

Allotment News

Thank you — and welcome!

By Phil Murphy — WAHGA Acting Chair

ONE year on from lockdown, the WAHGA Committee was unanimous: we needed to thank our plot-holders for keeping the site looking so good over the past 12 months. And we needed to offer a big welcome to those of you who have stepped forward to take up new plots.

This special edition of *Allotment News* is designed to update you on some of the activities of the last year and, we hope, to reflect some of the optimism shining through our Churchfields' community.

It's my view that it was a close call as to whether allotments would remain open, when the first national lockdown was announced. Thankfully, we were allowed to stay onsite and our membership responded, heeding the necessary restrictions but tending their plots creatively and assiduously. And we have had a strong influx of new members. A big thanks to the newcomers who have worked so hard to make a success of their new plots. Yours has been a great contribution to how good the site is looking.

We plan to enhance and improve our site this year and in years to come but, at each stage, we will consult our members. You'll see from the article about our shop (*page 6*) that we are bringing in more income from that. Let us have your views as to what you would like to see us invest in.



More plot holders than ever — and a healthy waiting list



FEW of us knew what to expect from national lockdowns 1-3 but, in hindsight, perhaps it should have been more obvious earlier that allotment associations would be big beneficiaries, as more and more people realised the benefits that cultivating a plot might bring.

It is fashionable to talk about 'mental health benefits' but, in common parlance, all of us have experienced the calm that working our allotments can bring to our lives, the sense of inspiration as we watch our produce grow, and the camaraderie that grows as fellow plot-holders become friends.

During lockdown, we even had people approaching the gates at Churchfields and shouting over, asking if there were plots available to rent.

It means we now have our largest ever number of plot-holders, 259, and there are six plots being prepared for letting out of our total of 265 plots.

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CONTACT US

If you have something you would like to share in the next newsletter or want to give us feedback, please e-mail to: info

@weybridgeallotments.org.uk

WAHGA Website [click here](#)

Original photos in this edition were all taken onsite by James Higgins

More plot holders than ever...

(cont from page 1)

By clearing parts of the site and making the norm for allocation to new plot-holders a quarter-plot, we have managed to increase the number of plots we can offer by around 17% over the past 18 months or so (see *Site Map* item below).

We have 32 full-sized plots (*insert here specification*), 14 three-quarter plots, three two-thirds plots 119 half-plots, eight one-third plots and 89 quarter plots. The reason why some plot-holders have larger plots is historical: they were able to take on more space at times when WAHGA had no waiting-list.

It is a fine balance, judging whether to be rigid about offering to newcomers only quarter plots. Many existing plot-holders hanker after a larger plot but, if we allow too many plot-holders to enlarge their space, we will not be able to make a real dent

“It’s a fine balance between offering plot-holders a larger plot and making a dent in the waiting-list”

in the waiting-list, which now stands at 54 people.

These numbers make it clear why we will have to be robust in ensuring that plot-holders keep their plots to a satisfactory standard of cultivation. We have begun our Spring check on plot standards and will be asking those who

have not been able to keep their space up to scratch whether they want to shrink the size of their plot or relinquish them. So it could be that we can make more rapid progress in welcoming new plot-holders and, over time, offer successful plot-holders more space.

The Allotment Community — news and views

The pandemic didn't affect our [member communications](#) - with seven newsletters compiled and published since our Covid update published in March 2020. Articles included shop updates, native hedge planting, help with problems such as tomato blight, information about seed potatoes, articles from members; our 'What the allotments mean to me' feature (see *page 4 of this edition*) and many other topics and updates. You can see back copies of the newsletters on our website [here](#) Our next issue will be published in May.

In January we launched our [new Facebook group](#) (changing from a FB 'page'). The group format has enabled much more communication for members who are FB users. Membership of the group has now grown to 80, and there have been 80 allotment and veg growing posts made to date and lots of helpful and interesting comments from members. This is a great way of sharing hints and tips, asking for help and of course posting photos of produce and our wonderful allotments.

We'd love to see even more members - so if you'd like to join please click on [this link](#)

The committee set itself a target to update the [allotment plot site-map](#). Since it was last published we have created a number of new plots and it was becoming quite hard to work out which plots were which! The update entailed walking the site, checking the position of each plot and adding the new ones to the map. The new site map is now located conveniently under a separate heading on the website [Click link](#) Plot signs - ensuring that all plots have a number marker - is high on our 'to-do' list.

We're making a concerted effort to keep on top of [boundary litter clearance](#) — even if it does sometimes feel like painting the Forth Bridge. As soon as you've finished, you need to start again!

We've carried out a couple of boundary deep cleans (from both sides of the fences) recently. Unfortunately, litter does continue to collect along the path around the site, and it blows through the fence into the allotments, detracting from our beautiful site. So this is an ongoing job, and several WAHGA members have volunteered to adopt the Churchfield Path as part of the Weybridge Litter Busters' initiative. But please don't let that stop you from helping out if you see litter or allotment rubbish along our boundary (either side)!

Pippa Graeme—WAHGA Working Party Coordinator



Long waiting-list a challenge for Brett

Hello, If you see a large balding guy with a beard, often in shorts, walking around then that's most likely me, Brett (*above*). I have been offered the honourable role of plot steward for the Churchfield Allotments and I am looking forward to getting stuck in. I have taken over from Sally Quest, who did a sterling job previously, letting 26 plots in the last quarter of 2020, so I have big shoes to fill. I would like to welcome all our new tenants and wish you all the best of luck in cultivating your new plots. If you need anything from us, please don't hesitate to ask and we will aim to assist in any way we can.

Thanks to relaxing government guidelines we have now restarted viewing for prospective plot holders and hope to accommodate as many we can in the coming couple of weeks. We look forward to welcoming our new neighbours at the beginning of this rather more hopeful year.

Over the coming weeks I will introduce myself to as many of you as possible and please feel free to stop me to ask any questions you may have about the plots or any other matter that I may be able to help with.

Brett Ford

Lockdown 'survival'

By WAHGA Secretary, Leila Brown

THANKS to all of you who heeded our reminders to follow local and National Allotment Society recommendations, thus helping us keep our members safe and our site functioning.

As an allotment community we have supported a number of plot-holders who have been shielding, suffered from COVID or other health issues over the course of the past year. Some plot-holders were 'stranded' overseas during the first lockdown! WAHGA members have delivered shopping, taken plot holders to hospital appointments, dug plots, erected sheds and tended to plots as requested.

A break-in in April 2020 affected many plot-holders and, fortunately, we were able to reunite some owners with their tools over the course of the week. A crime number was raised and we checked the plots for those members who could not get down to the site. Some of us felt that a positive from the lockdown was a greater sense of community spirit amongst plot-holders who in general enjoy the solace of tending their own plots. As we follow the roadmap back to some kind of normality, we need to continue to take precautions. Do limit site-access and do lock the gate every time you enter and leave the site, scrambling the code so that unauthorised people are not able to gain access.



Looking out for special species

MOST of you will be aware that the Churchfields Allotments site is home to or visited by a range of special fauna. But did you know that they include several species we have a duty to protect because they are on the list of Species of Principal Importance (SPIs, NERC Act, 2006)?

Here are some of the species you might just spot, if you are fortunate, on our site: hedgehog, slow worm, stag beetle, nine kinds of bat including noctule, soprano pipistrelle and brown, long-eared; song thrush, house sparrow, tree sparrow, common frog and toad; mason bee (*pictured top right*), reed bunting, wood warbler (*pictured below*), yellow wagtail, lesser redpoll, grass-snake, and a wide variety of butterflies and bumblebees.



“During the early part of 2020 [the WAHGA Wildlife Team \(WWT\)](#) faced the same challenges as many other conservation and volunteer groups, writes *Biodiversity and Wildlife Officer, James Higgins*.

A decision was taken to halt all working parties. A few short weeks after we had organised the first ever visit of a community payback team to help us improve plots and boundary areas they also stopped. It was frustrating but more important to stay safe and keep our site open.

Lots of the committee and several members worked alone to ensure newly planted hedges and flowers were kept watered during the summer months. Later government guidance allowed for distanced volunteering groups but we played safe and continued to work alone.

The individual volunteers have started to build brash hedges along the boundary to protect vital existing stag beetle habitat and encourage more wildflowers in the newly cleared spaces. Extra nesting boxes have been added and new reptile mats across the site will help to give our important slow worm colony further places to hide.

If you have space for a small reptile mat on your plot to help the slow worms or would like to join in with WWT activities as we resume working parties, please do get in touch *via*: info@weybridgeallotments.org.uk

Site portaloo — the facts

A fair bit of confusion seems to surround the situation in relation to our onsite loo. Here are the facts. The portaloo onsite was bought by the charity some years ago. The firm who maintained it went into liquidation shortly before Covid. The loo was locked from the start of the first lockdown to eliminate the risk of cross-contamination. Either WLC or WAHGA will fund a more attractive replacement. So, rest assured, there will be a loo on site accessible to all members as soon as restrictions are lifted and we can make the necessary arrangements.

What Churchfields Allotments mean to me...

A BRUSH WITH COVID — NOW A NEW LEASE OF LIFE



One year ago, Mandal Kalbassi was in hospital, laid low by Covid. Here he tells us how WAHGA friends rallied round and helped him re-discover not just his love of cultivation but his love of life.

FOR around 20 years, Mandal Kalbassi and his wife, Cheryl, have worked an allotment at our Churchfields' site and, if you only visit it once, it is worth the detour to 52A and 53A to admire their handiwork and green fingers.

But, a year ago, he could have been forgiven for wondering

whether he'd ever be back on site. On the same day as Prime Minister Boris Johnson was taken into hospital, Mandal was hospitalised. He caught the virus from his wife, Cheryl, who was exposed to the virus at the school where she taught. Their 28-year-old son was also infected.

Doctors struggled to get Mandal's temperature down and they were concerned about damage to his right lung. Both he and his wife lost a stone in weight in a fortnight. When he was released from hospital, he and his family had to shield. And this was the point at which WAHGA members stepped in to help out.

WAHGA members stepped in to help

Pippa Graeme, an indefatigable Committee member, volunteered to do the lion's share of the Kalbassis' shopping, our Biodiversity Officer, James Higgins, Mandal's allotment neighbour, was a constant source of support, and Mandal's next door neighbour, Richard, tended and watered his plots so that, when he returned, they were in great condition.

It's typical of Mandal that, as well as for his family, his main concern was for others: for Pippa on her multiple supermarket trips; but also he feared that he might have infected other plot-holders before he realised he had the virus.

Back on site—with trepidation

It all worked out well, Mandal didn't become a 'super-spreader' and Pippa emerged unscathed from her retail outings! And Mandal was able to visit his plot in mid-May, though he admits to some trepidation, when he first went back.



Mandal hails from Isfahan in Iran—one of the world's finest garden cities

“You become afraid of your own shadow after an experience like that” - Mandal Kalbassi



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“It was quite a scary time. You become afraid of your own shadow after an experience like that.”

Mandal’s plot—teeming with produce, even in early April

Mandal has a great gardening pedigree, his family hailing from Isfahan in Iran. Its traditions as a garden city of international renown stretch back to the Safavid dynasty, which began in the early 16th century. He learned too from his father, who was an arboriculturist. Trees in his garden he has grown from seed.

Solace in his allotment

Mandal’s father sent both him and his elder brother to the UK at the age of 16 — in Mandal’s case just four years before the Iranian revolution. He took A’ Levels in Grimsby and then took a degree and Ph.D in chemical engineering at Nottingham University. He spent 30 years of his career in industry working for an American firm, where the gruelling hours meant that working his allotment was the perfect relaxation.

Now he is hoping that his Covid trauma is over. Six weeks after he was released from hospital, he was recalled because an X-ray showed a shadow on his right lung. But, by the end of the year, that had all but disappeared.

“I have to be careful. I have a long-term weakness in my right lung and I find I have a tendency to lose my voice. It’s been a challenging year but, hopefully, there will be no more hiccups and no long Covid,” says Mandal.

One of the great characters of Churchfields

As one of the many great characters you find in Churchfields Allotments, Mandal is planning to leave solid professional and natural legacies. He was invited a few years ago to create from scratch a new chemical engineering department and syllabus at Brunel University and now that department is beginning to churn out graduates.

On the site, as well as tending his own plot, you will often see him working with other members of the Wildlife Team, planting native hedgerow plants, that in a few years’ time will form a fabulous border around Churchfields and provide a superb habitat for birds and other wildlife.

Meanwhile, on his own plot, he is discovering the joys of growing saffron. He found bulbs in 2019 and now is seeing some great results.

“The flowers are gorgeous and I think we have just the right kind of soil here for it to flourish,” he says.

Mandal — it’s great to see you back in top form and full of the joys of life!

LOCKDOWN GIVES SHOP UNEXPECTED SHOT IN THE ARM!

Prior to Covid, business was not booming in the allotment shop, and volunteers often had quiet mornings with few customers. But, after the first lockdown, all garden centres had to close, while our shop was still well-stocked with the items our members needed. And the allotments were remarkably busy, with a fine warm spring welcoming everyone onto the site.

The then chairman, Tony Palmer, was quick to make the allotments safe by issuing the National Allotment Society guidelines. I wondered if it would be safe to run the shop by e-mail, giving customers times at which to collect their goods so they could not encounter others. Tony was cautiously enthusiastic and the rest of the members were very keen.

I needed to create an order form and our former plot steward, Jo, cooked up a foolproof Excel spreadsheet in ten minutes during her lunch break. We are still using her form, constantly updated.



WAHGA Shop Manager,
Lesley Tilling

“Orders came flooding in”

With the form showing the available goods and the prices, we could start. Orders came flooding in and some weeks we had three sessions for collections. Keeping up with the level of demand was quite frantic, and although like everyone else, I couldn't follow my usual pursuits, the shop took up all the time I used to spend rowing, swimming and working at Hampton Court! I was lucky to get help from my husband, who also was missing his usual hobbies, so we could work in the shop together, and from Ashley and Alex Robinson, who knew the shop goods well and offered to help every week.

Naturally with all this demand for goods, we kept selling out! A blow came when I contacted our regular supplier in Ipswich, to find that she had put her whole company in mothballs for the duration, as she was unable to make her office or warehouse a safe place to work. By contrast, the Compost Centre in Woking kept going with deliveries as usual, and it was due to their reliability that we could keep up the supply of manure and compost, which we rely on to improve the soil.

King's seeds — the Tesco of the seed world!

Allotments get a good deal on seeds from King's seeds, which someone described as the Tesco of the seed world, but that's fine as they cover all the basic varieties at a good price. I could not believe how many times I had to restock with seeds. I was very wary of being left with seeds that were out of date and which I could not sell. So I ordered a maximum of five packets of anything and re-ordered popular varieties again and again. What a lot of parcels I received! I discovered that I really enjoy selling seeds, I seem to share in the possibility of every packet.

“I discovered that I really enjoy selling seeds. I seem to share in the possibilities contained in every packet!”

This year I have ordered larger numbers in the hope that members will again come to the shop for their needs and that I will not have to re-stock at all this year! And please come to me for your beans! I have ordered so many!

We still have to wear masks in the allotment shop, as elsewhere, and, after this very tense time, I am still a little nervous when customers get close to each other, but I am happy to welcome customers back into the shop. I hope the volunteers who used to take turns in the shop will return to help again, and I hope they enjoyed their time off!

The order form has been a great benefit, I think, for members to see what we have in the shop and decide what they want, so I shall continue to send it out every couple of weeks.

The profits were much higher last year—we estimate around three times more than in the previous year. So do keep using our shop as the first port of call. It is great for WAHGA and cheaper than elsewhere. Members have been very kind and full of gratitude, which has been lovely. It is a pleasure to know you all.