



Islington Gardeners

www.islingtongardeners.org.uk

NEWSLETTER: OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2009

Autumn 2009

As I look out of the window, it's raining. I am putting my summer clothes away and there is a decided feeling of autumn. There is still quite a lot of colour in the garden, especially from the fuchsias, the self-sown nasturtiums which have taken over the trellis and the self-sown perennial peas (not scented, and bright pink) which have been around since we moved in. Hardy Geranium 'Rozanne' (clear blue with white eye) has responded extravagantly to having the earlier flush of flowers cut off in June. The late purple daisies (heteropappus) are just coming out, as is the late-flowering Belladonna carmichaelii arendsii. I grow this and the midsummer flowering Aconitum napellus, the classic monkshood, since have never managed to grow delphiniums without the slugs and snails scoffing the lot. Aconitums seem immune to these attacks. They are poisonous (so are foxgloves), but I plant them well back from the front of the bed, and am a great believer in teaching children what not to eat, and why, once they are old enough to understand. Before that they shouldn't be in the garden on their own anyway. I have a clear memory of being warned off wild arum berries and laburnum pods when I was quite small.

On the other hand there is a feeling of urgency about planting bulbs and sowing late salads in the greenhouse, before it gets too cold. I have done something I have meant to do for ages, which is to sow green manure over one of my vegetable beds. I chose field beans because they are said to grow well over the winter, and can be dug in in the spring before I plant seed potatoes. Another project has been to get rid of the mahonia japonica which has been ailing for a while. It has lily-of-the-valley scented flowers in winter but has clearly suffered from drought. With its prickly evergreen leaves preventing water from penetrating the ground below, I didn't feel able to rescue it. I have a seedling, but am not sure where to put it. I am going to put a deciduous shrub (a single-flowered kerria, with buttercup flowers in spring) in its place. This is descended from a cutting I took from my eldest aunt's garden in Norfolk on the day of her funeral, and because it is deciduous, I can plant bulbs underneath.

Many thanks to all of you who came to my garden party. It was a beautiful day and I enjoyed myself. The icing on the cake was that we made £1,500 for Centre 404 (ex Islington Mencap) towards proper disabled access for their building. Tamsin

Britain in Bloom

Well, Islington didn't win, neither the Champion of Champions (that went to Falkland), nor the Large City category (which went to Croydon), but it was a very creditable performance with a Silver Gilt award. Islington also received complimentary comments from the judges and a nomination for the RHS Community Award, the only large urban area to be recognised in this way. The judges' feedback is being studied closely and ambitions are fired for getting Gold in 2010. Community gardening is definitely one of the borough's strengths and the Council have already announced redoubled encouragement for community projects – which includes Forgotten Corners tended by Islington Gardeners and others. So, if you have spotted a little patch of neglected ground somewhere near you, do move in on it and start improving. And let us know as we may be able to put you in touch with other members close by, or provide you with seeds or plants or just encouragement.

Gardens of the East Walk - 9 July 2009

The gardens we saw on this walk formed a broad spectrum, from the vast space of Finsbury Circus to Islington Gardeners' favourite which was the garden surrounding the bombed ruins of St Dunstan in the East. Gardens in the City of London are not quite what we think of in Islington and further afield. Most have just happened. Graveyards no longer needed, overrun, now tended; corners of bombed sites; new office blocks with an outdoor space for staff etc; so our minds must be open. Malka

It surprised me, how many green spaces there are dotted around the eastern side of the City of London. For some, or most of the time I didn't know where I was, which added to the mystery of the evening. Croquet at Liverpool St Station anyone? What was a shame was that fountains in some gardens have been turned off on the grounds of cost. But it was cheering to see that certain businesses have realised the benefit to the workforce of having a well kept green space for lunchtimes and alfresco meetings. Joy

Birds and Bees: Wildlife Roof Garden Visit – 9 July 2009

This was a fascinating opportunity to see architect Justin Bere's wildflower roof garden near Newington Green which is now in its second full year. As well as admiring the planting, which includes a small grove of hazelnut trees, we saw the beehive, recently installed on one of the upper levels and learned how the flowers are, in large part, secondary to the aim of attracting and nurturing birdlife. Goldfinches are catered for with large sacks of niger seed and the vetches around the beehive were chosen to attract aphids for insect feeding birds as well as to produce seed for others later in the season. Built into the wall is also a small "terrace" of specially designed boxes for house sparrows. These were untenanted at the time of our visit. Hopefully they will be occupied next spring and broods of young reared.

The building itself, with the garden opening out from and on top of the office, which itself is on top of the living quarters, is at least as interesting as the garden since it uses and showcases state of the art features to conserve energy in order to produce a minimal carbon footprint. There are also systems for harvesting rainwater and feeding it through an automatic drip irrigation network.

Our thanks again to Justin for allowing us in. Apologies to those who missed this visit because it was arranged at fairly short notice through our email network. If there is anyone who still chooses to receive a paper newsletter but has an email address, do let us have it so that we can include you on the email list for notifications of events which come up between the regular mailings.

Forgotten Corners

Most of the IG Forgotten Corners have had a good summer, as there was plenty of rain until late August and September. The Whitehall Park Garden, notoriously dry, had hardly a moment of wilt this year. However, several of our unfenced FCs have either had builders' materials dumped on them (the Rosemary Triangle) or were damaged by Council contractors (the Alwyne Castle Strip and a new one being started near Newington Green Road). The solution appears to be better notices to alert builders and contractors that the sites are being tended, and we are in the process of obtaining notices.

Biodiversity and Wildlife

Biodiversity Partnership: Islington Council is gathering interested groups (including Islington Gardeners) and individuals into a Biodiversity Partnership which will, amongst other networking activities, contribute to the updating of the Islington Biodiversity Action Plan. Food growing is also part of the Partnership's remit. The next meeting will be on October 22 at 6.0pm at St Luke's Centre and Garden, EC1, and anybody interested in attending should contact the Council's Biodiversity Officer Leanne Brisland at: Leanne.brisland@islington.gov.uk.
Sparrows: IG member Jennifer Chamberlain has been monitoring the sparrows in the Whittington Park in support of the RSPB's efforts to discover why all our sparrows are disappearing. See separate article for an account of her adventures to date.

Swifts: Yet another species in decline. The RSPB, in partnership with Swift Conservation Groups, is trying to get to grips with how our remaining swifts are getting on, and are asking people to send in details of sightings of

“screaming” swifts and swift nest sites. If you have seen swifts this summer (over Tufnell Park, for example), please go to www.rspb.org.uk/thingstodo/surveys/swifits/index/asp and fill in the survey pages.

Mason bees: It is always so satisfactory to provide something for wildlife which actually works. This year I was given a mason bee nesting cylinder, and mason bees appeared from nowhere and made their nests in the tubes, blocking up the tubes with bits of rose leaf, as stated in the instructions, as we watched in wonder. Mason bees are docile, good pollinators, and need homes as we have tidied up or built over many of their natural nest sites. I am therefore going to buy more mason bee homes for Christmas presents, especially for god-children. Suppliers are www.birdfood.co.uk and Lakeland (more expensive), or those who are handy at these things can make their own. Sue

Gardens to visit by Bus and Train

We didn't get out on the buses and trains this quarter to any of the many public transport accessible gardens in the London area, but here are a few ideas for places within easy reach:

The Red House – William Morris' country home in Bexleyheath (now in suburbia) with a garden which inspired some of his later work. Train to Bexleyheath station from London Bridge, Cannon Street or Charing Cross. Walk or take local bus for last $\frac{3}{4}$ mile.

Fenton House – principally of interest for the collections of porcelain, needlework, furniture, paintings and early musical instruments but advertising itself as having a walled garden with fine mixed borders, an orchard and a working kitchen garden. Very close to us in Hampstead Village and a short walk from Hampstead station on the Northern Line (Hampstead Heath station on the Overground is about a mile away).

Morden Hall Park – a wide open space with the River Wandle meandering through wild meadows and wildlife rich wetlands. Entrance 500 yds from Morden station on the Northern Line.

Claremont Landscape Garden – Vanbrugh, Bridgeman, William Kent and 'Capability' Brown all contributed of this garden in the English Landscape style. Train from Waterloo to Esher station and local bus for last 2 miles.

No prizes to anyone for realising that this is a round up from the National Trust handbook.

Closer to home: when did YOU last go to the Regents Park rose garden, or walk along the Embankment garden between Somerset House and Charing Cross? Neither of these is currently in their finest season, but they are both splendid in the summer, and it is too easy to forget that there are gardens only just beyond our front doorsteps which we can often visit for free.

Pretending to be a Plant Hunter

Any time I am in foreign parts, I am guaranteed to bore the company by "botanising" on path and road verges. A recent trip to Croatia was no exception. September is perhaps not the most exciting time to go if seeking flowers, so a return visit in spring is definitely on the agenda.



But the season was not without interest and one of its delights was the large number of bees and butterflies flitting over the vegetation – but rarely staying still long enough to be photographed. No wonder the markets were full of pots of (rather expensive) home produced honey. I also counted four different kinds of butterflies. I imagine there must be little or no use of insecticides on the vegetables in the small local market gardens. Maybe there was some on the vineyards, and I did see something rather like old fashioned fly papers hanging from a few olive trees. But many small islands, which are uninhabited because they have no sources of fresh water, are close to being in a state of nature with no agriculture on their dry limestone slopes.

I found it difficult to identify much of what I photographed. Wishful thinking had me expecting the internet would supply the equivalent of learned tomes on the flora of Dalmatia. No such luck. All I found was dire warnings on US sites about the invasiveness of Dalmatian toadflax (*linaria genistifolia dalmatica*) – very pretty and far from invasive in its native habitat. For the rest, all I could do was identify the species, such as a small fleshy leaved and

probably evergreen clematis, a flower of the cucumber family and, sole specimen among Roman ruins, a very lovely upright campanula. I was left admiring the way in which nature can produce so fine a rock garden. Here are some pictures. Can anyone guess what the tiny purplish blue flower with the rough bracts might be? Alison



Calling on Members in Tufnell Park

The church building on the corner of Tufnell Park Road and St George's Avenue, formerly the St George's Theatre, is about to re-open as The Rock Tower! They have an open space at the front and are planning to plant flowers and shrubs there in spring 2010. They would like to meet any keen gardeners in the area who could volunteer some time to help with the planting and to suggest a suitable theme for the garden. This could also be a chance for someone without a garden to get involved in some hands on gardening. Contact Jennifer Chamberlain in the first instance if you are interested jenniferchamberlain@hotmail.com or 7609 5156.

Changelings

Legend has it that Irish fairies steal human children and substitute their own less lovely offspring. Whilst I don't

think any fairies have been around my garden digging up plants and putting in others (not even hawthorn trees), I have not infrequently found that a plant I have put in does not match its label. The species is right, but the variety is different. The latest in this line is a clematis which was supposed to be light pink Hagley Hybrid. It got one of the less favoured spots in the garden where it has had to compete with a large and well established plumbago, so, perhaps not surprisingly, it did not flower in its first year. It has now begun to flower, but it is dark red rather than pink and almost certainly Ville de Lyon. I can't remember where I bought it, so it is too late now to complain. And it does look quite good with the pale blue of the plumbago. Could be worse. I shall just have to put in another beside it, preferably something early flowering so that it can scramble up the plumbago before it comes into flower.

I think this has been my only mislabelled clematis. But I have had a lot of mislabelled roses, including three out of four I bought last year with the groceries. Only Margaret Merrill came true. I have also had (from the late lamented Woollies) a "pink" camellia which produced red flowers and a "white" magnolia stellata with pale pink flowers and a far more vigorous habit than expected so that I am having to train it as a standard small tree instead of a shrub. I have not yet identified it but suspect it could be M. x loebneri "Leonard Messel" which is a very fine plant indeed.

All this just goes to show that cheap plants in general can be pot luck. They are probably packed on a production line and it is easy to imagine how bare rooted stock, which is completely undistinguishable by variety at the time it is bagged up, can get mixed at various stages, even back to the time the buds are grafted onto the rootstock. Provided the plants grow and flower, I am sure not many customers complain. If they threw the bag away, they might not even remember what colour the rose was supposed to be anyway.

Lessons: If you really want a particular variety you need to pay £10 or thereabouts at a pukka rose, clematis, camellia, etc. nursery which, as well as having a huge selection on offer, can be expected to keep proper control of its stock – and to replace anything which turns out not to match its label. But if you just want to fill a space and get some colour, you could do worse than the bargains at the supermarket or unlabelled roses at 4 for £5 in Columbia Road. Alison

Bulb Planting Day at Whittington Hospital - 27 September 2009.

River of Flowers group created a woodland garden of spring flowering wild plants on a grassy bank outside the former Emergency department of the Whittington Hospital. The area is shaded by several trees and has primroses and daffodils already.

Sophia Ioannou of Plant Environment who has already created wildflower meadows at Pooles Park School N4 and St Josephs School N19 gave a health and safety talk and instruction in planting bulbs to several volunteers from GoCity and members of the River of Flowers who then planted 1,000 English Bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) bulbs in a sweeping 'river-shape' as in the River of Flowers logo design.

The bulbs were donated by the Archway Herbal Clinic to the River of Flowers Floral Bank project which also loaned gardening equipment donated by Fiskars Orange Thumb, an organisation supporting the creation of community gardens.

We liked this picture of the volunteer planters in action. It must have been energetic work as the ground was still very hard then after so much dry weather.

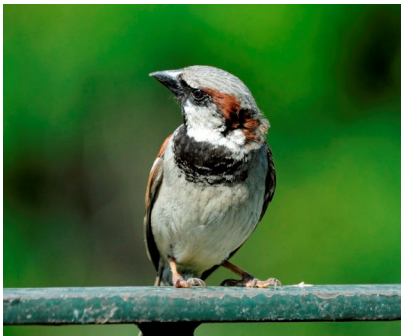


Monitoring Sparrows

For the last few months I have been taking part in a project run by the RSPB to monitor the feeding habits of sparrows in parks in London. The project is an attempt to try and address the 60% decline in sparrow populations in London over the last few years, and the idea is to seed specific areas in a number of parks with three different types of seed mix. The areas chosen are known to be near a significant sparrow population, and the job of the monitors is to observe the frequency with which the birds visit the seeded areas. They are seeded with either wildflower seeds to create a wildflower meadow; wildlife seed mix which produces seed bearing plants and cornfield annual flowers, or the grass has been allowed to grow long over winter and to set seed. The plots are monitored for 45 minutes at a time, and then compared for another 45 minutes with a similar sized plot of normal park grassland which is regularly mown, the idea being to see which of the three types of seeded plots the sparrows prefer and to see if they prefer them to the control plots. When the results are known, in about a year's time, the parks can plant as many areas as possible with the preferred seed mix to, hopefully, encourage the sparrow populations to grow.



I have been monitoring Whittington Park, near Archway, where the plot is planted with wildlife seed mix (and recently also with English bluebells), and I have visited it four times over the summer, with some rather interesting results. On my first visit, in early summer, the plot was extremely popular with the sparrows, who were darting in and out constantly, eating the seeds on the ground and whatever else they found. When I had finished my session I found, to my horror, that my bike had been stolen – so much for volunteering!



On the second visit, I walked to the park, having no bicycle, and was greeted by a ferocious pit bull-type dog snarling and growling at me, probably upset by the sight of the sticks I was carrying. I asked the owner to do something, whereupon she unleashed a torrent of abuse, involving much unpleasant language and threats to kill me – until I pulled out my mobile and threatened to call the police. I did manage to observe the plots eventually, but did not find it easy to relax with her threats hanging over me. The plot was full of lovely wild flowers by this point in the summer, but was not very popular with the birds – hardly any sparrows visited it at all.

Since then I have not really looked forward to my visits to the Park, which have to be early in the morning, but I have forced myself to go twice more. The strange thing is that the sparrows seem to have absolutely zero interest in the wildlife seed flowers, and I haven't seen a single sparrow on the last two visits. Who knows what this means – no doubt all the results will be put together and conclusions drawn. Watch this space. Jennifer

Many thanks to Pat Tuson for pictures of female (top) and male (bottom) house sparrows.

Membership Renewal 2010

Your membership renewal form for 2010 will be sent out to you in November 2009, shortly before the AGM so that you can, if you wish, renew at the meeting. We are doing this to lighten the load of our membership secretary and allow you the members more time to pay.

The membership year will continue to run from 1 February to 31 January and your current membership card will remain valid until the end of January 2010 .

Next Newsletter – early January – last date for copy 20th December to Alison Barlow, 1 Bingham Street N1 2QQ or alisonbarlow47@aol.com