice-chair, Pippa Graeme

IT WAS with considerable relief that we were able to resume work-parties after a year-and-a-half of Covid restrictions.

On a perfect sunny (but, thankfully, not hot) Saturday, over 20 WAHGA members joined us for our first working party. That is not far off one-in-ten of our plot-holders! We had been forced to take a break from running



The coppice plot before the work-party set to

group working parties for obvious reasons and were delighted to be able to get a willing and able group together at long last. Our task for the day was daunting - clearing an extremely overgrown area - and we did not expect to make much of a difference given the challenge.

However, it's amazing what 20 people can achieve in three hours — with a much-needed tea and cake break to spur us on! Thank you so much to everyone who turned out and



The coppice plot after the work-party

worked so hard. We plan to run more working parties so please do watch this space. Also a special thank you for the junior members who renovated the bug hotel and also provided excellent jam tarts and cakes on the day.



Plot-holders' children had a whale of a time, renovating a bug hotel and listing its residents

Excellent turn-out for WAHGA's Summer barbeque

Our team of organisers had to scrap a couple of potential dates for our barbeque, as bouts of unseasonal weather kicked in — but it was worth the wait, writes Pippa Graeme.

WE were thrilled that so many WAHGA members came to our summer BBQ. Having watched the rather dodgy weather forecast on an hourly basis for the few preceding days we were so lucky to have a glorious sunny day for our first social event for quite some time.

For some of us who have been working allotments for some years, it was great to see a mix of established plot-holders and newcomers attending the event.

It was particularly heart-warming to see so many members meeting each other for the first time and chatting away well into the afternoon.

Special thanks to organisers Leila Brown and Caroline Freeman and our barbeque experts, David Brown and James Higgins.

Certainly an event to be repeated - but, in the meantime, do watch out for other social events, including our plan for a community bonfire on Saturday 6 November at 5pm. Sausages and sparklers supplied!



'A Bin Called Wanda'...and WAHGA host Duke of Edinburgh youngsters

Look out for Wanda, the WAHGA Bin that is strictly NOT for garden waste or rubbish! Now that restrictions have been lifted, we can at last provide a drop-off point so that WAHGA members can support our local Foodbank. The Foodbank provides a precise, monthly wish-list and we will circulate October's list in the next few days by e-mail. Items sought are usually basic toiletries, and tinned foods. Fresh produce can be dropped off at St James's Church on Thursday mornings — but please don't put it in the bin. The bin will be sited by the sharing table in the compound.

A big thanks too to our local secondary school students, Leon and Thomas (*pictured right*). A WAHGA member arranged for them to get the practical experience they need for their Duke of Edinburgh qualifications by working onsite.

They will be helping plot-holders in exceptional circumstances who, temporarily, can't tend their plots. We plan to extend this pilot scheme next Spring. Great work, lads. Well done!



What Churchfields Allotments will mean to me...

“This nine-acre calm oasis — it’s just lovely, lovely...”

Having spoken to established plot-holders for this series so far, we thought it would be an idea to speak to someone embarking on their allotment career.

*We found that **Jonathan Bell** had quite a story to tell.*

WHEN Jonathan Bell and his wife, Katie, found they were running out of space to cultivate in their back garden, he suggested they look into the possibility of renting an allotment. Katie feared that it might be too much to take on but they fell lucky when they arrived at Churchfields.

WAHGA was looking for plot-holders who could benefit from a pair of raised beds and Jonathan realised that one of these would be ideal for him on Plot 126, making cultivation so much easier for him.

From the Armed Forces to Newsnight

Jonathan, who hails from Yorkshire, served for over a decade as an infantry soldier in the Green Howards’ Regiment, his active service largely on the streets of Northern Ireland. But in 1993, at the age of 29, he and 15 other soldiers were injured in an accident during a training exercise on Salisbury Plain. It left him paraplegic — but his change in circumstances opened his life to avenues he probably would never have entered, had he remained in the Armed forces.

He went to University— “where I came from, young



people didn’t go to University” - he realised he had a passion for news and current affairs, and was accepted into the BBC as a trainee assistant producer. He worked for two years in factual programming, including some work at *Panorama*, before beginning a 15-year career as researcher, then producer at *Newsnight*.

A zeal for social justice

Speaking to him today, his fascination with current affairs and the political situation in Britain burns bright, matched only by his zeal for social justice. “When I was on *Newsnight*, I always particularly enjoyed giving a platform to those groups in society that didn’t usually have a voice. The rank and file rather than the officers!”

“You’re always looking to the future — yes, your winter stuff is in but you’re already thinking about what to plant in the Spring.”



Diane Ewart, Peter Harman and David Brown building the beds

Having embarked on his allotment journey, Jonathan particularly likes the perspective it gives: “You’re always looking to the future — yes, your winter stuff is in but you’re already thinking about what to plant in the Spring. Aside from the planting, the nicest surprise has been getting to know people. Everyone has been so helpful and there’s so much

What Churchfields Allotments will mean to me... (cont)

expertise. It's great being able to sidle up to someone and ask for advice."

Jonathan name-checks Diane Ewart, Pippa Graeme, Peter Harman, David Brown, Sophie Murphy and Lesley Tilling for their support, advice and help in construction of the raised beds. The plan is to construct three or four more with WAHGA support, giving the Bells plenty of space to work with.

They will be experimenting with Hugelkultur — where logs are laid below the soil in a raised bed, rotting down over time to produce extra nutrients.

Jonathan is delighted that his wife has become much more excited about the project than he'd expected and he is hoping six-year-old daughter, Sara, will get the bug too.

And there's no mistaking Jonathan's own enthusiasm: "This nine-acre calm oasis. It's just lovely, lovely..."



Jonathan, Katie and Sara—already hard at work on their plot with a difference

To Dig or Not to Dig? That is the Question!

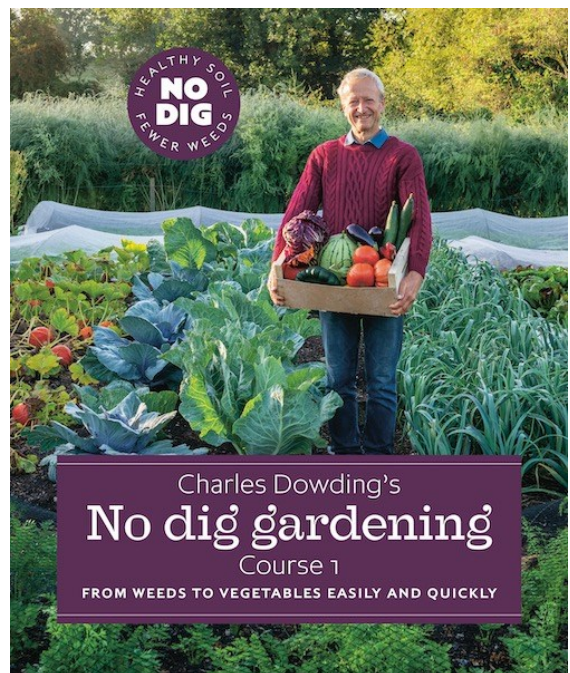
*The world of cultivation is abuzz with a debate as to whether traditional digging of our plots is correct or whether an increasingly popular 'no dig' approach is better. Our resident expert, **Diane Ewart**, answers the key questions around 'no dig' and helps plot-holders decide whether this is fad or way-ahead.*

I've never heard of 'no-dig' what it is?

'No-dig' is a system of cultivation where organic matter is added to the soil surface as a mulch, at least 5 - 15cm (2 - 6 in) deep. Worms, insects and microbes act on the organic matter, which is slowly incorporated into the soil. The soil structure and drainage is improved through aeration in the form of tiny air pockets and through the excretions of the worms and insects. Having an undisturbed environment encourages beneficial soil fungi and micro-organisms to build up. This is particularly useful in the upper soil where the majority of our annual vegetable crops have their root structure.

What are the benefits of 'no-dig'?

A major advantage is less effort! However, its advocates argue that it is rather a superior approach to cultivation.



Charles Dowding launched his 'no dig' theory in 1983—but it is now attracting more and more attention.

Dig or 'no-dig' (cont from overleaf)

What are those 'no-dig' benefits?

- Less effort
- Fewer pests and diseases, due to a more balanced soil being allowed to build up in an undisturbed environment
- Development of beneficial soil fungi and micro-organisms
- Moisture is retained more efficiently under mulch than on the surface of bare earth
- Slower percolation and less leaching of nutrients

What kinds of mulch can I use?

Composted manure, homemade compost, wet paper, wet cardboard and well rotted wood/bark clippings are all good. A mix of these will encourage a biodiverse environment. If your paths have been covered with wood chip early in the year, these will now be part rotted and are an ideal mulch. Use these on your plot and cover the paths with new chipping.

What are some of the issues that people find?

Though the 'no-dig' system is considered easier than digging, it is a long-term process. The benefits of 'no-dig' develop over time, as the balance and the structure of the soil improves year-on-year. 'No-dig' relies on having a plentiful supply of organic matter, so composting is an essential activity to support it. So, if you want to try 'no-dig', try it on one bed or section of your plot at a time.

If no-dig is so good, why are most people still digging?

Primarily habit and tradition. In the 1950s double-digging was common practice and was found to be a lot of effort for minimal return. Virtually nobody does that now. So general digging is done to remove weeds, loosen the soil and add organic matter. Digging might make removing perennial weeds easier but it brings dormant weed seeds to the surface. Digging speeds up the decomposition of organic matter in the soil, can affect the soil structure and balance of micro-organisms, the importance of which has been better understood in recent years. If you are a keen digger, then perhaps a combination of the two systems could work: dig up the weeds but don't dig in the compost, just leave it as a mulch?

It's my first year of having an allotment and the plot is very overgrown. How should I approach no-dig?

Starting with a very overgrown plot is difficult. My advice is to work a section at a time. Assuming you start now, that would be a small bed perhaps 1.5m x 3m. Once you've laid the mulch you

can plant some winter crops such as kale. I would then move to the next section, develop this and perhaps plant onion, shallot and garlic. The third could be planted with a green manure. And, slowly, you can tackle the entire plot.

Cropping a small area well is more productive than having weeds and empty spaces on a larger area, and you will enjoy it more.

How long do I have to leave the new bed before I plant?

Whatever the time of year, you can start planting directly into the mulch. The theory is that the plant roots will find their way through the compost and cardboard into the soil below.

What do I do with persistent weeds like marestail?

It is helpful to remove any shrubby perennial weeds such as bramble roots from the area beforehand. There's no need to remove other perennial weeds. Just apply a light-excluding organic surface layer such as large sheets of cardboard or several thicknesses of spread-out newspaper before adding the compost mulch of 5-15cm. Excluding light in this way weakens perennial weeds. However 'no-dig' does not mean 'no weed'. That is a common misconception. You may still have perennial weeds but they will be easier to pull out. And yes, even marestail will eventually go!

Can I apply 'no-dig' in my garden?

Yes, you can, and it's very easy. I already use no-dig principles in my garden, I just apply a layer of composted manure around the shrubs and a thicker layer over the herbaceous perennials once they've been cut back for winter. I never dig over the beds and just have to do a bit of light weeding. The main difference is that the garden is full of permanent/semi-permanent plants but, on a vegetable patch, the plants are forever changing.

I really want to try 'no-dig'. Where can I get more information?

On-line: 'No-dig' Wikipedia page

charlesdowding.co.uk

gardenorganic.org.uk search no-dig method

RHS.org.uk search 'no-dig' allotment

Books

No dig gardening -

Charles Dowding

No-dig Gardening

- Charlie Nardozzi

