

Green Fingers Newsletter 3 - Summer 2021

A challenging spring

It's been a challenging start to the growing season. April had the lowest average temperature since 1922 and the third lowest average since records began in 1884. We also had the highest number of April air frosts since records began in 1960 - more typical of the winter months! On top of that we had a drying northerly wind for much of the month combined with warm sunny daytimes.

This was followed by a cool wet May and it seemed like summer finally emerged from winter in June as if a switch was turned on. This recalls 2019 when summer disappeared almost overnight and winter set in almost straightaway. Whilst natural variation is to be expected one can't help but point to climate change!

Despite these challenges it looks like it will be a good year for fruit and veg. Plants have a habit of catching up!

Lucy's Vegetable plot

What a busy couple of months it's been! With spring arriving late, there were days I wondered whether any of my seedlings would come to anything! But I'm now very pleased to say we've been enjoying rainbow chard and spring onions from our raised bed which have not only been delicious but allowed us to explore some new recipes including this tasty soup ([here](#)) which has been a hit with all the family.

After our entire crop of cherries (from our potted Lapins Cherokee variety) was eaten last year by pigeons, I have covered it with netting to see if we will get the chance to enjoy a ripe cherry this year - it doesn't look very pretty but we're keeping our fingers crossed it will work!

I have also taken Simon's advice when trying to maximise my cucumber crop this year by adding some mycorrhizal fungi to the roots of my initially sad looking plant.

I have previously only used it on the roses, but after hearing that Simon uses it at the allotment, I have given it a go (cucumbers are a firm favourite with my children so I'm under pressure!). So far it's looking promising and the plant is looking much healthier.



Pumpkin update - knowing that our family's pumpkin competition is well underway and broadening out to include several friends as well, I've been doing some more research! Several Internet sources suggest growing pumpkin and squash plants in a compost heap, and I remember the mum of a school friend of mine doing the same. Apparently the mixture of the nutrients and the heat from the compost is a winning combo and will help make your compost even better in the long run! Challenge accepted 😊!



As you will see from the photo, I use large black plastic compost bins so I have lined the door at the front to hold back the compost, and then punctured it to allow me to insert the plant. It will be really interesting to compare it to the other potted pumpkins when harvest time comes.

Happy gardening, x

A note on mycorrhizal-fungi

These fungi live in the soil and grow onto and into a plant's roots, forming a network that expands the roots into a wider area of soil. This allows the plant to take up water and nutrients more easily.

It's important to distinguish between two different types. Ecto-based varieties are beneficial for trees and shrubs, and Endo-based for vegetables & fruit.

Most soils contain varying amounts and species of mycorrhizal fungi, but soils are very different. A soil fed naturally will tend to have good levels of fungi, but Simon uses just a pinch of the Endo-variety when potting up veg and when planting out. A little goes a long way. It seems to work, so it's worth considering.

Useful info can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

Eating in season

Seasonal produce available now include finger carrots, peas, broad beans, salads, spring onions, courgettes, globe artichokes and strawberries - see [here](#).

Herbs

Herbs are a joy at this time of year and good for pollinators. If you haven't sown any this year it's not too late to buy some in from a garden centre quite cheaply.

Alternatively, you can divide supermarket herbs. These never seem to last very long in their pots – perhaps because a large number of plants are crammed together. You can prolong their life and make more plants by splitting them up into individual pots or plant them in the garden!

Basil is always a good one to pick. Each supermarket pot often contains many plants so just split them up. See [here](#) and then pot them up or pop them straight in a sunny spot in the garden.

Information about the best herbs for pollinators and culinary uses can be found [here](#) – why not try marjoram, mint and borage (another self seeder).

Tomato Masterclass

Some expert advice from Gordon.

Some seventy-two years ago my father challenged me to grow a tomato which I did. I have now been growing them for all that time and have had successes and failures. I was not very happy when things went wrong so I decided to go to Pershore horticultural college where I learnt what to do and what not to do.

The tomatoes we see today are all hybrids of the original disease-free root stock. It's now convenient to choose seeds such as Moneymaker, Ailsa Craig, Exhibition etc. Some are happier under glass and some out in the open so do your research.

When you plant out your tomatoes it is important not to over water them until they are established. You can use a cane or string up some cord for them to climb up. They should be clipped to the can or tied to the cord every eight to ten inches.

When they are growing well the first flowers will start to open and it the starts to be important for you to train the plant. The first thing you must do is start watering every day as if you do not do this some flowers may not set.

Secondly, it is important to remove the side shoots that will start growing out at an angle between the stem and leaf of the plant. This is important as you want all of the growth to be in the stem and to produce the tomatoes.

You must decide how tall you wish the plant to grow but the average is near six feet. You then take the top out of the plant to stop it growing further.

Tomatoes are subject to a number of diseases so it's important to keep the plant growing by keeping the plants well fed. I personally mix Fish Blood and Bone fertilizer with my compost and feed with liquid seaweed every seven days.

You now come to picking your crop, they will gradually begin to change colour and get ripe, you can pick them at anytime to suit yourselves.

I do not know which is best as I do not eat Tomatoes!

Nature Networks

The hawthorn blossom in the hedges between the Haywoods was late but the display was sensational. The oaks and ash trees were also late out this year but the birds seem to be laying their eggs late too.

SinCH has initiated two Green Walks over the spring and summer. Around 20 people had a lovely evening walk through the wildflower meadow between Coley Lane and Coley Grove.



In addition to a sea of buttercups and a wide range of grasses, [Cuckoo Flower](#), Red and White Clover, [Lesser Stitchwort](#), Vetches, Sorrel, [Meadow Vetchling](#) (*lathyrus pratensis*) were spotted. At the time of writing the area has lots of [Meadow Brown](#) and [Speckled Wood](#) butterflies.

The second walk was centred on the Colwich Brickworks Nature Reserve and the green lanes and fields surrounding, one of which is of countywide significance as it is managed for

diversity by the landowner.



In June and July the Brickworks reserve is home to [Southern Marsh Orchids](#) and other wild flowers such as [Ox-eye Daisies](#), [Ragged Robin](#) and [Self Heal](#).

Both walks ended at the Lamb & Flag to allow people to enjoy further socialising. Please watch out for details of future walks.

Some SinCH members are mapping out the green spaces and species to be found across the parish – if you would like to help please contact info@sinch.earth

Simon's Wildlife Gardening

So how's the quest for year-round nectar going?

At one of last autumn's SinCH coffee mornings I was gifted some wallflowers from Gordon and these were still going strong through May. They have gone really well with the Forget-Me-Nots and some self-seeded [Herb-Robert](#).



Sadly it was time to take them out to make room for other things. As they are all biennials I have left some behind to go to seed for next year.

Outside the garden gate we have [Fox and Cubs](#) which attract many insects, such as hoverflies. These are one of very few orange flowers in our countryside.

Back in the garden the [Aquilegias](#) (Columbine) were very popular with pollinators. They work very well with bluebells and the foliage of the hostas (which themselves are very attractive to bees later in the summer). Again, being biennial, they will self-seed for another display next year.

Rhododendrons and Azaleas are also very attractive to bees and these have provided an all too brief splash of colour. They seem to suit the soil in the parish so I'd recommend these to fill a semi-shaded gap for next year.

The cotoneaster hedge is full of small white flowers and this, of all my plants, attracts the widest range of bees, hoverflies and butterflies.

June and July means the foxgloves, honeysuckle, elderflower and roses all become very important sources of nectar. Just now the bees are all over the campanula.

Wildlife Gardening cont'd

Finally, as the herbs flower they are also very attractive to pollinators, so I've left some chives to flower for them. Flowering chives are too tough to eat but it's worth the short term sacrifice and when cut down the chives will regrow.



So where to go next?

- Find a place to create the pond but I need to think carefully about where best to put it - so more on this next time.

- I've bought a very grand bug house from the Wildlife Trust HQ shop but in clearing the shed out I've come across two old shelves I can use to make an extra one later in the year – watch this space.

- Collect wallflower, aquilegia, poppy and

foxglove seeds when they have ripened and sow straight into the garden in new places.

See [here](#) for good illustrations of various pollinator friendly flowers and a very detailed resource [here](#).

News and events

The **SinCH's plant sales** at its May and June coffee and plastic free mornings were a big success and provided over £60 for SinCH funds. So many thanks to those who brought plants along and to those eager purchasers. Early rhubarb was in season and went down well - at least one SinCH member now has some rhubarb gin on the go.

A **bee-friendly plant sale** takes place every Friday morning from around 10.00 to after lunch at the Staffordshire Wildlife Centre at Wolseley Bridge. Fiona and Trish will be on hand to talk you through what's available. A proportion of the proceeds go to the Wildlife Trust.

Colwich allotments will be having an **open day** on Sunday 25th July. More details to follow.

Liz's Rhubarb Gin recipe

I have made this several times, always with success. I use a generous amount of rhubarb but don't be deterred if you don't want to make the full amount - I've often just halved the ingredients.

- 1litre of basic Gin
- 800g rhubarb 100g granulated sugar
- juice of 1 lemon

Chop the rhubarb and add to the gin along with the sugar and lemon juice in a large jar. You'll need to shake it and invert it or shake it around for the first few days to make sure the sugar is dissolved.

Leave for anything from 2-6 weeks. I find that if you have more rhubarb you can do it for a shorter time. If you only have a little rhubarb you'll need to leave it in for longer to get lots of flavour from it.)

This should give you a nice pink rhubarb gin which you can bottle in a pretty bottle - or 2 smaller ones.

Tips: Notes about timing

- After 2 weeks the rhubarb will still be OK to put in a crumble etc, with a bit of fresh rhubarb. It'll have a very slightly ginny taste.
- After about 6 weeks the rhubarb will have shrunk and be to ginny for a crumble.
- I usually find that 3-4 weeks is fine.

SERVING

This is the best bit! Don't add mixers, or you'll spoil the lovely rhubarby flavour. To make a longer drink just put a load of ice and a slice of fresh lemon in the glass, then pour in your pink gin. Lovely sitting outside on a sunny day, especially if you've got a nice view to enjoy!

How long does it keep? Well, it won't go off, being high in alcohol. However, the pretty pink colour comes from tiny particles in the rhubarb, which eventually sink to the bottom and go slightly brown, so it looks like a dusty sediment in the bottom of the bottle, and the drink loses its pretty colour. SO! I'd say plan to drink it within 6 months. Don't bother saving it for Christmas, it is very much a summer drink.