

Amersham Gardening Association

www.amersham-gardening.org.uk

August 2020 Newsletter

From the Secretary

When I wrote my item for the May newsletter I was quite hopeful that everything would be more normal by September, however at the moment it looks very unlikely. At least we have had a chance to spend a lot of time in the garden although sometimes it has either been too hot or too wet, though generally better than last year.

In the spring my bergenias were the best they have ever been and now my agapanthus has produced many more flowers than previously. I haven't done anything

special with either so I am just putting it down to the weather.

Hopefully some of you have been able to visit the Open Gardens that we have been notified about and have enjoyed the chance to escape from limited horizons.

I hope you will all have a successful gardening year and hope you all keep well until we can meet again.

Jean Bowling

From the Chairman

Two years ago I wrote a short note for the Newsletter in which I mentioned that it had been a challenging year in the garden with heavy snow before Christmas, more snow at the end of February and six weeks of drought conditions. Well, if 2018 was challenging due to the weather, this year has been many times more difficult for our members, as Covid-19 has taken its toll, both mentally and physically. I do not suppose that the gardens have complained as they have had a lot more attention than they normally receive.

Britain in Bloom was, of course, cancelled but that has not stopped the Amersham in Bloom team from keeping the town looking beautiful – thanks to all the team, both members of AGA and non-members for their efforts.

Due to Covid-19, our Plant Sale, all coach day trips and the annual 4-day coach trip had to be cancelled and our monthly meetings were also cancelled due to non-availability of the Drake Hall and in line with Government directives. Government policy has eased somewhat and it seems that the Drake Hall will become

available again shortly, though there will be significant restrictions on numbers allowed to attend.

Due to these restrictions and the age profile of our membership, the committee has decided to cancel the September meeting and to consider the options such as meeting in the Drake Hall with reduced numbers and online meetings using Zoom if we can find speakers willing to take part. In parallel, members will be kept advised of local open gardens and other items of interest. If any members have anything that they would like the committee to consider, please let the secretary know before the middle of August so that they can be tabled for the next committee meeting.

Finally don't forget that there are a number of gardening programmes on television such as Gardeners' World and Beechgrove, which are worth watching.

Stay safe and carry on gardening,

Colin Ross

See the photos in this issue full size

Click <https://www.flickr.com/photos/127260098@N04/albums/72157715281469482>

to go to the Flickr site containing the photos from this newsletter. Click the button on the top right of the screen for a slide show; you can scroll through the pictures using the > and < arrows on the right and left of the screen



Other peoples' gardens and how they see them

We have all been used to visiting other peoples' gardens and taking photos of what we find interesting or attractive. While we have been unable to go on garden visits, Keith Hoffmeister has been asking members who have smart phones to share pictures of their gardens using Whatsapp. For the benefit of those

who, like me, do not have a smart phone, pictures from the following people are available: Anne Kelliher, Christine Ross, Felicity Vickery, Gaye Williams, Ian Attley, Irene Glyn-Jones, Keith Hoffmeister, Liz Molton, Marcelle Siddall, Margaret Stanley, Marian Hoffmeister, Sue Jepson and Tim Hillier.

What is fascinating about these photos is not so much the glimpse they give us of other peoples' gardens, but what the gardeners themselves think is interesting and want to share with us.

Click <https://www.flickr.com/photos/127260098@N04/albums/72157715280703773> to see the photos. (This is a link to a Flickr site, see the note on page 1 about viewing a slide show)

Christine Ross writes about her garden: "I garden organically, and for wildlife. The garden is not too tidy, there are overgrown areas and log piles. Unfortunately slugs and snails are a problem, but I try not to kill anything. The garden has lots of shrubs for hiding places, wild flowers, and any garden plants have single

flowers, apart from a few roses. There is a normal lawn, but that is for the dog. There is a large 'hump' with a stag from Africa made from old oil drums, and tall grasses and wild flowers. Nothing is cut back until the spring. Hope that you enjoy the photos."

More photos from garden outings

If you are missing visiting gardens, you can see an archive of photos taken on AGA outings going back to 2013 on our website at <http://www.amersham-gardening.org.uk/outings.html>

There is also an archive photos going back to 2015 from outings of the Chiltern U3A Garden Interest Group – go to <http://www.chiltern-u3a.org.uk>, then click on "our groups" and scroll down the list until you come to "Garden Interest".

Help, I've lost the label



Last year I bought a small climbing herbaceous plant (I think at one the AGA meetings) that did moderately well in a planter with a 1.5m trellis. Although I assumed it was not hardy, I left it in situ, and it survived what was a remarkably mild winter. This year it has gone mad and has escaped the trellis to grow up the hardy palm tree so that we can see flowers for the bedroom window.

If anyone can identify it, please email me at david.bender@btinternet.com.

Dahlia Westin Spanish Dancer

We have quite a number of dahlias that we have bought over the years, some from Aylett's nursery in St Albans and some from AGA members at monthly meetings. Westin Spanish Dancer (see right) was an impulse buy. We had gone to Flowerland in Iver for aquarium fish and passed a stand near the entrance with dahlia tubers reduced to clear (it was late spring). The label of Westin Spanish Dancer attracted me. It has done well over the years, and this year we have two large containers flowering profusely.

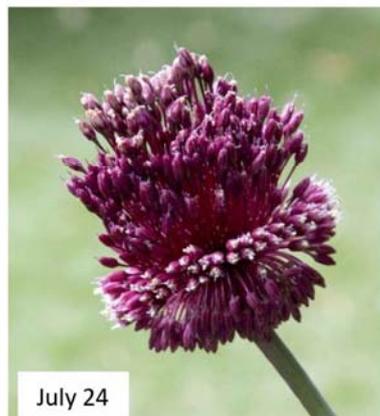
I have a quarrel over the naming of two dahlias: in the Bishop series we have Bishop of York and Bishop of Canterbury – sorry, I have always thought that York and Canterbury had Archbishops, not mere Bishops.



Only two of our three *Allium mohican* grew, but they provided interest for almost 2 months



One was about 1 m tall and the other slightly shorter. The flowers when fully open were 6 cm from top to bottom



.. and there will be seed heads to come later in the summer

Bumble bees can warm up – but not cool down

Have you wondered why it is that on a sunny day in winter you see bumble bees around the early flowering shrubs, but not other bees? The answer lies in some interesting bumble bee biochemistry. They are capable of carrying out the apparently useless task of performing a so-called “futile cycle” in which two opposing chemical reactions occur at the same time, with the end result of burning up metabolic fuel (sugars and fats) without producing any metabolically useful energy, just heat. This means that these cold-blooded insects are capable of increasing their body temperature sufficiently to be able to fly in cold weather. Other bees can't do this, so have to wait until the weather warms up before they can fly. Of course, hive bees can warm up in the hive by the equivalent of running on the spot – staying still and moving their wings so that they create heat – but not enough for them to be able to leave the hive. (If you look at a demonstration hive, with glass panels, you can see lots of bees doing just this, and putting your hand on the glass you can feel the heat they are producing.)



However, bumble bees can't cope with high temperatures – they have no way to cool down. A study reported in February 2020 used data on 66 different bumble bee species across North America and Europe that had been collected over a 115-year period from 1900 to 2015 showed how bumble bee populations have changed by comparing where bees are now with where they used to be historically. The researchers found that populations were disappearing in areas where the temperatures had become hotter. They were able to predict changes both for individual species and for whole communities of bumble bees with a surprisingly high accuracy. This work suggests ways that we might mitigate the effects of climate change for bumble bees, and other organisms, by maintaining habitats that offer shelter, such as trees, shrubs, or slopes, that could let them get out of the heat.

Perhaps it is not surprising that bumble bees (and presumably other insects) cannot cool down in hot weather – after all, they don't have sweat glands to allow cooling by evaporation of sweat from the skin. More surprising is the fact that bats, which are mammals like us, have only a limited capacity to cool down in hot weather, because they have only a limited number of sweat glands. During the extreme heat wave in Australia last year there were reports of large numbers of bats falling from trees, suffering from heat stroke. People were warned not to try to help the fallen animals – they can bite when disturbed or upset.



I started this note by talking about “bumble bees” and “other bees”. The July 2019 issue of *The Garden* tells us that there are 25 different species of bumble bee in Britain, and altogether some 276 different species of bees, many of which are solitary, rather than communal, like honey bees. We have had bees nesting in vole and field mouse holes in our garden – too close to our compost bins for comfort or detailed observation – I was stung while adding material to the bins.



Frances Billington sent these photos of the first crop of asparagus and the bougainvillea in her conservatory



I am especially jealous of the bougainvillea. I haven't tried to grow one recently, but some years ago I did – it was flowering superbly in the greenhouse, so it was obviously time to bring it indoors. It dropped all the blooms in protest at being moved. The same happened the next year, and then I gave up. Like Christmas cactus, it obviously must never be moved.

Frances' bougainvillea does make the point that as gardeners we are always looking for a challenge, and will struggle to grow an exotic plant that does not belong in this country. Just think about the splendid wild hedges of bougainvillea in the Canaries.

I have often thought that gardeners in tropical and subtropical countries would be fascinated to try to grow what I am going to call the English lion's tooth plant, with a rosette of leaves, attractive yellow flowers and a beautiful seed head (see the photo on the right). Of course, in a hot climate it would have to be grown in a cooled greenhouse, and as we all know, it grows best in a lawn of fine rye grass, not the coarse crab grass of the Mediterranean.



Hilary Unwin writes:

Until 3 years ago we lived in Chiltern Rd, just off the main road near Our Lady's School. The topsoil was good where it had been worked over a few years but most of it was heavy clay on top of chalk with flints. We moved down the hill and now live fairly close to the River Chess. The soil is, I suppose, river soil, a delight to dig, dandelions come up plus roots quite easily! But it needs frequent feeding. Compost disappears.

We also have a sheep farm on a hill on the Chenies/ Chorleywood border. Soil different again with round (?river washed) stones.

Such variety in a relatively small area!

It obviously affects what we grow. Most of us cannot grow azaleas or other acid lovers.

I would be interested to hear the history of our local soils and why they are as they are. We might need different speakers to tell us what the effects are on what we can grow, though most of us have found that out!

This is obviously a suggestion to Jules and Sue for a speaker when we resume monthly meetings.

Isabel Wise sent two photos of her garden

and I have this picture of Isabel taking a photo in some-one else's garden



... and these of Waterperry gardens



On watching the garden from indoors

Fifty years ago my father and the home economist Patty Fisher co-authored a book called *The Value of Food* for students of home economics, catering, etc at A-level and in further education colleges. At the end of each chapter they included specimen questions, some from A-level and other examination papers and some made up. One of the questions in this latter category was "Describe how you would use left overs of [several foods listed]... chips ... What would then be their nutritional value?" There was no teachers' guide available with specimen answers to the questions, and I never had the nerve to ask Patty, who was a close family friend, what she did or would recommend people to do with left over chips.

However, I know what I do with left-overs on the rare occasions when we have chips, and indeed I do the same with left over roast and boiled potatoes, Yorkshire pudding, pasta, bread crusts, etc. They all go on the bird table. We have a large roost of jackdaws in the woodland behind our garden, and the early morning and evening flypast can number up to 50. Sometimes I only just get back indoors before the cabaret starts. Jackdaws and magpies start to gather in the trees and swoop down on the bird table. Sometimes two magpies will happily share the table; sometimes one on the table will fiercely repel any approaches; sometimes one will swoop down and repel the bird already on the table. Jackdaws behave similarly, but never seem to try to repel a magpie. The occasional crow is large enough to repel magpies or jackdaws. It is fascinating to see a bird with a large beak full of food fly off, apparently front heavy, such is the greed to gather as much of the delicious smorgasbord as possible. As soon as the occupant of the bird table flies off, others waiting in the trees or on the fence swoop in and flutter round until one (or sometimes two that are friendly with each other) lands on the table and starts to fill its beak.

The big surprise comes from the wood pigeons. They do not seem to attempt to drive other birds off the table, but once they are on the table they repel any advances by jackdaws, magpies or crows. Who would have thought that big aggressive corvids would be frightened of a humble wood pigeon? In the same way, squirrels make only a half-hearted attempt to drive corvids off the table, but once on it, they also repel boarders. It is not until almost everything has gone that the smaller birds (tits, wrens, robins, nuthatches etc) get a look in.

Hanging from a bracket about 10 inches above the bird table we have a mesh fat-ball feeder. At first the magpies, jackdaws and crows stood on the bird table and stretched up to peck at the fat balls. Now more and more of them flutter up and land on the mesh to feed. At least they mostly stay the right way up. The squirrels sometimes stretch up from the bird table, but at other times they climb down from the support post and eat upside down. The smaller birds, of course, simply land

on the mesh and peck at the fat balls – sometimes at the same time as larger birds are fighting over the contents of the bird table. Most of them are upright when they do this, but the nuthatches always feed upside down.

A somewhat less welcome addition to our garden bird list this spring has been a pair of green parakeets – unwelcome because they are extremely noisy (although the jackdaws are also noisy). In our last house in Harrow, we had a small flock of ring-necked parakeets that also annoyed us, but compared with the shrill cry of the green parakeets we have now, they were musical.

I have commented before on the blue tits' considerable expenditure of energy fighting each other for aphids on plants. This spring, several times I have been sitting in the conservatory (while my camera was upstairs, of course) while blue tits fluttered around the window frames pecking at small nests of spiderlings. Needless to say, when I was sitting there with a camera, none came.

We had blue tits in one nest box, and great tits in the other. We thought the long tailed tits were nesting in a small conifer – they certainly spent a lot of time flying in and out of it with twigs in beak. However, there was no sign of a nest there – they must have been using it as a staging post for a nest in the laurel hedge. As lock-down eased, we were invited to drinks in the garden next door. We were admiring the other side of our clematis tunnel, and were told that the gold finches had nested there – we had seen nothing from our side.

One evening we were enjoying our pre-dinner drink about 6pm, when a badger calmly walked across the garden (in full daylight), then leant up to drink from the bird bath. It must have done so again later that night, because in the morning the concrete dish of the bird bath was on the ground, having been tipped over. Needless to say, my camera was upstairs – for the next few evenings I kept it in the conservatory, but no further sightings of the badger.

We have known for some years that we have deer coming into the front garden from the hedgerow between our garden and our neighbour's. I know that they are still doing so because not only do I see deer droppings on the new border along the front edge of our gravel bed (thank you, they are adding valuable organic matter to the poor soil there), but I also find several of the large white pebbles from the front edge of the gravel scattered on the soil most mornings. I have not seen this deer, but am assured by the neighbours that it has only three legs. Presumably it was caught by a fox in its youth.

David Bender

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Discounts for members – remember to take your membership card to claim your discount

[South Heath Garden Centre](#), Meadow Lane, South Heath, Great Missenden, HP16 9SH, offer a 10% discount on some items.

Gardening and outdoor ropes, buy online from <http://www.buyrope.co.uk>, and use the code Amersham10 at checkout for a 10% discount.

Past newsletters

There is an archive of past newsletters from May 2014 to the current issue on our website at <http://www.amersham-gardening.org.uk/newsletter.html>

Local events

If you know of local garden events, open gardens, etc, please email newsletter@amersham-gardening.org.uk to let us know as early as possible, so that information can go out in the newsletter and on the website

Photos from outings

You can see lots of photos from our outings at <http://www.amersham-gardening.org.uk/outings.html>

