

# AMERSHAM GARDENING ASSOCIATION

## JANUARY 2015 NEWSLETTER



### FROM THE SECRETARY

I hope you all had a good Christmas and that 2015 will be a good gardening year. In my garden spring flowers are already beginning to show so let's hope the snow stays away. Our first meeting of the new year will be on January 22<sup>nd</sup> when the subject will be Hole Park through the seasons.

I don't know if you are all aware of the Associations web-site. David Bender keeps it up to date and has some interesting information. At the moment there is an article about Montreal which is well worth a read.

Jean Bowling

### CHOP OFF CRANESBILLS

There is much talk of chopping plants down these days for greater effect later, but the hardy geranium, or cranesbill, has been subjected to this treatment for many years. This most obliging genus does its stuff in early summer, then settles down to the age-old business of setting seed, which we don't want. You can stop this in its tracks and make it flower again by shearing the whole lot off to the ground. In no time, a new hat of fresh green leaves will appear and a second crop of flowers will follow in due course.

### NOW FOR THE SCIENCE BIT

It is not just humans that have raging hormones. Plants do too and once you know a bit about them lots of gardening practices make sense.

Amazingly in a few weeks' time it will be spring and your thoughts will turn to pruning. I hope you haven't gone round ruthlessly chopping things down to remove "that mess". Unsightly it might look but "that mess", unless its smothering a neighbour, actually affords protection during the cold and wet for many dormant buds.

One of the first plants you think of to prune in the spring is the rose. Once you can understand how to prune a rose you can apply the principle to many more plants. First of all the three Ds apply –dead damaged and diseased. Cut back to good healthy growth. Next come crossing stems or stems that are growing in towards the centre of the plant. In order to minimise fungal infections, an open airy plant allows the wind to move through it and dry it off quickly both of which discourage fungal spore germination. So don't let the centre of the plant become cluttered up.

Now comes the shaping of the plant. Every stem will have a bud at its tip, it is called the apical bud and this is where the hormones come in. That apical bud is determined to be dominant and extend the growth of the plant at any cost. Hence it is a bully and produces a hormone called Auxin that flows back down the stem and suppresses the hormones that control growth of the side shoots. Remove that apical bud either by chopping it off or nipping it out and the next two side shoots down will grow. If you are happy with the height of your plant then just nip off the tip.

If you want to reduce the height then cut just above where you want side branches to develop. If the side branches have got very long then nip out their tips too to make laterals develop. Alternatively pull them down to make an upside down u-shape, twist them around a support or lay them out horizontally. All these will slow the hormone flow from the apical bud and the hormones that control the growth of the side shoots will not be so suppressed,

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so the side shoot grows and the flowers come. Do be aware however that it takes 6 to 7 weeks between nipping out the apical bud and flowering. So you can get a lovely bushy fuchsia say but you keep setting back the flowering date.

The same principles apply to perennials too which is why the Chelsea chop works, why you cut back Penstemons, why you clip hedges. If you didn't you would get tall sparse plants. Out of interest how many new hedges can you spot as you go around the town where the new bushes have been put in but have not been pruned back? They will all have holy bottoms.  
Susan Jeffery

### WELCOME WASPS TO YOUR GARDEN

It may be cold now, but down here in the south east of the country, it is only a matter of a few weeks before insects emerge from hibernation. The first two will probably be the buff-tailed bumblebee and the wonderfully named hairy-footed flower bee (a solitary bee). Soon after is one we are perhaps not so enthusiastic about, the wasp.

I'm so often asked "What is the point of wasps?" They sting at random and irritate us when we have picnics; even the Latin name for the common wasp, *Vespula vulgaris*, sounds disgusting!

They are, in fact, one of nature's pest controllers, and if you are honest, you don't even notice them till late July onwards. They may be of only marginal value as pollinators, but they are an indispensable part of a balanced ecosystem. Their lifecycle explains all.



A wasp colony has a life of five to six months. The queen emerges from hibernation around March or April and seeks out a nest site: underground in an old mouse's nest, in a compost heap, wall cavity or shed ceiling. She starts by constructing a golf ball size nest using wood fibres gnawed from, for instance, untreated garden furniture, sheds and fence posts, mixed with her saliva – so, yes its paper. She then lays her first clutch of worker eggs (sterile females). Once hatched the workers enlarge the nest to about the size of a football (ultimately containing between 600 and 1,500 wasps), defend it and nurture the developing larvae leaving the queen to lay about 100 eggs per day for the rest of her life!

It is during the spring that wasps are the gardeners' friend. Unlike bees, wasps are carnivores and get all their protein needs, like us, from meat (bees, effectively vegetarian wasps, get their protein from pollen). Unnoticed by you, the workers hunt for pests such as caterpillars, greenfly and aphids (one worker can collect over 100 each day) which they chew up and feed to the developing larvae. In return the larvae "reward" them with a sugary liquid (carbohydrates – which bees get from flower nectar).

At the height of summer the queen ceases laying workers and lays fertile female and drone (male) eggs. Once hatched they mate and the mated females (next year's queens) fatten up

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in preparation for hibernation. With no larvae to feed the workers receive none of the sweet reward they crave, so seek out new sources – ripe fruit fallen from your fruit trees, sweet drinks, beer and our sandwiches; also nectar from flowers, primarily late flowering species such as ivy. The colony finally dies out in the autumn, at latest with the first frosts.

PS: Did you know that if you are fearful of wasps you suffer from speksophobia?

John Catton

## JEAN BOWLING'S GARDEN IN NOVEMBER



The shrub/ small tree is *Euonymus atropurpurea* var. *Cheatumii*, the autumn snowdrops were grown from bulbs supplied by the previous secretary of the Association, Richard Jones, and the campanula is a variety, I do not know the name of, but it is darker blue than most and flowers regularly twice a year.

### FELICITYS' TIPS

#### Wheelbarrow Use in Winter.

If you are a dog owner and are despairing of the Buckinghamshire mud, here is a tip. Fill your barrow with water and have a car sponge nearby. On return from the dog walk put the muddy dog in the barrow to wash off the worst before entering the house. This saves your back and cleans the paws and tummy. If however you have a very large dog the hose might be more appropriate!

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### Gardening Success - Leeks in Flower

Two years ago some of my leeks went to seed and the flowers were spectacular, attracting so many insects and giving long lasting summer colour. This year I grew some just for their flowers and so many people admired them and were very surprised to realise they were vegetables. In late summer I picked some of the heads for a flower arrangement. These I have dried and will attempt to spray gold for Christmas. So keep some of your spring leeks, let them flower and start a new trend.



### GARDENING FOR, WITH OR AGAINST WILDLIFE?

We moved to the outskirts of Amersham at the end of March 2005. This is an updated version of something I wrote 6 months after moving.

An altercation on the lawn the other day set me to wondering “whose garden is it?” – after all, we were paying the mortgage. A trio of green woodpeckers settled on the lawn, kindly aerating it for us (definitely gardening with wildlife) when one of our resident magpies (they nest at the top of one of our trees) came down and tried to scare them off. Two did fly off, but the third stood its ground and eventually the magpie backed off and left the lawn to the woodpecker.

Gardening for wildlife is obvious, and I hope it is something we all do to a certain extent. We have a line of eleven 100 year old lime trees planted about 6 feet apart along the bottom of our garden, and another four along the side, intermingled with the neighbour’s sycamores. Before we moved here the trees had been topped off (at about half as high again as the house), and there is now splendid coppice growth between the trees almost, but not quite, thick enough for nightingales. Behind the lime trees we have another 8 feet of garden, overlooking farmland. This is heavily shaded, but makes a splendid woodland walk, and it’s here that we keep the compost bins. There are lots of lovely habitats here, also a fine crop of wild arum in spring, but no berries this autumn;- presumably the plants were too damaged by squirrels (and other wildlife) to set seed.

Both on the woodland path and on the lawn we have a fine collection of fungi. The lawn boasts not only the usual lawn / meadow fungi, including shaggy ink caps, but also woodland species. While I was raking up leaves (with all the trees this is a matter of gardening with, or perhaps despite, wildlife, but we had a splendid compost heap after only 6 months in the house), I saw a small *Amethystina* in the lawn. This means that I can disguise my lack of lawn pride by saying that I keep the lawn for wildlife, not for weedkiller and lawn sand manufacturers.

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More gardening for wildlife: obviously, a bird bath, bird table and seed and nut feeders. The garden bird list has topped 30; the most exotic to date are the pheasant that was a regular visitor in spring and early summer, and the peregrine falcon that sat on the bird bath for quite a time one afternoon (but flew off as soon as I brought the camera to the window). Greater spotted woodpeckers bred this year, but the juvenile was blown off course during a gale and smashed into the side of the house. We have a (very noisy) tawny owl, and after living in a busy street in Kenton, it is a pleasure to be woken up by owls hooting and deer barking, rather than traffic noise.

Equally obviously, a pond for our koi, and within a month of digging it we had a good collection of frogs of various sizes. The pond was urgent, because the koi were unhappy in the over-size water tank we moved them in. We know they were unhappy, because they refused food! The tank has now become a bog garden in the middle of a rockery, and frogs have not only discovered the water, but also the sheltered habitat provided by gaps in the soil around and under the tank.

The farmland beyond our fence is a splendid wildlife reserve. The farmer obviously makes his money on this field by growing EU subsidies for set-aside / country stewardship, and it is delightfully untended, with nettles, brambles and a few seedling trees, as well as a hawthorn hedge (more bird food) along one side, and a now-deserted fox den.

Gardening with (or despite) wildlife includes the problem of leaves mentioned above, plus the problem of the incredible fertility of our lime trees, the sycamores at no 6 and the horse chestnuts at number 10. A constant succession of seedling trees need to be pulled up. Of course, the birds also try to grow their own food, and we have small elder trees and holly bushes – but I have to grub up cherry, hawthorn, sycamore and horse chestnut seedlings, as well as brambles.

On the positive side, gardening with wildlife also includes a very fine population of worms in the soil, so that we are able to dispose of some of our leaves in trenches in the borders. Of course, if I were lawn proud I would have to do something about the wormcasts on the lawn, but I have become rather attached to the blackbird that starts looking for worms at the same time as I come down to make the early morning coffee. In winter it is still dark, but there is just enough light to see him sitting motionless on the lawn, waiting for it to be light enough to see his breakfast, then hopping around, almost always following the same pattern.

Gardening against wildlife is a matter of defensive action. We don't mind the fox and squirrels coming to the pond to drink, but the day a muntjak deer came over the back fence and started nibbling the sweet peas and courgette plants was the time to take action. After all, we do have some pride in the plants we grow in the garden, it's not all for wildlife. Only a mild defensive action – a matter of raising the 3 foot high chain link fence overlooking the farmland. We still have the gap under the fence that the foxes and cats use. The other defensive action concerns the pond, which has to be netted in late summer and autumn because of the leaves, and be festooned with chains to deter herons the rest of the year.

During the mile walk to the station, I often disturb a considerable number of blackbirds and robins in the splendid hedges and little pockets of woodland in this part of the town, before I come to the hedge that you can hear from 100 yards away – it has a large flock of very noisy sparrows. Finally, if I am lucky, there will be jackdaws to watch around the station platform while I am waiting for the train.

David Bender

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## MONTHLY TALKS FOR 2015

22 Jan	Quentin Stark	Hole Park through the seasons.
26 Feb	Nick Bailey	Chelsea Physic Garden – past, present and future.
26 Mar	AGM Charlie Powell & Sian Chattle	Lindengate therapeutic gardening charity.
23 Apr	Kathy Brown	The Manor House Garden, inspiration and creation.
28 May	Leila Jackson	The versatile world of salvias.
25 Jun	Antony Powell	The scented garden.
23 Jul	Edwin Rye	David Austin roses.
24 Sep	Barry Newman	The modern kitchen garden.
26 Nov	Andrew Halstead	Pests recently new to Britain

On **26 February** our speaker is Nick Bailey, Head Gardener at Chelsea Physic Garden. His talk will encompass the Edible and Useful Garden and the new Garden of Medicinal Plants at Chelsea.

Our **AGM** will be held on **26 March**. Afterwards Charlie Power and Sian Chattle will update us on progress with their community project in Wendover that aims to provide gardening programmes to help people in their recovery from mental health issues.

Kathy Brown comes to tell us about the conception and development of her Manor House Garden on **22 April**. She and her husband moved from London to Stevington near Bedford which necessitated her gardening projects changing from the confinement of container growing to the creation of a garden spanning over 4 acres. It is a lovely place to visit on a summer day and the cakes she makes using her own recipes with edible plants are delicious.

I persevered with the suggestion box for 9 months of 2014 but regrettably have had to surrender! Not one suggestion or comment was received via that route!

Anne Webb

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## COMMITTEE 2014

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## NON-COMMITTEE

Plant Stall	Debbie Clogg		
Visits	Margaret Hillier		
Raffle	Christine Prizeman & Laura Bennett		
Newsletter	Neil Watson		<a href="mailto:etal.watson@gmail.com">etal.watson@gmail.com</a>

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## VISIT TO THE HANGING HOSTAS GARDEN and MOTTISFONT

WEDNESDAY 8<sup>th</sup> JULY 2015

Our first visit will be to the HANGING HOSTAS GARDEN in Lindford, Hampshire. You will remember a talk by John Baker in May last year with wonderful photos of his collection of over 1,500 hosta cultivars – one of the largest in England. Also we will see their informal cottage garden and other areas with a huge variety of plants.

We will be provided with coffee/tea and biscuits.

We will then travel to Mottisfont – which needs no introduction – to see their wonderful collection of roses.

Mottisfont is National Trust and therefore is FREE for members. If you are not a member, the group entry is £9 payable on arrival.

**TO GET A GROUP RATE FOR NON-MEMBERS I SHALL NEED TO PAY IN ONE TRANSACTION SO PLEASE BRING £9 IN CASH FOR ME TO COLLECT ON THE COACH.**

Refreshments – Mottisfont has a café for lunches, teas, etc. It also has a shop, art gallery and historic rooms.

COST FOR THE TRIP £14

TIME OF DEPARTURE 9.15 a.m. from Amersham Community Centre.

**PLEASE COMPLETE AND SEND THE BOTTOM PART ONLY OF THIS FORM AND KEEP THE ABOVE FOR INFORMATION.**

Please send a stamped addressed envelope and a cheque made payable to the Amersham Gardening Association to:

Mrs. Irene Glyn-Jones

Little Orchard, 24 Weedon Lane, Amersham, Bucks. HP6 5QT. Telephone 01494 727203.

.....  
Visit to the Hanging Hostas Garden and Mottisfont on Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> July.

I would like ..... place/s. I am/am not a member of the National Trust.

Name: .....

Address:.....

Tel. No.....