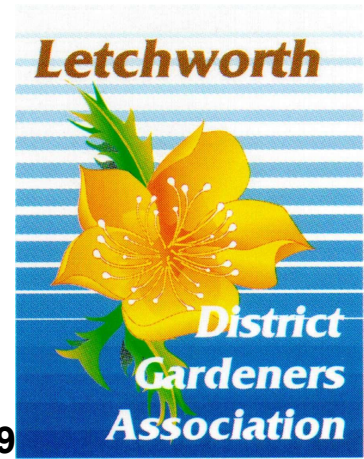


Gleanings from the
Compost Heap

Spring 2009



New season, new seeds, new colours

One of the things I enjoy most about the start of a new gardening year, is the chance to drool over seed catalogues. With each page turned, I see more and more flowers and vegetables I feel I must order. I have to take myself firmly under control and decide that since I only have limited space, I must make a strict list of things I absolutely have to grow and then perhaps just try one or two new seeds or plants.

It is really heartening to see that even major seed producers are recognising that more and more people want to have produce that is as fresh as possible. want to know where their food comes from and what has been sprayed on it - and so are growing their own vegetables. One of the largest companies which has traditionally always had a front cover featuring brightly coloured flowers has runner beans as the star this year, even if the flowers are bicoloured. Vegetables are news!

Unusual vegetables

I have picked out some of the interesting new seeds from various catalogues, that some of you might want to consider. Unwins (allied to Marshalls) offer a courgette with ribbed skin, which looks like a cogwheel when sliced; *Latino* might encourage picky children to eat more vegetables, too. Or you could try tempting your kids, or impressing your friends and family with carrots in deep purple with orange cores, or cream or yellow?

Tomatoes too come in all shades from almost cream, through yellow, orange, the usual 'tomato' red, to almost black. These can certainly make a salad look exciting. Thompson and Morgan even offer *Green Sausage* seeds, producing long, sausage-shaped tomatoes,

which are green with yellow stripes when ripe and which they say are good in containers.

Heritage varieties of potatoes are becoming popular again as people value their taste, disease resistance and interesting colours in some cases. Besides the usual white or cream flesh, *Congo*, stocked by Thompson and Morgan, is a dark bluey-purple potato with blue flesh, while Shetland Black has deep blue almost black skin and white flesh with a clear purple ring. *Yetholm Gypsy* is very patriotic as Thompson & Morgan claim it is the only variety showing red, white and blue together in the skin. Should look interesting on a show bench.

Save some time this season

If you're looking for ways to make life easy, Marshalls have 'pre-chitted' potatoes, stored at the right temperature, with light and moisture carefully regulated so the primary sprouts develop at the correct rate, giving vigorous growth and earlier, more reliable crops. They are more expensive than chitting your own potatoes, but if you are prepared to pay for the convenience of not having your spare bedroom floor covered in potatoes (which is where mine are, now I've bought them from the Store) it might be worth trying.

Another aid, which I know traditional gardeners may be critical about, but which I find useful, are starter plants. These used to be only available as flowers, provided from mini plug size upwards, but several companies now offer vegetable plants, also. If you work full-time or have limited space for a seed bed, they provide you with healthy little plants to give an early start and with no worries about germination, or slugs eating your seedlings. You can get many of the greenhouse crops - tomatoes, aubergines, peppers (sweet and chilli), as well as celeriac, leeks, celery and most of the brassica family, including several types of broccoli..

Container vegetables

A number of the catalogues are realising that people have smaller gardens and/or want to grow food closer to the house than their

allotment, so there are many dwarf varieties on offer, or plants ideally suited not just to the traditional growbag, but also to patio pots. Unwins has a dwarf runner bean, *Hestia*, with red and white flowers that would look lovely on any patio, while it produces tasty beans for your kitchen.

Courgette plants do well in pots and growbags, as long as they are kept well-watered. The yellow flowers are bright and attractive (as well as being edible) and you can get yellow courgettes, as well as the more traditional green versions. Peppers, particularly some of the chilli peppers, are pretty plants in their own right, with tiny white flowers interspersed with ripening yellow, orange or red peppers of various shapes and degrees of heat.

Herbs are ideal for containers as most of them enjoy the good drainage. A selection of pots near your kitchen door will attract beneficial bees, look good all through the summer with little care needed and provide you with lots of fresh herbs for cooking. Try experimenting with different types of the common herbs; sage can come not just with green, but purple, cream-edged or tri-coloured leaves (cream, green and purple); thymes can be variegated in cream or yellow. There is a particularly good lemon thyme (*Thymus citriodorus Golden Queen*) with lovely golden variegation and a strong lemon scent. Bronze fennel can look striking as a tall background to a pot of herbs, as well as in a border.

Even trendy designers realise how good herbs can look in pots. If you visit the British Library in London, notice the planting of their huge patio pots. The central plants are dwarf marjoram, providing deep pink panicles of flowers from late Spring and then attractive seedheads through the winter. These are surrounded by alpine strawberry plants, whose runners trail down over the edges and which provide small white and gold flowers, followed by fingernail-sized fruit. I don't know if they're an edible variety, but the local blackbirds have learned to enjoy them.

IMPORTANT ALLOTMENT NEWS

Letchworth Garden City Council is negotiating with North Herts District Council to take over the allotments service. The Council has set aside a sum for making improvements to the allotments in Letchworth.

Councillor Raymond Smale, Chair of the General Purposes Committee, said, "If anyone has any ideas for improvements to the service or would like to suggest where investment should be made, please get in touch with the Council. We would really like to hear your views on priorities".

If you have any comments please contact Mandy Mikiel at the Council.
Telephone: 01462,682552
email: mandy.mikiel@letchworth-tc.gov.uk
or write to the Council Offices at 66-68 Leys Avenue, Letchworth, Herts SG6 3EG.

SEND IN EMAILS, PLEASE

We are trying to reduce the number of copies of *Compost Heap* that are printed and hand-delivered - and attempting to get the newsletter to you as quickly as possible.

If you have an email address, please send it to Jo Schurch - jo.schurch@hotmail.co.uk. She will add your email address to the membership database, which will ensure that you get your *Compost Heap* immediately it is produced.

Several people have already sent me email addresses, which I have forwarded to Jo, but it would be good to have as many members as possible being contactable by email.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

March 19th: Seeds and Cuttings

April 16th: Parks and Gardens: Mike Macarthy

May 21st: Allotments and vegetable gardens

All meetings start at 7.45 and are held in the Guide Headquarters, 247a Icknield Way, Letchworth Garden City

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