



# Islington Gardeners

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

## NEWSLETTER: OCTOBER – NOVEMBER 2010

### **A Canonbury Garden in Autumn**

Tamsin's articles on her wonderful Highbury garden will be much missed. We can't readily replace her, but the committee has decided that we will take it in turns to write a seasonal introduction for the newsletter. Judith starts us off.

One of the benefits of belonging to a local garden club is being able to compare notes about what will survive and succeed in local conditions. This is particularly useful in London where warmth and humidity, air pollution, shade and generally poor soil can make gardening more than averagely difficult, and the small size of most of our gardens means that we want everything we put in to earn its keep. No surprise then that some of my most successful plants have been ones I have obtained from local plant sales and from neighbours.

Looking at my garden at the moment I see a tall very pure white Japanese anemone which I inherited with my garden. It seems to grow widely in Canonbury and has probably been spread around by gifts over garden walls. I think it is Honorine Joubert. It runs and I think self sows. It seems happy in sun or shade, damp or drought, and looks particularly nice next to a very glaucous green euphorbia wulfenii. From a fellow IG member, I also have a dusky pink double Japanese anemone with a flower which is almost pleated. This is equally successful. Japanese anemones seem to take a year or so to settle down after replanting, particularly if split, but they are then unstoppable.

My other flower of the season is asters. A pinkish mauve specimen, which I got over the internet and was described simply as "aster, pink", flourishes in front of the white anemones. Elsewhere I have a tall self sown common blue aster which I call the railway cuttings aster. This is happiest poking up through other plantings as it really needs to be staked, and can be a nuisance if not removed from more refined plantings, but it is a very reliable "doer". I also have a blue powder puff type which may be a named variety although I have long since lost the label. However, I have failed with more fancy varieties, particularly "Mönch". I have a "rule of three" that if any plant does not survive by the third attempt I don't try again, so this one is now off the list. But I am still in the market for other "Islington proof" asters

Other current delights obtained from fellow Islington Gardeners are a lovely salmon pink schizostylis, a pure white hardy cyclamen which has a particularly long stem and which I plan to spread around if it does not do so by itself, and a couple of hardy fuchsias, red stemmed magellicana, and a nice short stemmed pink variety with an apple green leaf.

Long may we continue swapping tips and plants among ourselves. Judith

### **In Bloom Awards**

We are pleased to report that Islington won Silver Gilt in Britain in Bloom and has been nominated for The Communities Award in recognition of the effort of our communities and businesses in making Islington greener and cleaner.

Islington also received a Gold in London in Bloom, with Angel Town Centre winning Best Town Centre with a Silver Gilt and King Henry's Walk Garden winning Best Community Garden. Newington Green obtained a Silver Gilt in the Urban Community Award and King Henry's Walk Garden, Toffee Park and Whitecross St all did well in the It's your Neighbourhood Awards.

The Islington in Bloom results are not yet available at the time this newsletter is being put together but should be out by the time it is distributed. But we will post them on the website.

## **Gardens to visit by Bus and Train**

The word liquidambar has always had for me resonances of Nineveh and Tyre. More prosaically known as Sweet Gum, the trees have an oriental apotheosis in autumn, when their leaves become a conflagration of reds and yellows. Amazingly, they can be seen in all their glory in Newham, where the national collection is held - at West Ham Park.

The site is recorded as part of the Upton House estate in the sixteenth century and was acquired two hundred years later by a Dr John Fothergill, a keen collector of rare plants who established a 5 acre botanical garden there. Fothergill was a fascinating character and a prodigiously hard worker who deserves to be better known. A Quaker from a relatively humble Yorkshire background he trained initially as an apothecary before changing to medicine which he studied in Edinburgh since, as a Dissident, he could not be admitted to an English university. After initial difficulties establishing himself in London he made his fortune when his success in treating victims of an epidemic of what is believed to have been scarlet fever and the book he wrote about the disease made him the most sought after and one of the richest physicians in England. His garden enabled Fothergill to work on the natural history of many drugs and, in honour of this, Linnaeus named a wild growing shrub from Carolina Fothergilla after him. This moderately popular plant of the hamamelis (witch hazel) family has rather insignificant flowers but is known for its spectacular autumn leaf colouring. You can discover more about Fothergill in a potted biography on website [www.whonamedit.com](http://www.whonamedit.com).

Since 1874 the 77 acres of the estate have been owned by the City of London and, in one 7 acre corner, a series of charming ornamental gardens has been created. The ruined cornerstones of Dr Fothergill's house have been formed into a cairn, and this is a vantage point to view the glory of the 25 specimens of Liquidambar. From the cairn a well planned route leads to the walled garden with curved stone terraces round a pond. These are set with bedding schemes of vibrant geraniums and marigolds in summer and in spring cooler flowers and bulbs. And a cornus, "Eddie's White Wonder" (*c. florida x c. nuttallii*) provides quite a feature with its purple/red autumn foliage and distinctive white flowers in late May. Then comes the heather bed planted with junipers to make a mosaic interspersed with silver birch. Further along is the New Zealand bed, continuing Dr Fothergill's legacy by providing a home to some unique plants including the rare and endangered tree broom, *Chordospartium muritai*.

Later you reach the azalea and rhododendron beds, the Japanese Acer bed and Dr Fothergill's Rock Garden. He is said to have introduced one of the first rock gardens in this country in 1766 and this is believed to be in the same position. The plants used there are mainly Alpines and grasses, with aquilegias, sedums and bulbs all under the canopy of a Magnolia Grandiflora. To reach the Iris garden continue past a Ginkgo biloba planted in 1763, one of many interesting or lovely trees scattered throughout the garden. Nearby is the Rose Garden with over a thousand roses. One bed along a terrace has been designed in association with the Historic Roses Group and features varieties dating to back before 1550 and up to the 1950's. Two of my greatest summer favourites are to be seen at the Park gardens. One is *solanum rantonnettii*, with its green/white variegated leaves and bright purple flowers, grown as a standard 4 feet high and dotted around the ornamental garden beds. The other is the national collection of Trachelospermum, so useful for its scent, long-flowering period and evergreen leaves, though the collection is only viewed by arrangement.

Details: West Ham Park, Upton Lane E7 9PU Tel. 0208 472 3584. More information, including a virtual tour on [www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/openspaces](http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/openspaces)

Hours: Daily 7.30am until dusk.

Refreshments: ice cream van in summer. Picnics are welcome and benches are provided in the park area.

Travel: Nearest station is Plaistow on Hammersmith and City and District Lines. Out of Plaistow station, go right and along High Street, reach Clegg Street on left, continue along it to traffic lights, and see Park opposite. Walk takes about 20 minutes. You can also travel to Stratford on the Overground or the Central Line and take a bus from stop D outside the station; either 104 destination Manor Park or 238 destination Barking, get off at the Territorial Army Centre on the Portway and continue walking in the direction of the bus to the park entrance about 30 yards along the road. The buses are every 5 to 10 minutes and the journey takes about 15 minutes. Check Underground and Overground availability before travelling for any works on the lines. Transport for London 0207 222 1234.  
Mary Rutter

## **Visit to Sissinghurst Village Gardens - 27 June 2010**

This was such a splendid day out that we are once again making no apology for providing two reports. And anyway, it simply was not possible for anyone to see all of the open gardens. The first is from Phil Heycock who, although he had his arm gently twisted to come along, clearly suffered no injury as a result.

I had not really thought of this trip until Tina phoned. I only remembered vaguely where we were going and said yes on the spur of the moment. It turned out to be one of the best days out this year. For those who also went, please consider that I am writing this in September, and in any event, unlike Tamsin, I am no kind of plantsman, so my recollections are wholly impressionistic.

As the autumn dews and damps creep on, I remember particularly that it was a blazing and beautiful day, alas rather rare later this summer. The coach stopped first at Sissinghurst Castle. Those who wished went to visit it briefly, but a cup of Sissinghurst's excellent coffee, a stroll round the outside peering over the walls and looking at Sarah Raven's garden were quite enough. We had, after all, come for the gardens of Sissinghurst Village – more than 30 of them.

The Village gardens were a potent reminder of the extraordinary and varied charm of gardening. They, or at least the ones I went into, ranged from huge to tiny, with every combination of size age and planting in between. At Sissinghurst Castle you get one famous person's image of a garden, focussed of course through her successors; in the village you get everyone's images.

Were there common threads? Perhaps. The love of the owners for their gardens shone through every garden, whatever its size, design or planting. Then there was the welcome to visitors that came in many ways, often by supplying refreshment on what had become a really, really hot day – a couple of weeks later a friend phoned me from Goudhurst and mentioned his friend who had opened one of the gardens and had a hugely enjoyable day selling over 400 teas; indeed yes, I had one of them. There can be few more pleasant things than tea in someone else's treasured garden.

Did I have a favourite? I remember with gratitude the owner of a pretty little garden off the High Street who invited me to sit and chat. But I'm sorry, my accolade goes to the garden with the model railway running round it. It said so much about the owners' ability to put their own ideas into the garden while apparently still being on speaking terms, though I did get the impression that this might have been at times only just. Unusual maybe, but typical of a wonderful, slightly eccentric day out. If they do this every year, could we perhaps go again next year and visit the gardens we missed? Phil

Since Phil has done the impressionistic bit, I suppose it is up to me to do the plantswoman's. No-one could possibly have got to all the gardens and I did not see the one with the model train or quite a number of the ones on the main street in the middle of the village. Those which really stick in my memory are a cottage front garden at the end of the village furthest from the castle, the green and park like garden of a large Regency house not far from this and the huge and covetable garden at Sissinghurst Place where we had tea before crossing the road to get back on our coach.

The cottage garden attracts because it showed what could be done in a fairly small space with an open aspect. It was quite large for a front garden, probably something like 70' deep but no more than about 20' wide. The design

was simple, just two long borders either side of a path and the rest laid to lawn. The thought that had gone into it was evident in a disciplined choice of mostly scented flowers which stuck faithfully to a blue, pink mauve and white colour scheme. I took only a couple of pictures there and, as well as the herbaceous clematis, hardy geraniums, lupins and tall nepeta shown in the one included here, I remember catmint and lavender, campanula and salvia and penstemon and pink and white roses.



The green garden is memorable for being totally restful. A pair of us got there footsore and dehydrated and the rather posh owner, although not set up for serving teas, provided us with water and brought it out to us in proper glasses with plenty of ice cubes. We drank it gratefully in the shade of tall trees and departed refreshed and thankful.

Among other glories the garden at Sissinghurst Place has a simply stunning area by a small swimming pool where rambling roses and clematis and ivy and honeysuckle swarm over old brick walls with geraniums and dianella and catmint and erigeron in pots and in gaps in the paving below them. All huge and simply covered in flowers. If only, if only, my garden would grow like that. Alison

## French Diary - Summertime

We arrived at Les Penots on a mid July evening after a fine sunny day and, as we looked out from our terrace, had a superb view of wheat fields in the golden light at dusk glimmering and flickering in the wind. From the north side of the house, sunflower fields looked like green pinheads on a large yellow pin cushion glowing in the sunlight. By the time we left in September, the seed heads had been harvested and the brown stems were due to be ploughed up.

Summer is a busy time for the local French farmers with their three main crops of sunflowers, wheat and maize all ripening and ready for harvesting. This year it all seemed to happen early August. First the farmers were out in the fields gathering in the wheat and maize; then, a few days later, our nostrils were assailed with the stink of manure when they cleaned out their barns and spread and ploughed in the manure on their fields before planting their next crop. Phew!

The increase in “growing your own” here, made me notice again that most of our French neighbours have large “potagers” producing all sorts of vegetables. Some also have rows of grapes for their wine production which is as important as or more important than the tomatoes. One elderly Monsieur’s garden must be about 30 metres square with vines and every conceivable type of veg. That is around a quarter of an acre or more than 3 times the size of the standard 10 rod British allotment. Garden space hungry Londoners eat your hearts out! Tomatoes were very late ripening this year so I could not make any sauces or compotes like last year.

Unfortunately this year neither our apple nor pear trees bore much fruit compared with every other year that we can remember. We have no idea why this should be. Perhaps it was the very cold winter this year, or a late frost after the blossom was out, or the dry spring? Our pyroantha was also devoid of berries yet looked healthy. However, in early September, our large fig tree was full of fat, juicy figs and became a magnet for blackcaps, blue and great tits and other birds getting merry on the fruit.

As ever the wildlife was fascinating and some highlights included seeing at dusk on a field nearby a herd of sanglier (wild boar) comprising a huge boar and about six sows with piglets. Days later, as I was cycling along the road, I saw three sows crossing just in front of me! In September the hunting season commences, mainly for wild

boar and deer, and you often hear shots before seeing the hunters with their guns and wearing brightly coloured caps and vests. This year I discovered delightful crested tits in pine woods nearby. These provided hours of interest. Other birds I saw included spotted and pied flycatchers, a red backed shrike (quite uncommon), a honey buzzard (which really was the colour of honey), stonechats, yellowhammers, two spoonbills, egrets and a pretty green grass snake at a marsh reserve near Bordeaux. I also discovered a wasp spider in a web in the garden – spectacular yellow and black stripes on both sides of body. I had not seen one before. It was quite amazing. Butterflies were abundant and included a scarce swallowtail sporting the two wonderful tails which distinguish it from the common swallowtail.

I could go on and on. It was a wonderful summer and, as we departed, the yellow autumn crocus and miniature pink cyclamen were in bloom reminding us that autumn was on its way. Diane A

### **A really useful plant – Hardy Cyclamen**

When I talk about hardy cyclamen in my garden, I usually mean *c. neapolitanum* (aka *c. hederifolium*) which emerges from its summer dormancy around the end of August and continues in flower until around the end of October. Its marbled leaves, which emerge after the initial flowers then persist until around June of the following year when the seed heads are starting to ripen before scattering the slightly sticky seeds which ants then carry further afield from the parent plant. I fell in love with this little charmer many years ago and initially tried, without success, to get it established from purchased dried corms and from (surprisingly expensive) purchased seed. I began to win when I eventually bought a couple of growing plants of the pink form and was given a growing plant of the white. This is one of the species of which fresh seeds germinate very readily but older seeds only reluctantly. (Primroses and cowslips are others in this category.) I put my initial plants in some wide, shallow clay bulb pots so that I could catch the early seedlings. Then, once they were getting going nicely, I moved the whole clumps into the garden without disturbing the roots.



Now, about 10 years on, I can cheerfully say that they have naturalised in quite large areas of the garden so that I have several little pink and white carpets of their blooms at this time of year with many patches of new seedlings in among them. I even find seedlings in the lawn. Pink seems to be the dominant gene so pink is in the ascendant.

I am therefore not surprised when I see that a major bulb supplier charges more than three times as much for white corms as for pink. They don't seem too particular where they grow and, although they are obviously not too keen on a sunny parched area under a big dense sycamore, they love the shadier spots, which makes them a fine city garden plant. A good spot for them to ensure that they are visible is under a fairly open deciduous shrub. I have patches of them under a magnolia stellata, at the foot of my apple tree and under a caryopteris.

I am now working on getting early spring flowering *c. coum* established. These are slightly smaller plants with much more variety in leaf pattern. They also seem shyer at getting going and produce less seed. However, they are gradually getting going and one day I may also have a spring cyclamen carpet to match the autumn one. There are a few other less readily available and not fully hardy species cyclamen such as *c. cilicium* (scented, autumn flowering) *c. repandum* (late spring flowering) and *c. europaeum* (scented, summer flowering) which I have not tried yet but which are on my list. Species *c. persicum* (parent of the large flowered hybrids) is readily available – it is the little one with white or pale pink flowers with a dark pink blotch at the base. It is usually quite cheap and is almost hardy, but it does not spread itself around quite so freely as the really hardy kinds. Alison

## The High Line

On a recent trip to New York I visited a newly-created public garden known as the High Line, which is a beautifully planted walkway 30 feet in the air above the streets of Manhattan. I was very impressed at such imaginative use of an urban landscape. The High Line was once a railway track which used to carry freight trains along the west side of lower Manhattan, through the city's largest industrial area. In the 1930's it was decided to elevate the tracks 30 feet in the air to prevent the large number of traffic accidents that were occurring at street level. But by 1980, as road freight took over from rail, the tracks were no longer being used and it was proposed that this historic structure be pulled down. Then,



in 1990, the Friends of the High Line formed as a community-based, non-profit group to preserve and maintain it as a public park. Construction began in 2006 and the first approx. 1.5 mile section was opened to the public last year.

The planting of the park was inspired by the self-seeded landscape that grew up for 25 years between the rails on the unused tracks. Many of these actual plants were saved and incorporated into the final planting design. There are about 200 species of perennials, grasses, shrubs and trees planted along a gently curving central path. There are seating areas, lighting and several access points (lifts and stairs) to get you up to park level. The plants were chosen for their hardiness, sustainability and textural and colour variations, with a strong focus on native US species. They are planted in large groups and are a classic example of the modern style of prairie planting – and indeed, Piet Oudolf was a consultant to the landscape architects.

The park is alive with butterflies and dragonflies, and exudes a mood of calm and tranquility, which is no mean achievement in the hustle and bustle of Manhattan. It is an extremely popular place to walk, and relax, and has a strict ban on skateboards, bikes, scooters, dogs, alcohol and amplified music – all those things which can be so very annoying in a public park. I look forward to seeing the next section when it is opened in another year or so and I thoroughly recommend a visit, should you find yourself in New York at any time. Lots more information and masses of pictures on the High Line website [www.thehighline.org/about/park-information](http://www.thehighline.org/about/park-information). Jennie

## Wildlife Gardening

I have been sampling the facilities at the Whittington Hospital last month, (for very boring non-threatening repairs), and have only just been able to think about the IG newsletter. So as a short-cut I thought that the London Wildlife Trust's latest Biodiversity Booster list would be helpful:

- \* Don't mow your lawn (or all of it), see what appears (clover, dandelions), and let them flower to provide nectar for insects, and of course enjoy the medieval flowery mead effect;
- \* Take part in a wildlife survey and collect some important species data, the Natural History Museum is collecting data on urban hedges, please see survey on <http://www.biodiversityislife.net> ;
- \* Put up bird and bat boxes (the Council's biodiversity officer tells me that bats have been using boxes she put up around Highbury, so there are more bats around in Islington than one might think);
- \* Speak out – complain! – if a green space is under threat (this summer the coalition government changed the planning rules to give local councils greater powers to prevent the building over of gardens if local people object);
- \* Volunteer at an LWT reserve – or at our own Gillespie Park, and other Islington reserves, the Ecology Centre (0207 527 4374) has a volunteer programme running on Thursdays, and regular participants really enjoy themselves;

- \* Create a green roof (on a shed, bin shelter, or rabbit hutch), for a sedum “carpet” please see <http://www.enviromat.co.uk/> ;
- \* Make sure that your MP takes biodiversity seriously – write a letter (though we think Jeremy might already have the message!);
- \* Join the London Wildlife Trust, [www.wildlondon.org.uk](http://www.wildlondon.org.uk) or indeed the Islington Wildlife Gardeners (no fees, please email me on [Susan@lees.org.uk](mailto:Susan@lees.org.uk))

Meanwhile, Islington Council’s Greenspace team have been busy with groups of local residents creating new biodiversity-rich corners around the Borough. To see where good things for wildlife have been going on have a look at the Summer Edition of Greenspace Now on [www.islington.gov.uk/DownloadableDocuments/Environment/Pdf/greenspace/Greenspace\\_Now\\_Spring\\_Summer\\_10.pdf](http://www.islington.gov.uk/DownloadableDocuments/Environment/Pdf/greenspace/Greenspace_Now_Spring_Summer_10.pdf).

## Visit to Horniman Garden – 16 September 2010

The small group of Islington Gardeners who gathered for this visit had a bright sunny day for it and a most enjoyable time. But, if you didn’t come don’t worry. You can add this one to the list of interesting and easy to get to London gardens (a short walk from Forest Hill station) and take yourself there any time you fancy. If you haven’t used the new East London Line from Dalston Junction, it is also an opportunity to sample this excellent new service.

The garden surrounds the Horniman Museum which has extensive collections focussed on anthropology, natural history and musical instruments. The garden aims to reflect the first two of these specialisms. There is a really stunning Africa Garden with a border of banana trees, agapanthus and amaranth (see picture) and beds of African



food plants. And, in the natural history section, wildflower areas (pretty well spent by the season of our visit) and the biggest and most elaborate “insect hotel” I have ever seen. We were also very taken with the vegetable growing demonstration beds – produce going to the volunteers who work them and a local charity.

There are also more classic features in the sunken garden, the rose garden and the herbaceous border, the last of which had a most splendid castor oil plant in flower. Since this is a hilly site, there are also views northwards towards the city and Hampstead Heath. On a really clear day and with binoculars you could probably see your way as far as Archway.

A bonus was that we got to chat to two of the gardeners at work there. From one we discovered that plans for change and simplification (presumably related to funding cuts) are due to sweep away the banana border and the vegetable plots next year. With the other – whom we had accosted for permission to collect some ripe seed heads in the herbaceous border (which were then cheerfully cut off for us) – we had one of those cosy chats about plants which ensue when gardeners get together.

After tea in the café, we made a foray into the museum and found our way to the new and exceptionally good aquarium. This is laid out in a natural style with recreated watery habitats including British pond and stream life, British coastal life, a piece of the South Seas, a piece of mangrove swamp and many more. Hornimans is well worth a visit for this alone. And it is all free. So get yourselves down there. Alison

## **To Crock or not to Crock**

Every time we pot up a plant or plant up a container, one of the things most of us do, almost without thinking, is to put a layer of gravel or broken clay pots into the bottom of our pot. We have always thought that it helps with drainage. The 'Old Wives' Tales' item in the current issue of Which Gardening reports on recent tests done which disprove this.

Research by soil scientists has shown that water does not flow freely from fine textured materials into coarser ones. Water only moves into coarser materials, such as gravel or crocks, once the soil above is saturated, so a sudden change from a fine to a coarse texture causes water to collect in the soil above rather than drain away. This can be bad news for roots which, as we all know, do not like to be kept sodden. However, pot feet do help to improve drainage and prevent waterlogging, especially in containers sitting on a hard flat surface.

The verdict is that a drainage layer in the bottom of a pot just reduces the volume of soil available to plant roots. The lesson therefore is that, for good drainage, you should not add gravel or crocks, but just ensure pots have drainage holes. If you are not using them already, you should also ensure that pots placed on hard surfaces have pot feet or some other means of keeping them just above that hard surface. This is especially important in wet weather and, if we should again have last winter's wet period followed by hard frosts, it may make the difference between survival and death for potted plants which survive frost better if soil is not waterlogged.

This does not mean that all your store of crocks should be thrown out. It is still useful to put a pebble or a small piece of broken pot over the drainage hole of a clay pot. But this is not for drainage. It is just to stop the compost being washed out. Also, if you are planting a large container with shallow rooted items, there is an argument for mixing some bulky lightweight material, like expanded polystyrene, into the lower layer of your compost since this both saves on the amount of compost used and makes the pot much lighter and therefore easier to move around.

Which also tested reusing old compost in containers and found that, provided you add slow release feed when you replant, used compost works just as well as fresh. Skinflints rejoice!

## **Three Sisters Project Report**

A number of Islington Gardeners members signed up earlier this year to Liam Devaney's experimental project to test the efficacy of the native American tradition of growing squash, sweetcorn and runner beans together. Liam have provided us with a progress report on the project as at mid August. Those interested can read this on our website [www.islingtongardeners.org.uk](http://www.islingtongardeners.org.uk). We hope that Liam might also be able to provide an update on the final results.

## **Membership 2011**

This is advance notice that we shall once again this year be sending out membership renewal forms in early November. Those who wish to do so can therefore renew for 2011 at the 2010 AGM on 16 November. The membership year continues to run from 1 February to 31 January.

## **Newsletter by Email**

If you have just signed up to receive your Newsletter by email, it would be helpful if you could send a short email note confirming this to [islingtongardeners2@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:islingtongardeners2@hotmail.co.uk) so that we can be certain we have your email address correctly recorded. Handwriting is often fallible and a missing dot or a misread character means it will not be delivered. If you have already been receiving your newsletter by email and change your email address, please let us know so that you continue to get it. In all cases, it is useful to put our email address in your address book so that our emails do not get classed as spam.

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