

SHROPSHIRE ORGANIC GARDENERS

Spring 2024, Newsletter 49



For gardeners, allotment holders, window box owners, who wish to grow without chemicals and meet with others.

SHROPSHIRE ORGANIC GARDENERS

We are a group of growers of fruit, vegetables and flowers with gardens, allotments or smallholdings in various places in Shropshire.

Winter meetings on the first Wednesday of the month at 7.30pm.
Summer meetings from May to October are usually at weekends, and consist of visits to members' gardens, outings, practical workshops, demonstrations etc.

See the programme on the back pages.

We are regularly involved in putting on displays at green days/climate events/local and sustainable food events.

Subscription rates: £12 per person per year
Visitors: £3

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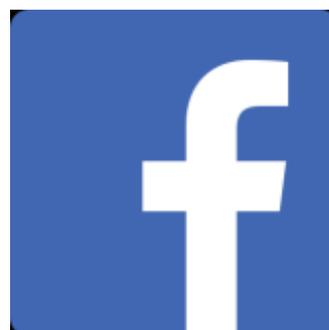
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SHROPSHIRE ORGANIC
GARDENERS- SOGS

Members only group;

Soggies Surviving
Join the Conversation.

MESSAGE FROM YOUR CHAIRWOMAN

Spring 2024



Welcome to our Spring 2024 newsletter and I'd particularly like to welcome and thank Caroline Wright for becoming only our third editor in getting on for 30 years.

Dare I ask how your winter has been? Are your gardens merely sodden or completely washed away after what feels like rain since forever? Oh, the vagaries of our weather!

Luckily we've had a packed winter programme of talks and more. Continue into the newsletter for all the info on those talks.

Firstly, the December Bring and Share became our new SOGs Logo Competition event and the winning logo, voted in by all who came along for the evening, was by Maralyn Hepworth, our former editor and coincidentally the creator of our Potato Day logo as well. We'll be making as much use of the logo as possible in correspondence and hopefully, if I've done it correctly, you should be able **Ctrl + click** on the logo above and it will take you directly to our website. I'd like to thank Maralyn and everyone who took part. You can see all the submitted logos further on and they are really lovely.

February and of course Potato Day, and what a day! Celebrating our 20th Anniversary, we had our surprise guest, Alys Fowler, gardener, garden presenter, journalist and book author, to say a few words and cut the hessian potato sack ribbon with many of our 'veteran/vintage' SOGs members watching on and our early visitors queuing to get in, as impatient as ever.

Alys said to me that she really does love a good Potato Day and went to one of the first ones to be held at Garden Organic (HDRA in those days), which was more or less at the same time SOGs started their event, or a year after. She enjoyed quietly choosing her potatoes beforehand and then chatting with members and the public afterwards. It was so generous of Alys to give up her time and drive to Shropshire for us, so thank you Alys.

Friday night we got set up in record time, with Matthew and Gete from Brighter Blooms getting down from Lancashire with few delays this year, and members' potatoes chosen and bagged.

This year was also a first for SOGs introducing card payments. Card income was still less than the cash payments, £877.25 v £1,493.14 (cash), but it's clear that we made the right decision to introduce this technology.

Also new was the table of second-hand gardening books/magazines, a suggestion by Lorraine Gawlick to help us all thin out our libraries of gardening books. It was donation only but we made a massive £72 on them, so this will definitely be on the agenda for next year too. Our profit at the March meeting stands at £1,429.08 but Maggie and Peter are still selling potatoes so that will change a bit. The full accounts will go out with the Minutes and Agenda for the April AGM.



Photo Montage above and front cover:
Dave Croker

I'd like to thank every member who again volunteered in getting Potato Day on the road. It simply wouldn't happen without you and I hope you all enjoyed yourselves. There are other contributions on Potato Day further in the newsletter so do enjoy.

Friday 1st March saw the second delivery of our Melcourt Peat Free Bulk Compost ordering project. My thanks to Angela Cattermole who took charge of it this time around and, as it turned out, ended up having to deal with a date muddle with the supplier and then a matter of 27 missing bags! Angela was on the case and everyone got their orders. We might consider another way of doing this in 2025, so watch this space. However, SOGs luck held out. The weather was truly appalling the day before and on the morning, but the sun came out, which is really very helpful when organising an outdoor pick up.

Now of course we head into our summer visits programme, via the all-important April AGM meeting and short talks from some of the groups SOGs donated funding to this year. So please do come along. The AGM business is but a minor item of the evening.

As of going to print, I haven't been able to fully confirm our October visit, but will do as soon as possible.

We kick off in May with a visit to The Isle Estate at Bicton on the edge of Shrewsbury. Because we have regularly had large numbers for many of our visits, the owner and I are suggesting a 'Walk, Talk and Picnic Lunch' day with one group in the morning and one in the afternoon (up to 30 members for each), but with a picnic in between for **everyone**. A chance to laze in the sunshine and catch up with friends and try everyone else's food in the walled garden. Should the weather decide to change we are offered 'the house' if wet.

Head to the back pages for the Summer Programme and the dates, but in the meantime, fingers crossed for some better weather and good gardening everyone.



Rachel Strivens

EDITOR'S NOTE

Many thanks for all your contributions to this bumper edition of the Newsletter, my first, and to Maralyn and Rachel for smoothing the way for me. I hope I've managed to include everything you sent me and please shout out if not and I'll be sure to include your contribution in our November issue.

It has indeed been a very wet and unseasonably warm winter, and I know we'd all have preferred it to be cold and dry. But Spring has definitely sprung in the hedgerows and in our gardens and I wanted to share a poem to celebrate that, below. In the meantime, look forward to seeing you all on our Summer visits – I'm especially excited about our first of the season to The Isle Estate, as I've always been intrigued about that part of the map within one of the River Severn's many loops.

Caroline Wright

Daffodowndilly

She wore her yellow sun-bonnet,
She wore her greenest gown;
She turned to the south wind
And curtsied up and down.
She turned to the sunlight
And shook her yellow head,
And whispered to her neighbour:
"Winter is dead."



- A.A. Milne,

When We Were Very Young, pub. 1924

**TALK: THE DEVELOPMENT OF PEAT FREE COMPOST
PRODUCTS CONTINUED!**
**Richard Cave, Technical Sales Manager for Melcourt
Industries Ltd**
1st November 2023

Written up by Rachel Strivens

Following feedback received from Richard's first talk to SOGs in February 2023, we asked him to return and finish his presentation, covering the science and Peat Debate, and future progress for Melcourt, and it proved just as interesting.

Just a reminder, Melcourt Industries was established in 1983 and is jointly owned by Charles Ransford & Son Ltd (Bishop's Castle) and AW Jenkinson (those of the massive haulage vehicles you see on the roads). In 2001, Sylvamix was developed for professional nurserymen/women whilst in 2013 Sylvagrow came on the market for the general public.

Bark Supply Chain: Sourced from 100 UK forests, Melcourt buy from 24 sawmills and send the raw materials to 4 processing sites around the UK. The growing media is manufactured at one site in Gloucestershire. Some 4 million cubic metres of all growing media are sold in the UK/year.

Nitrogen from Urea is currently used but they are going to stop this soon. Melcourt are looking into the use of sheep's wool, making it in to pellets to add, but this has so far proved a little variable.

Non Peat Ingredients In Melcourt Compost Products:

- 1. Bark and wood fibre** - renewable, consistent, available, UK sourced, low in nutrients.
- 2. Coir from renewable coconut** plantations in India - renewable, low in nutrients so versatile, has good moisture holding capacity, not UK sourced but they regularly inspect the plantations. It is high quality when washed so they use monsoon water collected in lagoons. Mainly sourced from small businesses working as cooperatives, and the trees can be inter-planted, so it all provides

a steady income and is Soil Association approved organic. 20-30% is used in a mix.

- 3. Green garden compost** through council collections - renewable, available, UK sourced, carefully sourced, cheaper than most other ingredients, BUT, it can be quite contaminated (poor sorting) and very high in pH and conductivity and only sensible to use up to 30% in a mix.

Other potential materials:

Bracken, digestate, wood, farmed sphagnum moss, worm casts, coffee grounds, ground cork. Vermiculite, Perlite, loam, grit, sand, reclaimed materials but these also all have climate related problems. So just 3 ingredients to keep it simple: Bark, Coir and Compost.

The Peat Debate

The long history of peat reduction has moved from just a biodiversity argument to climate change being the driver. Peat extraction for horticulture commenced on a commercial scale only in the 1960s. The late conservationist David Bellamy raised the issue of bog damage back in the 1970s.

There is no doubt that habitat loss and CO₂ emissions are key, but poorly developed new peat free products haven't helped as they led to loss of grower confidence and the industry is still coping with the legacy.

- In 1990, a consortium of 14 of the UK's leading main wildlife and archaeological conservation organisations launched the Peatlands Campaign to emphasise the damage caused by peat-based industries and to promote the use of alternatives in growing media.
- In 1992, a peat working group examined the balance between extraction and nature conservation.
- In 1995, planning guidance suggested a target of being 40% peat-free by 2005.
- The 2011 Natural Environment White Paper adopted a policy to stop the use of peat in England in the garden and hobby market by 2020; and in the commercial horticulture sector by 2030.
- The rationale was based on biodiversity loss, CO₂ emissions, damage to heritage and historical artefacts and destruction of scientific information.

Huge pressure on the Commercial Horticultural Sector led a Sustainable Growing Media Task Force of 35 organisations to set up the Responsible Sourcing Scheme (RSS)

<https://www.responsiblesourcing.org.uk/> .

It was important to get everyone in the same room, including the peat firms, to overcome barriers. The 'sustainable' has been dropped but the Task Force has committed to all growing media being made from materials that are sourced and manufactured in a way that is both socially and environmentally responsible.

Key Strengths of the New Responsible Sourcing Scheme

- All growing media ingredients will be assessed across a range of criteria and scored accordingly.
- The scheme is auditable, transparent and evidence-based.
- The scheme will incorporate a requirement for continual improvement.

RSS Criteria

Energy inputs, including transport

Water required in production

Renewability

Impact on habitat and biodiversity

Efficiency of resource use

Social compliance

Pollution

<https://www.responsiblesourcing.org.uk/scheme-criteria-snapshot>

Not all manufacturers have signed up but most of the big ones have and the Criteria are measured and scored by RSS. A Petal symbol is used A-E. This score isn't put on the bags, but a QR code is which takes you to the website and the scores.

Most Melcourt products are a B rating, but the Melcourt with John Innes is D rating because loam, grit and sand are non-renewable and a lot of energy is used in their extraction.

Advice on Growing with Peat-Free Compost

- Watering - little and often (test soil underneath with your fingers)
- Keep weeds down
- Feeding - you may need to feed a little earlier than usual. Some peat free has long-term feeding properties so be aware and adjust accordingly.

Editor's Note: Thanks for capturing all this complexity Rachel; it was beyond me!

The good news is that although the government has postponed the bans scheduled in the 2011 White Paper, Richard confirmed that compost manufacturers who still use peat have been reducing the proportions significantly and garden centres seeking environmental accreditations have been stocking fewer products containing peat. So the use of peat has already fallen dramatically in the UK.



THE GARDEN MUSEUM IN LONDON

By Judy Crook

If you find yourself in London with a couple of hours to spare, a visit to the Garden Museum in Lambeth will make you very happy. It's housed in a wonderful formerly abandoned 14th century church next to Lambeth Palace. At its centre is a courtyard garden of rare plants



designed by Dan Pearson, containing the elaborate tombs of Captain Bligh (of Mutiny on the Bounty notoriety) and John TreDESCANT.

There's much to see inside. There are well used garden tools and artefacts, ephemera (gnomes), seed packets, art, photographs, garden design, social history and much more. Don't miss the Victorian glass cucumber straightener designed by George Stephenson ('father of the railways'), the oldest watering can in the world (16th century) and a collection of pressed flowers sent in letters home by a soldier serving in the 1st World War. In fact, you'll need more than a couple of hours, particularly if you go up the tower for views across the Thames to Westminster or visit the excellent cafe.

CHRISTMAS BRING AND SHARE

6th December 2023

By Pat Frost

On a cold December evening, the annual Christmas Bring and Share at Draper's Place brought warmth and conviviality! As a new member this was my first opportunity to enjoy an event which I'm sure has been eagerly anticipated by other members all year long!

The hall was looking very festive, thanks primarily to those with decorating skills and those who provided the seasonal goodies on the tables. The selection of and presentation of delicious food was amazing! I could say 'a feast to behold', but that's a bit corny! Much chatter ensued in between the feasting!



I noticed quite a diverse collection in the Big Seed and Garden Paraphernalia Swap, which disappeared almost entirely. I'm sure everything went to a good home – or more likely a good garden.

As if that wasn't enough, we also had the judging of the SOGs Logo Competition – quite a difficult choice to make out of several good entries. The winner was Maralyn, who unfortunately wasn't with us for a well-deserved round of applause.

All in all, it was an excellent event to round up what has been a very successful year for Soggies!



SOGS LOGO COMPETITION

With thanks to all our entrants and to Dave Croker for putting together this wonderful montage, show-casing what a lot of choice we had alongside Maralyn's winning entry!



From top left clockwise - Jan Gibb, Frank Oldaker, Helen Foxall, Jan Gibb, Mary Rickards, ? Dave Croker and Rachel S, Maggie Anderson. The bottom left logo had no name attached to it so please do let us know who you are.

TALK: ORGANIC FARMERS AND GROWERS
Steven Jacob, Development Officer
10th January 2024

Written up by Maralyn Hepworth

This was a very interesting talk, as whilst I was aware that the organisation was based in Shropshire, and assessed land nationally, I hadn't considered the SEED TO SHELF assessments, the complexity of the Community Interest Organisation and the joys and sorrows of working with the Government in the accreditation process – especially after Brexit! OF&G assess 52% of organic land in the UK.

The core of this is ensuring higher animal welfare and the exclusion of synthetic inputs across the whole chain, from farms and growing sites to the commercial kitchens that prepare the food for sale. In turn, OF&G are audited by UKAS, for which they must pay. Their 40 assessors visit the farms, and report back to longstanding seniors, and this report goes to a final panel with other organisations making the final decision. There is a charge for farmers etc. to participate, which is especially difficult for small units, but OF&G are looking at ways to make this possible – maybe with local groups setting up in partnership.

At present, the outlook is not good. DEFRA pushed a bill through Parliament without consultation and it is not precise. Four international companies have now swallowed up most of the smaller seed producers, and they are intent on using GM and the synthetic inputs GM plants require. This is of great concern. However, OF&G now have a 7-year organic seed production project where seeds are cross pollinated for resilience in the field rather than a lab for pesticide, flood and drought resilience. Rather than a homogeneous plant, variety adds strength. A photo of a field at Greenacres Organic Farm in Shifnal showed two wheat crops, one from a lab-produced seed – all identical -, the other from organic seed. The one with the weeds was lab grown. The organic one looked clean.

Another interesting topic was Regenerative Farming. There has been much media attention and interest in this, and much confusion. Regenerative Farming is NOT organic. It may take on some of the organic criteria but is more about regeneration of the soils, and they

can use chemicals. Whilst it should be welcomed as a move towards Organic, and farmers can be supported in this, it has no accreditation so at present, there needs to be more public information on this.

Discussion afterwards on where to buy organic seeds from the UK came up with suggestions, which Rachel will share on the website. It would appear some are coming in from China. Regenerative farming also came up, with a need expressed to make sure people were aware what organic meant.

We hope to see to Steven at SOGS events in future.



USES FOR OLD TIGHTS! (OR STOCKINGS)

By Jan Gibb

1. Fill a leg with any type of manure, dangle in a butt of water to make potent fertiliser. You could also add chopped nettles and/or comfrey for extra oomph.
2. The feet of old tights make excellent, easy-to-clean strainers/filters when fastened around the downpipes that feed water butts.
3. Fill a leg with harvested onions and hang up to store.
4. Use the ends of tights as hammock-style supports for ripening melons, tying the ends to canes.
5. Cut tights up into strips to make discreet plant ties which are also stretchy.
6. Put a pond pump into the knotted-up top section of a pair of tights to stop it getting clogged with sludge etc. The makeshift pump cover is easily removed, cleaned and replaced.
7. Use a section of tights to enclose cabbages and cauliflowers to keep the leaves tightly closed (this would also presumably help to protect from caterpillar infestation?).

Any other ideas anyone?



Image courtesy of Paul Cartledge

TALK: THE ORIGINS AND HISTORY OF VEGETABLES

Howard Goslyn
7th February 2024

Written up by Peter Anderson

First define your veg. Is it fruit or vegetable? Does a tomato taste better for being a fruit? Should rhubarb be eaten with meat and potatoes? Personally, I have always eaten peas with honey; I've done it all my life, it makes the peas taste funny but it keeps them on my knife!

We have the veg that we grow in our gardens and we sort of assume that they have always just existed so it is fascinating to learn that they had origins and therefore there must have been a time before there was a potato in this country, for instance. How could that be possible? The potato is so indispensable and a day without a potato is a day lost to culinary excellence. Traditionally the potato was introduced by Sir Francis Drake, along with tobacco. I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall watching him work out which one to eat and which one to smoke...!

Along with the origins, Howard gave us insights into the properties of veg; for instance; the aphrodisiac qualities of some veg, I won't name them, experiment for yourself.

Alternative uses were also covered, e.g. beetroot makes red ink and reduces blood pressure. Odd combination there; it is red ink on a bank statement that usually increases blood pressure!

Without veg and its cultivation there could be no civilisation and some veg predate even pottery. Lentils were used when we still shared caves with Neanderthals.

My own favourite is runner beans being perennial. They are a tender perennial that we grow as an annual; room for experiment there I think.

Apparently Roman gladiators rubbed themselves all (all!) over with onion before they fought, room for experiment there too.

Howard made some mention of the “Doctrine of Signatures”. If a plant looks like a body part then it is obviously good for it. Sounds reasonable to me. And there is now scientific evidence for this; he listed; carrots, tomatoes, walnuts, egg plant, sweet potatoes and peanuts. I won’t tell you which body parts as there could be a good quiz in this; but one of them is a Viagra substitute; again just experiment and then you can tell me.

There was one disappointment which Sogs can take as a challenge; potatoes are only the fourth most popular veg in the world behind maize, wheat and rice. Let us make it Sogs mission to make potatoes number one, beginning this potato day and keeping this unique event going for another 20 years (at least).



POSTSCRIPT: THE DOCTRINE OF SIGNATURES

What on earth is it?

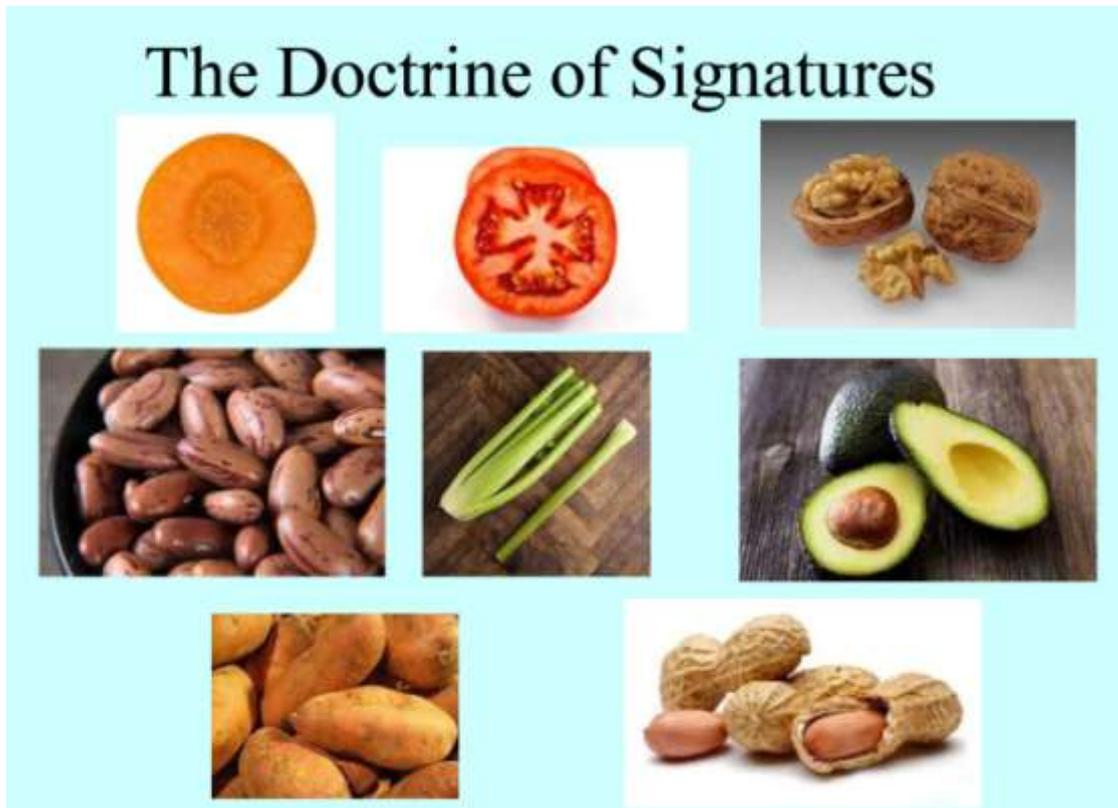
By Rachel Strivens

I found myself thinking about the Doctrine of Signatures after Howard’s talk and wanted to know a bit more, so here goes.

According to Bradley Bennett, ‘The Doctrine of Signatures (DOS) is found throughout the world and has been around for a long time, but most scholars/scientists dismiss it as a “primitive” or “prescientific” idea’. For thousands of years humans have looked to nature to provide medicine for a wide range of ailments (don’t get me started on the potential medicines lost from the destruction of the Amazon Rainforest habitat). Dioscorides, who practiced and wrote about medicine in ancient Rome, recorded in 65AD “The Herb Scorpius resembles the tail of the Scorpion and is good against his biting”.

So how did our ancestors know which plants to pick? That’s what a few people have asked me since the meeting and basically, people have used a **plant’s appearance** to divine its medicinal properties. This concept is called the “doctrine of signatures”, and it decrees that plants which resemble the condition or body part can in some way treat or alleviate an illness in that body part. If we follow that thinking,

then walnuts, which look like brains, will ease headaches and madness.



According to Bennett, scientific evaluation of Signatures is rather sceptical, suggesting four things:

1. There is no evidence that morphological plant signatures ever led to the discovery of medicinal properties. Considering DOS in this manner is unproductive and largely un-testable.
2. Signatures are post hoc attributions rather than a priori clues to the utility of medicinal plants.
3. It is productive to redefine signatures to include organoleptic properties [characteristics of food perceived through our five senses] associated with therapeutic value. Plants with strong odours or bitter tastes, for example, commonly are found in pharmacopoeias.
4. DOS should be considered for what it primarily is - a way of disseminating information. DOS fundamentally is a mnemonic [memory aid] and, therefore, is exceedingly valuable in traditional cultures.

The thing with science is that it's not always right (or not at a given time in history) and isn't able to explain things we don't fully understand – yet! With more recent investigative and nutritional sciences, evidence is showing that what was once called the Doctrine of Signatures is worthy of a closer consideration. I mentioned walnuts and brains above, and beetroot are increasingly being recommended as juice to help with high blood pressure. I'm not totally sure which organ beetroot represents but I'm sure it's somewhere in our body.

At the same time, the Doctrine does not always work and could even be very dangerous. For example, birthwort (*Aristolochia clematitis*), so-called because of its resemblance to the uterus, was once used widely in pregnancy, but it is carcinogenic and very damaging to the kidneys.

Now Peter mentioned in his piece above that the photos of examples of Doctrine of Signatures would make a good quiz, so above is the slide Howard had, and now it's up to you – what organ do each represent and why?

Answers on a stamped, addressed email (!) to our Editor, Caroline Wright, carolinewright932@gmail.com or, of course, to Peter at magandpete@yahoo.co.uk

Looking forward to including your answers in our Autumn Newsletter!

More Information:

Bennett, Bradley C. (2007) 'Doctrine of Signatures: An explanation of medicinal plant discovery or Dissemination of knowledge?', *Economic Botany*, Vol. 61, pp. 246-255.

Simon, Matt (14 August 2014). 'Fantastically Wrong: The Strange History of Using Organ-Shaped Plants to Treat Disease', *Wired*.

Condé Nast, Available online:

<https://www.wired.com/2014/07/fantastically-wrong-doctrine-of-signatures/>

Wood, Matthew (2023) 'The Doctrine of Signatures', Available online: <https://www.matthewwoodinstituteofherbalism.com/pages/blog?p=the-doctrine-of-signatures>

POTATO DAY 2024: OUR 20th 10th February 2024

By Ian Thom

As ever, we tried a few different things in this our 20th year.

To improve the parking we had even more volunteers on duty in the car park, we borrowed road signs from the Council to try to slow down passing traffic, and we sent letters to local residents informing them of the event (and inviting them).

We had the potatoes in “seasonal” order this year, i.e. First Early, Second Early, Main. We have previously laid them out in Organic/Non-Organic order, or in plain old alphabetical order. As before, we will review whether any particular way of doing it is better than any other.

And this year, we introduced a card reader on the cash desk. For some time, the indoor market stallholders in Shrewsbury have used card readers as well as taking cash. I had briefly considered a card reader before, without coming to any conclusion, and then a friend of mine set up a local small business (Dinglewood Vineyard at Stanton-upon-High Heath) and said how easy it was to set up a card reader. So, after some investigation, we set up a SOGS account with Sumup, bought a card reader (£64 one-off payment, with 1.69% transaction fee), and took the plunge. On Potato Day, we took approximately £900 using the card reader, and £1,500 in cash, so all in all that seems worthwhile. Cash is still king, but lots of customers seemed to appreciate the card option. We’ll consider extending it for the kitchen and cafe next year.

As always, the kitchen did a roaring trade in hot food (our famous bacon, egg and sausage butties, together with home-made soup) and the café provided innumerable hot drinks and delicious cakes (all provided by members). Not surprising given that we had 518 people attending!

RECIPE FOR OUR 20th POTATO DAY CELEBRATORY CAKE

Made by Maggie Anderson

5 oz Self raising flour
6 oz Caster sugar
6 oz Soft margarine
3 oz Drinking chocolate powder (I put 1/2 cocoa)
3 large eggs
3 tbsp boiling water

1. Grease and line a deep 7 or 8 inch tin.
2. Mix all the ingredients together in one bowl, gently to begin with, until all are combined. Beat for 2 minutes.
3. Put in the cake tin and bake in the centre of oven at 350F, 180C for 1 hour until well risen and firm (the temperature and timing will vary for a fan oven).
4. Leave cake in tin for 5 minutes.
5. Turn onto a wire rack to cool.
6. When cool ice with chocolate butter icing then decorate as below.

Four cakes were made for the occasion and joined together.



Decorations

Roll little pieces of marzipan into balls and then ovals. Leave to dry. Shape a bigger piece of marzipan into a rectangle and press the sides

up, squashing the corners until it looks like a potato tray and leave to dry. When they are dry - the next day- paint tiny brown dots on the potatoes to look like eyes. I used a mix of red and green food colouring to make the brown. The letters were made by rolling out long sausages of marzipan and then shaping them into the letters. The piping icing was just icing sugar and a little hot water and a splash of green colouring. Put it in a plastic bag and cut off a corner. Then you can pipe your writing.



FROM THE ARCHIVES: A POTTED HISTORY OF POTATO DAY

By Ian Thom

Looking through the old SOGS newsletters for information about the early Potato Days, I came across the following: *“Potato Day, Nesscliffe Village Hall, 5th February 1905”*. Which made me wonder if Potato Day is actually a lot older than I thought, and, if it is, how old does that make Peter? Or maybe it was just a misprint...

The first SOGS Potato Day came about as the result of a conversation between our then chairman, Peter Anderson, and Andy McQueen of Three Counties Potatoes. They got talking at the SOGS stand at Shrewsbury Flower Show in 2004 - to use Peter's words, “I was approached by a man with potatoes on his mind”, who could arrange for many varieties of potato to be made available at a potato day in February, and be there to give advice. The basic premise discussed on that day still holds good – ‘we arrange a venue, the publicity and some catering and Hey Presto! We have a potato day’.

The first Potato Day was indeed at Nesscliffe Village Hall on 5th February, 2005. It was a great success, with over 300 visitors. Advice was dispensed by Andy McQueen, the potatoes (supplied by Pat Smith, a local seed merchant) sold well, the tombola stall ran out of prizes, the raffle made a lot of money, and lunches and cakes were popular. Even the Mayor and Mayoress of Shrewsbury were there to judge the children's competition and present the prizes. As Peter said afterwards, “The problem is, with it being so popular, we're going to

have to do it again next year!" In fact, Potato Day has been held every year since then.

In 2006, the organisers instituted the Friday night set-up to prevent the hectic Saturday

morning of the previous year; it was also noted that most people turned up in the morning, so the opening times of 10.00 until 5.00 could be brought forward. In 2007, all potatoes were sold out! By 2011, the chairman could report that Potato Day still generated the same enthusiasm from members and visitors, and that even opening an hour earlier, the whole thing was as smooth as silk!



2012 saw Potato Day move from Nesscliffe to Montford Village Hall. This hall had a larger car park, and a kitchen at each end, one for breakfasts and lunches, one for tea and cakes, with more room for potato stalls in the middle – all evidence of the increasing popularity of the Day.

The following year was a bit fraught, as the day before, we were let down on the delivery of potatoes; happily, a certain Matthew from Preston stepped into the breach, and has been supplying us ever since.

2013 saw a bit of excitement in the car park when a car got bogged down in the far corner. Eventually it got pulled out by a bloke from West Brom with a Landrover – this turned out to be Steve Phipps, who happened to be a bit of a potato expert, and who has been turning up ever since to help us out. In 2014, there was even a cake to celebrate 10 years of Potato Day!



By 2015, Frank was wondering whether people would still come to our Potato Day, now that there were other events nearby at Shropshire Wildlife Trust and Harper Adams; however, over 500 people turned up, which cleared that up. As Frank said then, it is an enjoyable event, not just a sale of potatoes, and volunteers and visitors appreciate that. Frank's report on 2016 reminds us why we do it – not only do we provide gardeners with great choice, we have a welcoming community event, and we also donate much of the profit to local organisations and charities. Eric Lunt, treasurer at the time, reported that we had given over £5,000 in the past five years.

Potato Day continued to outgrow the hall, and particularly the car park, at Montford, so in 2019, we moved to Wattlesborough Village Hall, bigger in both respects. And we still continued to fill the hall with potatoes, side stalls, and customers, and fill the car park with cars. As Peter said. "We tap in to a need for potatoes, information, gardener's fellow feeling, and cake".

Our 2021 Potato Day had a different, and one-off, venue because of the Covid lockdown. We were at Hindford Grange Farm near Whittington, so we could take advantage of their barns to institute a click and collect system (or delivery in many cases), overseen by Rachel, who had just taken over as chair from Peter. Against all the odds, this was another success, with plenty of sales and customers; surplus potatoes were then sold on a profit-share arrangement by Maddocks Farm Shop near Baschurch.



We returned to Wattlesborough in 2022 (headline in Shropshire Star “Hundreds of Salopians pay homage to the humble spud at gardeners’ Potato Day”!), with click and collect still in place, but reverted to our tried and tested ‘come and get it’ approach for 2023 onwards. We still get over 500 people turning up so we must be doing something right.

TALK: THE NATURAL GARDENER - GARDENING WITH THE CYCLES OF NATURE

Nancy Lowe
6 March 2024

Written up by Sue Bosson

Nancy was born in Shropshire, where she developed her love of nature. She tries to incorporate this into the gardens she designs, bringing organic, permaculture and ecological elements to them. Her gardens burst with wildlife and in her talk she told us how we too could have the same, whilst still having a productive and desirable garden. Nancy informed us about what we can look at to support the cycles of nature in our own gardens. She spoke about the food chains, from the smallest creatures to those higher up the chains. The small creatures, detritivores, eat dead leaves etc, putting nutrients into the soil which is taken up by plants. Small creatures are also eaten by larger ones, which in turn may be eaten by birds and small mammals, which in turn are eaten by larger birds and mammals. The food chain.

Many of these small creatures are helped if we provide shelter for them with structures like bug hotels but also piles of rotting wood, rocks, dead hedges. Anything that gives them shelter and protection. All insects are considered beneficial as many eat plant pests. Wasps and ladybirds eat aphids for example. But many 'pests' only attack poorly plants, very often making space for healthier ones. Many insects are pollinators, which are so important to our crops of most kinds. To encourage pollinators do avoid double flowers, which hide the pollen. Repeat plantings in the garden are beneficial, so the insects don't get confused and feel a visit to your garden is worth it. Use mass plantings such as irises, sanguisorbas, echinacea, red hot pokers, sedum and spring bulbs for those early insects.

Plant bulbs at the base of trees for the end of year season, autumn and then spring, when light can still reach before the canopy of leaves develop. Bulbs appreciate the dry shady conditions in the summer. You can have good flowers in lawns too. In long grass, grow yarrow,



knapweed, ladies' bedstraw, bird's foot trefoil, germander speedwell, black medic and clover. And daisies and clover will happily grow in shorter grass too.

Native plants will also help the insect larvae as they are where their eggs are laid, hence nettles and plants such as ladies' smock will encourage butterflies to lay their eggs where the plants feed the larvae. Honesty, sweet rocket, hedge garlic are all good choices. Blue butterflies particularly like leguminous plants, ie. the pea family. And if you want to see those small copper butterflies then do try growing common sorrel. Try wild carrot and Queen Anne's lace too, hoverflies love them.

In the autumn, instead of sweeping all the leaves from the lawn, try mowing over them instead. This makes it easier for worms etc. to drag them down to the depths! Too many leaves for this? Then turn them into a mulch. Match any mulch to the type of planting you have. So, shrubs benefit from wood chips and bark. Herbaceous plants prefer softer mulches such as straw and home-made compost. Piles of leaves also make good hiding places for wood lice, ground beetles etc.

Water helps in the garden too as many insect species start their lives in water, in a pond. Bigger is better if possible, with an irregular outline to give a longer edging where they can get in and out and provide more places to hide. Have varying depths to suit different plants and try to have some plants whose leaves float on the surface, so a small creature can hide underneath. And plants with tall stems give insects such as dragonflies the place to emerge and fly away. Submerged plants give creatures shade and somewhere to hide. Birds and mammals also appreciate somewhere to drink and bathe but do consider their safety.

Trees and shrubs in the garden are most important too. The more the better as they also provide shelter and they don't have to be untidy either. A nicely pruned shrub still provides that shelter. Other plants can grow in the shade or shelter of these shrubs. Evergreen grasses can give shelter too. Anything with hollow stems will be ideal too for winter hideaways. Poppies, sea holly, phlomis are examples. Teasels will grow in long grass too. Their leaf joints are so shaped and hold onto little pools of water and the flower heads hide insects.

SOGS SPRING/SUMMER PROGRAMME 2024

Out of courtesy to our hosts for each visit, Rachel will email the full membership a month before each visit to see whether you will be attending so numbers can be confirmed and refreshments organised. As with all visits, we like to car-share as much as possible and full address details are sent out beforehand. strivens58@btinternet.com or 01743 891607

May 25th (Sat) - The Isle, Isle Lane, Bicton, Shrewsbury SY3 8EE. Walk and Talk visit of around 1.5 miles with a Picnic Lunch in the walled garden (or house if wet)

Start Time: 10.00-10.30am meet up; **Walk and Talk:** 10.30-12.30am
12.30-14.00/14.30 - BYO Picnic Lunch

Walk and Talk: 14.00/14.30-16.00/16.30

Depending on the number of members interested this might be split to a morning and an afternoon visit with a manageable 30 in each group. We're suggesting a BYO picnic in between so all members can get together and have a chat.

The Isle Estate consists of approx 800 acres of agricultural land, water, woodland and dwellings and walled garden, mostly surrounded by the River Severn. Edward Tate the owner is passionate about Sustainably Farming for the Future. Find out what role agricultural practices have to play mitigating climate change, biodiversity loss, and water and food security, along with the work they do with Harper Adams & Ashton Universities and The Field Studies Council on long-term projects to enhance the natural environment and biodiversity.

June 30th (Sun) - 2.00pm - Members garden, Maggie and Peter Anderson, Baschurch. After quite a number of years, we return to Maggie and Peter's lovely place out near Baschurch.

A five acre holding with one acre of garden, they excel in resource recycling, composting, greenhouses, fruit (top and soft), veg, herbs, roses, lawns, trees, hedges, goats (very entertaining), hens, cattle, sheep, (pigs sometimes) horses and dogs, a gardener (wife) and regular WWOOFERS (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms) and any other waifs and strays who turn up! No upper limit on numbers. Please bring cakes.

July 21st (Sun) - 2.00pm - Robin and Julie Pocock, Shrawardine [not far from our old Potato Day venue]. A large half acre garden with slopes down to the River Severn, grape vines, raised veg beds, 21ft polytunnel, fruit trees, ornamentals, house at Poo Corner, pond, a river bank walk and joy of joys, a zip wire (periculo suo). Real enthusiasts. Please bring cakes.

August 11th (Sun) - 2.00pm - Twelve Acres Wales - Drew Spellar, Gardener, Plant Grower and Herb Lover

This growing smallholding is situated near Llangadfan, Welshpool, and is work in progress (something I know SOGgies like). Some things are establishing and doing well, others are experiments, like the small vineyard. The garden with raised beds are developing and the animals an ever learning experience. Drew is also the Chair and a Trustee on the Board for The Herb Society, so herbs play a big role in what happens at Twelve Acres. By August I suspect there will be plants for sale. Please bring cakes.

September 22nd (Sun) 2.00pm - Haven Hills Field and Kitchen - Members 'garden' Jonathan and Karen Hartnell-Beavis - Brockton nr Shifnall

Havenhills Farm sits on a hill just south of Shifnall. Jonathan ran a food business in London for 15 years - The Food Ferry, whilst Karen is an accomplished food photographer. They became disenchanted with the food system and food production as a whole and moving to Havenhills, they set about changing things. Whilst Jonathan looks after the field and growing side of things, Karen gradually became obsessed with food provenance and nutrition, and manages the kitchen, marketing and photography. They have a Veg Bag delivery/ collection scheme and sell Hampers full of fresh, nourishing seasonal veg based foods, bread and pasta, the flour for which comes from a neighbours' organic heritage grains.

They held three Supper Clubs last summer in the Silver Birch Grove and also ran a few workshops in the field, one focussing on tomato growing, another called "Soil, skills and sustenance".

This will be both a field and kitchen experience.

October Visit and Date to be Confirmed but hoping to go to: Agripost Green Waste Recycling Unit, Shrewsbury

If possible this will be a joint SOGs and Master Composters visit.

SOGS IS A MEMBER OF GARDEN ORGANIC