



# Islington Gardeners

[www.islingtongardeners.org.uk](http://www.islingtongardeners.org.uk)

## NEWSLETTER: JULY – SEPTEMBER 2011

### Pretty Easy

*Papaver somniferum* (that's the opium poppy) is as easy to grow as dandelions and produces almost as much seed. But it is a lot prettier and is annual and easy to pull up when you have too many seedlings. Between 2 and 3 feet high, grey leaved and with single or double flowers in white and various shades of palest to deepest pink and purple, it is one of the delights of early summer.



Many of the flowers are over by now but the pepper pot seed heads are also decorative. If you lived in California or other hotter parts of the US, you would be breaking the law if you grew it as they might suspect you were plotting home grown heroin. But here we don't get hot enough sunshine even in the best years for enough of the banned substances to be produced.

Some years ago I had these flowers in almost all their available colours because, after admiring some in a Cotswold garden and asking for some seed, its owner, an antique dealer who had the collecting bug big time, not only gathered me seed from his own plants but also went round lots of his friends and neighbours and begged seed of every different colour he spotted. Now, sadly, I have only a deep pink (pictured) and deep purple in both single and double versions. I would dearly like to add to the variety, so, if there are Islington Gardeners who have other colours, it would be lovely if they could do some seed collecting so that we can have a swap session. The AGM might be a good time to do it. Email me if you have got some (address at end of newsletter) and bring it along. Meantime and while you are thinking about it, since this is seed which lasts well, a pinch of any you collected in previous years could be dropped in a few tree pits to brighten them up when it germinates next spring. Same goes for the yellow Welsh poppies (*meconopsis cambrica*) which are almost as easy and also perennial. Alison

### Coach trip to Braughing Open Village - 19th June 2011

Making a date for a coach trip in an English mid summer is fraught with uncertainties. So it was with trepidation that I opened my eyes on Sunday morning to see blue sky after several days of rain. Relief unbounded.

A cosy 33 seat coach whisked two dozen intrepid IG members up the M11, west along the A120 and right up a country lane and suddenly, there we were in Braughing to spend the afternoon leisurely viewing ten amateur gardens generously opened by their owners in aid of The Red Cross. We were given maps of the village and allowed to wander at will. Braughing is a compact village with a church at the centre and some beautiful and very interesting traditional old architecture.

I started with a visit to a row of terraced houses. Instead of just the one back garden I was treated to six little interconnecting gardens ranging from a small dining space with hanging herb garden to a cottage garden with full vegetable plot and views across mature trees and fields. These gardens were favoured by a family of ducks who seemed very familiar with the place and who did not eat the garden plants. This was utterly delightful. Next along the lane was a small but immaculately kept lawn surrounded by colourful bedding interspersed with statuary. The owners, Mr and Mrs Vernazza, were equally immaculate.

Next door, Mr Wilson had a problem. What to do with a Monkey Puzzle that was fast growing out of its tub. He wanted rid of it but his wife did not. It was already ten feet tall and had burst through the base three times. His garden has two sections one for flowers and shrubs and one for vegetables with a small greenhouse and some very healthy looking courgettes or maybe as they were climbing, cucumbers.

By now I was peckish and wanting to try the famed Braughing sausage but first visited a garden planted with approximately 1,000 heathers and over 100 different types of conifer. The garden was long and narrow and meandered down to farmland. Looking back, the house was almost hidden from view by the carefully positioned conifers. I have seen gardens like this on the edge of Dartmoor. Any conifers I have tried to grow have all succumbed to red spider mite. Also conifers don't like clay. The owner has a fondness for concrete geese the heads and necks of which popped surprisingly out of the clipped heathers.



Right: A horse admires a Braughing garden

Passing the Braughing Local History Society's stand outside one of the villages oldest houses I aimed myself at the barbeque in the spacious front garden of an architecturally modern style house with a tropical style garden laid out in a manner likely to encourage informal gatherings and poolside parties. All of us who gathered to have lunch or an array of home made cakes and tea were enclosed by a high hedge which we assumed was to act as a wind break should we be tempted by the pool.

I took a slight detour to include the local Art Gallery which was housed in a converted barn. More tea and cakes and the well designed and tranquil garden complimented the art and craft from local artists and designers some of whom will be exhibiting at Hatfield House later in the Summer. Crossing the ford back to the village I realised I had circumnavigated it and had only three more gardens to visit.

In the centre of the village is a 16thC house. It has a lawn with a mature ginko biloba in the middle and the most deliciously perfumed roses. Dotted about are an array of small gazebos or summer houses from which to view the garden in all its glory. The kidney shaped swimming pool concealed behind a hedge of flowering shrubs and roses was a surprising addition. A small courtyard with herbs and shrubs in tubs and pots provided some hard landscaping outside the main living room. Here was another monkey puzzle imprisoned in a pot but the owner had kept it curtailed so that it resembled a large cactus or succulent providing interest in a darker spot. Just around the corner and down the street was the old cobblers shop dating back to the early 18thC. The garden was a traditionally planted shrub and herbaceous mix, beautifully nuanced with much attention to wildlife with two ponds and a beehive. The shrubs and flowers eventually gave way to a vegetable plot and a small greenhouse that doubled up as a chicken feeding station. The chickens entered by way of a cat flap from their protected coop and run. The owner was a very keen gardener and was happy to tell how the garden had evolved over the twenty years she had

been there. An oil tank removed and a second pond installed were the most recent tasks.

Next door was the garden of the rag rug lady who was making them as we wandered about. She was in battle with the local council about her extension which was clad in turquoise plastic sheeting and her house has gained a certain notoriety because of it. Her garden was small and pretty with an area given up for vegetables and fruit trees. The veg plots were near to the kitchen door and all manner of containers imaginatively employed to house them. And finally it was time for tea in the village hall.

It had been a very pleasant day and whilst not inspirational (in the way that, say, Beth Chatto's garden might be) had provided food for thought as to how to combine flowers, shrubs and vegetables into a harmonious whole. Thank you to all who came and contributed to a very friendly, peaceful day. Joy

## **Ann Le Fanu**

We were sorry to hear of the recent death at the age of 96 of Ann Le Fanu a long time member of Islington Gardeners and one time committee member.

Her son, Julian, a current member, writes: My mother was a keen and talented gardener with an eye for design and what went together. Until a few years ago she was a regular feature on Islington Gardeners' coach outings, always organising a picnic with a group of friends (the picnic usually included Parma ham and black olives on brown bread and butter and, of course, a bottle of wine) that they would eat in one of the gardens visited. I also went on some of these outings with her.

My mother was born on 3 April 1915 and died at peacefully at home on 27 May 2011. She was a WRN officer in the War, seeing service in India and Ceylon (as it was then), and was on the 'Marnix' on her way there when her convoy was attacked in the Mediterranean and the 'Marnix' disabled by an aerial torpedo. After the War she married my father and moved around as my father's job in the British Council took them to Barbados, Uganda, Yugoslavia, South Africa and Switzerland - not to mention Scotland (Aberdeen and Edinburgh) and London. She was a great home maker and I particularly remember her last gardens in Cloudsley Road and Malvern Terrace. She also had time to bring up four children and, later, for her six grandchildren.

Malvern Terrace neighbour Jill Leman writes: With the death of Ann Le Fanu, I feel we have reached the end of an era. We really won't see her like again, and she was a very remarkable woman. Even her family know very little of her early life which she determinedly put behind her when she came to London at the age of 17. During the 1930's Ann had a series of jobs, mainly in hotels, because they supplied her with somewhere to live, and educated herself by reading The Times. On returning to London from a short time in France where she had been working as a nanny, Ann found a job as companion with a Scottish aristocrat named Majorie Ellice - who had a great influence on Ann's life. Having joined the WAAFS when war broke out, Ann decided the Wrens were a better choice and somehow managed to leave the army and join the navy. This was a good move as she was sent off to Greenwich to be trained as an officer. On her way to India to work for Lord Mountbatten, her ship was torpedoed and Ann was luckily rescued by the American Navy.

Ann met Dick, her husband (who died seven years ago) in Ceylon and they married in 1947. Their children, Julian, Mark, James and Sarah all spoke movingly about their mother at her funeral which was held at Epping Forest Burial Park. About eighty family and friends gathered in a very attractive wooden building with a beautiful view into the forest - dappled sunlight shining through the leaves - a very English landscape. We all knew Ann would approve of this, and with her exacting and high standards this was very important! Ann was buried under an ancient oak deep in the forest.

I knew Ann Le Fanu from Islington Gardeners for many years, but it was only when Martin & I moved into Malvern Terrace in 1991 that I came to fully admire and appreciate her. Her attention to detail, beauty and harmony in her surroundings was a joy to behold - she would explain this by saying 'I have an eye' - although it was a mystery to her where this gift had come from. In readiness for the annual NGS opening in Malvern Terrace she would order tulips in October, giving a great deal of thought to colour schemes. The tulips would be planted in

November by David her patient and lovely gardener. Two large pots would each always have about 40 White Triumphator bulbs and were, almost without fail, a triumph. Sadly, this year they did not conform to Ann's standard which was a bit disappointing for her, but her garden looked just as fabulous as ever.

Last summer, Ann came to Sissinghurst on the Islington Gardener's outing and while walking there, she was stopped by a total stranger who said 'I have to tell you that you are the most elegant older lady I have ever seen' - a great compliment. Ann would often tell me how fortunate she was, and this was so true - almost until the last couple of weeks of her life she was still enjoying going to the Ballet, visiting exhibitions and sitting in her garden in the sun.

Without Ann life in Malvern Terrace will never be quite the same.

## **Slugs and Snails**

In a letter to The Times a few years ago the writer said he had found a large snail in his garden, put a spot of white paint on it, and had thrown it as far as possible into the field at the end of the garden...the next evening he found the SAME SNAIL back munching the hostas. He asked "How far can a snail travel in 24 hours?" Several of us wrote in on the lines: "Take your snail, and any of its friends that you can find. Carry them to the patio or other suitably hard surface. Jump on them. You don't need the white paint, they won't travel back."

I could have added an even nastier picture: if you leave the corpses on the patio, (not always popular with other garden users however) slugs will sometimes arrive to feed on the dead snails. Then you can jump on the slugs. It is the only bloodsport I approve of – perhaps snails do not have blood anyway. But there was a time when I could not do this.

Geoff Mallows, an elderly Gloucestershire gardener we used to know, was a gentle polite chap. But even he could not help looking scathing when I was telling him once about my efforts to rid the garden of snails. I stuck them in buckets, with a view to moving them a long way from the garden. As I turned my back they were crawling out. I tried drowning them in salt water, but as fast as I put them in the water, they were climbing out again. I threw them into the middle of the lawn in the hope the thrushes would get them. But there are no thrushes. The girls sometimes crunched over a few of them on their trikes, but that could not be viewed as a serious extermination method. And behind my back our youngest daughter, a staunch animal lover, used come and along and put them back in the flower beds to save their lives. As I was telling him all this, Geoff Mallows could not mask his withering look. "Chuck (chook, he said) 'em at the wall. ...." How right he was. At that point I could not imagine doing that, and plenty of visitors to our garden shrink in horror at the idea. Just try it. If you think you can't – look at your ragged hostas, delphiniums, clematis and so on. Then try again. I guarantee you will soon, like me, begin to do something akin to salivating at the prospect of the sound of snail shells crunching under your heel. It is a quick and humane end, they never know what has hit them.

At one time if I went out on a summer evening after a shower armed with a torch, I gathered more than 100 every time, day after day after day. This was in spite of putting down plenty of slug bait. At that stage the battle was proceeding on three fronts – chemical warfare with the pellets, trapping with beer and frontal attack with the torch and the boot heel. That was when I realised that the pellets – even the really toxic ones, don't work very well. I see a few empty shells around, but the plant destruction goes on. And I have found the organic ones barely work at all.

But now we are gaining the upper hand in the battle. We do have some delphiniums in flower, and I am even wondering about trying hostas in the borders again. The main difference might be about timing. Yogurt pots full of beer are sunk in the earth in early March. Within days even a small pot can be filled with 40 tiny (dead) lager louts. What satisfaction. It is clearly important to do this long before you see the damage to a plant. Next thing is to keep these pots replenished with fresh beer: our slugs go for the cheapest on offer from the Co-op. Also it is worth moving the pots around from time to time to make sure every little slug finds out about them. The pots need to be exactly level with the soil, or slightly below so the slugs don't have to crawl over a sharp edge of plastic. Picking off by hand works well with snails, especially now I have developed more experience about where to find them. We tore all the rather dull ivy off the garden walls when we realised that huge gatherings of snails were

lurking behind it. The dying leaves on hellebores and the dying spires of euphorbias are often infested with snails on their undersides. Snails gather behind the supports for the trellis, and behind spiky rose branched tied to the supports.



The slugs at the allotment are like something from a futuristic horror film. Huge glistening black, or chestnut brown with a bright orange frill, they are sometimes the size of a mouse. They take up residence inside young cabbages, and chomp their way through the tender heart. We have harvested a promising-looking kohlrabi, only to turn it over and find it has been hollowed out and a large slug is curled asleep inside, waking from time to time to eat a bit more of its house. The beer traps are some help, as is a very thick layer of eggshells completely surrounding the stems of sunflowers. But the best weapon there has been Nemaslug, organic nematodes which burrow into the slug and kill it, staying inside the dead slug long enough to breed more predators to kill more slugs. It is quite expensive, but we have noticed a real decrease in numbers.

Left: *Helix aspersa* about to breakfast on a hosta

We wondered about offering a home to a rescued hedgehog – they apparently eat lots of slugs, but they also apparently need to walk three miles every night – I would hate to think of one patrolling round and round our walled garden trying to find a way out. We wondered about trying to adopt one for the allotments, but lots of other allotment holders use pellets, which would presumably kill the poor thing as soon as it arrived.

Meanwhile, I have seen songthrushes occasionally in Barnard Park, but never in the garden. Has anyone got any ideas about how else to attract them to the garden? For sure there are a few snails, in spite of all my efforts, but how can we tell the songthrushes to come and get them? Anna McKane

Unlike Anna, I have never had any qualms or squeamish thoughts about killing slugs and snails. My father used to tell a story of how, at the age of three or thereabouts, I came into the kitchen demanding salt to drop on the slugs I had seen on the garden path. These days, I do the torchlight prowling round the garden with a bucket gathering up both slugs and snails (rubber gloves help with picking up the latter) and despatch them with a kettleful of boiling water. I shall have to try beer traps again. Past failures with this have made me suspect those in my garden are teetotalers. Meantime, those who grow their hostas in pots report that copper bands are a very effective protection. Alison

## French Diary

Spring was well under way when we arrived at Les Penots mid April. Like southern England, France was unusually warm and dry for the season and this year there was no rain at all during our stay. We even dined outside on two evenings. Plants which normally would have been in bud were in flower including lilacs, purple wisteria over the garage, deep red chaenomeles, heliotrope coloured irises and several roses. A weigela was also in bloom with clusters of pink flowers contrasting well with its dark leaves. The mauve lilacs attracted scarce Swallowtail butterflies which flew from one to the other entertaining us with their acrobatics.

The herb garden required attention, as it normally does in April and we added new mint and thyme. To my relief the rosemary bush, unlike one of my London bushes, showed no sign of rosemary beetle. Some small shrubs had not survived the winter and we will replace them this summer. Our petit meadow was flourishing with yellow cowslips and white cow parsley. Road verges were a mass of colour with buttercups about to flower and tiny violets and daisies. I even discovered a field of wild orchids. I have not been able to identify positively which they are. The flower is a deep burgundy colour with white markings and the wide leaves are plain green. I checked my reference books back in London and think they may possibly be Lady Orchids. Unfortunately, my only two photographs were taken in very bright sun and do not give a good indication of the colour.

Nightingales flew in and entertained us with their warbling song. A cuckoo called daily and we saw him in the distance. Blackcaps, chaffinch, swallows and many others were busy with their young and nests.

We visited two wonderful gardens near Sarlat: Marqueyssac and the Exotic Garden at La Roque-Gageac. The hilltop garden of Marqueyssac, known as “the belvedere of the Dordogne”, is surrounded by a 6 kilometre terrace walk from which there are spectacular views over the Dordogne river valley. It is famous for its swathes of hand clipped box, some cut in soft cloud shapes, some as more formal topiary. These are set off by southern, principally Mediterranean, vegetation including evergreen oaks, Montpellier maples, junipers and umbrella pines. We were pleased to have visited in April since it becomes very crowded in the summer. Close by at the picture postcard village of La Roque-Gageac, a configuration of cliffs has produced a particularly mild microclimate allowing the creation of the Exotic Garden. We had little time there but saw olives, date and banana palms, bougainvillea in full bloom, several types of bamboo, oleanders, bush rose and figs! Not to be missed. Diane A

## **Wildlife and Forgotten Corners**

The Council’s updated Islington Biodiversity Strategy/Action Plan (“the Plan”) has now been published online and can be seen here:

[http://www.islington.gov.uk/environment/sustainability/sus\\_nature/biodiversity\\_islington/biodiversity.asp](http://www.islington.gov.uk/environment/sustainability/sus_nature/biodiversity_islington/biodiversity.asp)

The updated Plan once again had contributors from the community, amongst which were a number of Islington Gardeners, and the Islington Wildlife Gardeners and both are pleased to be partners in the Plan’s work to preserve and expand biodiversity in Islington. Many of you will be aware that contact with nature, as well as being - in general in this country - delightful, has been found in many studies to be good for people’s health, particularly mental health. The Plan has projects to improve biodiversity around/on top of buildings, in parks, in private gardens, canals, factory and railway lands, schools, urban woodlands, and acid grassland. It identifies the black poplar, the house sparrow, the common swift, bats, and bees, as species requiring particular assistance, and offers ways to help them. There are all sorts of statements of Council support for nature which will be very useful for future reference.

If any Islington Gardeners want to get involved with the Plan (other than by encouraging wildlife in your gardens and balconies), please do not hesitate to get in touch with Morgan Pegg at Greenspace. Her email address is [Morgan.Pegg@islington.gov.uk](mailto:Morgan.Pegg@islington.gov.uk)

The Wildlife Gardeners have now met with Transport for London in the Archway Cuttings, and while there is no money available to fund the London Wildlife Trust to keep a watching brief over the Cuttings, we had a harmonious meeting and are hopeful of a positive future relationship with TfL. One pleasing though minor result of our tour with TfL is that Leading Councillor Catherine West has now set the Council refuse team to clearing up the back gate area of St Aloysius School, which has been a rubbish tip for the last 25 years, giving a disgraceful message to the boys. She is now writing to the School to ask for some wildlife-friendly planting to be done.

The Wildlife Gardeners have been thinking about tree pit (a nicer name is “tree gardens”) planting and anyone who would like to make a tree garden near their home should contact Mark Rowe, Community Landscape Manager, [Mark.Rowe@islington.gov.uk](mailto:Mark.Rowe@islington.gov.uk) and if necessary the Council will come along and give your tree garden some new earth. Meanwhile, there are instructions at:

[http://www.islington.gov.uk/environment/outdoor/parks/getting\\_involved/treepits.asp](http://www.islington.gov.uk/environment/outdoor/parks/getting_involved/treepits.asp)

Wildlife Gardeners’ discussions on wildflower planting in tree gardens showed that several of us had had total failure with meadow type wildflowers in these difficult sites. If one wanted to do something for wildlife, it might be more successful to plant garden thug wildflowers which help bees: for example, geranium phaeum (the mourning widow), comfrey, phacelia (a plant with pretty blue flowers used for green manure), tutsan, polygonum amplexicaule, (thin crimson spikes, damp shade). If given a bit of protection from other plants, herb Robert would probably manage – very pretty pink, loved by bees, and probably already in your garden! Sue

**Next Newsletter – early October 2011 – last date for copy 20<sup>th</sup> September to Alison Barlow, 1 Bingham Street N1 2QQ or [alisonbarlow47@aol.com](mailto:alisonbarlow47@aol.com)**