

During a very challenging year both in terms of weather conditions and world situations, both of which were exasperating for keen gardeners, one thing is clear: allotments are not only more desirable and popular than ever but are ever more needed as green lungs in urban spaces, where they not only protect and encourage wildlife, but provide both breathing space and exercise for body and mind for the wellbeing of both physical and mental health.

The summer of 2019 will not go down in gardening history as one of the best. Aside from the fact that different crops enjoy a variety of mutually exclusive conditions, it was a season of extremes: heatwaves contrasting with prolonged spells of heavy rain and nothing much to shout about in between. In short, it was a disappointment after early promise and the long, hot days of 2018, favouring pea crops but blighting slow-to-ripen tomatoes, excessive rain swelling fruit but low levels of late summer sun resulting in a harvest that lacked the sweetness and flavour of the previous year's bounty.

Other moves were afoot, however, providing welcome focus elsewhere within the gardening calendar. On Elm Street, on either side of the bench dedicated to Anniki Case's memory, planters were installed bearing roses to commemorate both Eric Highton and Mary Beilby, who were instrumental in setting up Elmcross and laying the foundations for our ever growing gardening community.

Early in July, on a thankfully warm and sunny evening following an inevitably rainy morning, the Annual Elmcross Barbecue was reinstated after an absence of several years. Thanks to Annette and her team, the gazebo went up on an empty plot, dishes bearing assorted salads and desserts were brought and shared while barbecue favourites were expertly cooked and enjoyed. Food, drink and conversation flowed on a relaxed evening until well after sunset.

Holding the event this year, not counting difficulties caused by the Coronavirus outbreak, would be more problematic to site because, in a situation unheard of to the knowledge of many long-established allotment holders, we have full tenancy! This has been achieved in no small part by Doreen Webster's generous offer of vacant, overgrown plots rent-free until the year end, along with a campaign of persuasive advertising throughout the parish. We hoped our new gardeners would stay, and they have!

There is always understandably a greater demand for plots on Shacklecross rather than Elm Street, although the monster of the boundary hedge there still looms largely unchecked, encroaching upon the 'sweetness and (especially) light' which pervades this peaceful haven. And, despite the superb new sets of double gates at either end of the site, Jack's half inch Whitworth is still in good use. Both sites achieved awards in the Erewash in Bloom competition – but the rivalry continues! Shacklecross usually fare better and last summer was no exception.

As a group, we have increased our liaison with Borrowash in Bloom throughout the year and had planned to open up both sites to the public as part of their 'Secret Gardens' project. Although this event is unlikely to go ahead now, our aims were in part to raise public awareness of the benefits of allotment gardening, as well as the hard graft involved!

The Annual Show in September was well attended. It was a perfect day, and Elmcross are grateful to Collyer's for their generosity in providing not only the use of a polytunnel but also for numerous high-quality prizes donated for the raffle. Considering the vagaries of the season, the number and standard of entries was high.

The AGM, held in October, is a time to take stock of the year's achievements and to present the Elijah Highton Trophy for the best kept allotment. This year, the cup went to two newcomers who had taken on and tamed their plot little more than a year earlier, claiming they 'garden by YouTube' We salute them!

We are keen to encourage the gardener's friend, the humble but threatened hedgehog, to our sites. In Autumn, two young but underweight hoglets were discovered on Elm Street, but would not survive the winter without help. They were duly dispatched to a local sanctuary where, sadly, one died, but the other, named 'Elmo', has been in five star accommodation over winter, his keep and fellow rescues being contributed to by Elmcross. We hope he may eventually return home, although for the time being is convalescing with his finders, since allotment sites can be fraught with dangers for hedgehogs.

The rise of Extinction Rebellion and its message has been a key factor in our strategies as an organisation. We have opposed the Borough Council's policy on the use of weedkiller in public spaces and sought better alternatives for our own plots, hoping to make each site glyphosate-free. We have experimented with alternatives to pesticides, planting to encourage pollinating insects and bees. It has now been shown that the best places for supporting bees in cities and built-up areas are allotment sites, and untended plots especially. Just by growing some of our own food, we can lessen our carbon footprint, reducing air miles and plastic packaging. Allotment holders are also renowned for creative use of recycled materials!

Prolonged rain and flooding from the end of September until March made most winter projects impossible. As soon as there was light showing at the end of this particularly long tunnel, Coronavirus has struck with all its attendant restrictions. We are lucky enough to have our plots to escape to; the perfect environment in which to self-isolate whilst still being able to communicate with neighbours, naturally observing social distancing guidelines. The sites are looking wonderfully tended, allotments having been a saviour for many. Whilst some resources have been difficult to find, information sharing, a spirit of community co-operation and the generosity of gardeners have usually triumphed, so that we are still able to look forward to the season ahead, even if no calendar events are possible.

Elmcross would like to thank the Parish Council and Doreen Webster in particular for its continued support.

Julie Smith, Secretary.      May 2020

