

Amersham Gardening Association

www.amersham-gardening.org.uk

November 2017 Newsletter

From the Secretary

I am writing this after a very enjoyable quiz evening, a report of which appears on page 4. Christmas is rapidly approaching and we hope that many members who attended the quiz and also other members will be able to attend the Christmas Social on December 21st for another enjoyable evening (see page 2).

Details of the AGA holiday in June (see page 4) and the application form are also

with this Newsletter. The holidays are always good fun and we hope that maybe someone who has not been before will join this one. There are always several members who come on their own.

Meanwhile the committee wishes you all the best for Christmas and the New Year.

Jean Bowling

Subscriptions are now due for next year.

The cost remains at £10 for a single member and £17 for two members at the same address. **See the renewal form with this newsletter.**

Ian Attley sent this photograph (right) of blossom on his bramley apple tree on September 24th – is it late blossom from the dry spring we had or early blossom for next year – or is the tree just confused?



And Jenny Elliott took this photo (left) of their giant cosmos. Jim hasn't shrunk, but he obviously needs the ladder to deadhead it.

Plant Sale, May 19th 2018

While you are taking cuttings, dividing perennials and sowing seeds, please remember our plant sale next year and prepare some donations. The profit from our plant sale makes a significant contribution to the Association's funds.

Xmas Social tombola

At the Xmas social on December 21st (see page 2) we have a tombola. Please bring along items as prizes to the meeting on November 23rd and give them to Irene Glyn-Jones.

Amersham in Bloom

You cannot have missed the delightful planting in odd corners around Amersham, the display outside the public conveniences in Woodside Close, the planters around Hill Avenue, the splendid display in Memorial Gardens and the hanging baskets around Old Amersham and elsewhere. They have certainly brightened our town up over the summer. Thanks and congratulations to the

Amersham in Bloom team. They won a gold medal for the overall display, best small town in the Thames and Chiltern region, a gold medal in the parks section for the Memorial Gardens, best in the Thames and Chiltern region for conservation and wildlife, and a highly commended for Chestnut Lane school in the regional Mark Mattock cup. Truly a splendid achievement.

Forthcoming meetings

November 23rd The challenge of building the Chelsea dream by Dan Riddlestone

Dan joined [Bowles & Wyer Contracts Ltd](#), the landscape construction arm of the business, in 2006. With a background in hard and soft landscape construction, Dan has been involved in numerous medal-winning Chelsea gardens and award-winning commercial landscapes.

Dan's client portfolio covers private clients, government bodies and commercial organisations and his expertise covers a number of areas including landscape restoration, town & country gardens and commercial projects.

December 21st Xmas Social

By popular demand, this year we are reverting to a "pot luck" dinner for the social evening. Members whose surname begins with A – K are asked to bring along a savoury dish, and those whose surnames begin with letters L – Z a sweet dish or fruit. We will provide plates and plastic cutlery,

but if you can, please bring "finger food". We will provide wine and soft drinks from the Association's funds. There will be a table quiz, entertainment and a tombola.

This is your chance to meet and talk to fellow members.

January 25th Composting at home by Baird McClellan

Baird McClellan, 67, a former environmental studies teacher at Mandeville School and former head at Wingrave has been turning composting into a fine art and is now a master composter after taking part in a Bucks County Council course in 2009. He has a background in horticulture, has been composting for more than 40 years, starting at the age of 22 in his first house. Since then, his efforts have grown and at his home, he now owns six compost bins with their contents in various states of decomposition. He said: "The county council is trying to avoid organic waste going to landfill, but that is not my key reason for composting. I do it because sending waste to landfill is a waste of valuable ingredients. "I first started composting with a wooden bin in the corner of my garden, which I put all my materials in. I don't like wastage of anything."



February 22nd Lessons from great gardeners by Matthew Biggs

Matthew Biggs probably needs no introduction. He trained at The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. He has presented numerous television programmes, notably Channel 4's *Garden Club*, stepped behind the camera to direct Meridian Television's popular gardening series *Grass Roots* and worked as Horticultural Consultant for a garden design series on Channel 5.



He has written several books including the recently revised *Matthew Biggs's Complete Book of Vegetables* which has been translated into five languages. He has also contributed to two Gardeners' Question Time books, *Plant Chooser* and *Gardening Techniques & Tips*, and was commissioned by the Eden Project to write *Gardening at Eden and how to do it at home*.

Matthew contributes to several magazines, including the Royal Horticultural Society Journal, *The Garden*, *BBC Gardeners' World*, *Countryfile* and *Gardens Illustrated* and leads gardening tours worldwide. He lectures at the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, Oxford University Botanic Gardens, the Cookery School of Michelin starred chef Jean-Christophe Novelli and is course director of the Plants and Plantsmanship course at the English Gardening School. He is also a regular panellist on BBC Radio 4's *Gardener's Question Time*.

More on his website at <http://matthewbiggs.com>

March 22nd Flower farming then and now by Claire Brown

Claire Brown is a member of the Flowers from the Farm network of pioneers involved in reviving the cut flower business in the UK. After a period of decline in the domestic industry it seems that flower farming in the UK is now becoming a growth industry.

Following 12 years in garden centre management, five at the Plant Centre, RHS Wisley, Claire set up Plantpassion (<http://www.plantpassion.co.uk>) in 2012 and grows up to 260 varieties, mainly annuals, in the Surrey Hills.

And for the rest of the year:

- April 26th Gardens and climate change by Michael Keith-Lucas
- May 24th The good, the bad and the bugly by Chris Day
- June 28th Plants of the season by Paul Green
- July 26th Gardens of the Emerald Isle by Vincent Gradwell
- September 27th RHS plant trials – past, present and future by Sabatino Urzo
- October 25th Quiz night
- November 22nd GM crops: Saints or Satan by Sandy Primrose
- December 20th Xmas social
- January 24th 2019 Flowers of the Altai Mountains by Barbara Lydiatt

Remember the plant sale on Saturday May 19th.

Outings for the year (booking forms with later newsletters)

- April 25th Cerney Garden and Rodmarton Garden and House
- May 17th Upton House and Farley Hill
- June 11th Malverleys and Hardy's Plants
- July 17th Waltham Palace
- September 5th Huntsmoor, Bovingdon

Quiz evening

A gloomy autumn day did nothing to dampen the spirits of the 91 members and friends (possibly a record) who battled for the right to be named AGA Quiz champions 2017.

Our congratulations to Ian and Judith Attley, Jill and Graham Harris, Myra and Stuart Ottley and Janet Philpott (on Table 2) – worthy winners after a close fought contest with Table 3 led by Susan Jeffery. Our thanks to Carole Thurston and her helpers who again provided an excellent meal.

Perhaps this email (one of several received after the event) says it all. *“Question 1 about the Pet Shop Boys really sealed our fates. Far more important - thank you so much for organising such a convivial and informative evening. Please extend our thanks to all members of the committee who worked so hard to make this year’s quiz such a success”*

Outstanding teamwork by your committee deserves special mention – always supportive – always there when needed. Thank you.

And finally – a very specific and well merited note of appreciation from all of us for our redoubtable Quiz Masters – Tim and Margaret – without whom we could not continue to deliver a successful and enjoyable event – year after year. Professional, well researched, impartial and when appropriate even ready to offer help – especially to those puzzling with “Dendrochronology”. Thank you both.

Carol Barratt

And the treasurer adds thanks to Irene Glyn-Jones for her efforts with the raffle, which rained £277 for the Association’s funds.

Holiday June 24th to 27th Gardens of Kent and Kentish Gardens



Kent is divided by the river Medway; people living to the east of the river are known as men or maids of Kent; those living to the west are Kentish men or maids. Presumably the same distinction applies to gardens east or west of the Medway. Jeanne Harrison has put together a fine set of gardens for us to visit this year.

The itinerary is shown overleaf, but details may change when all the gardens have confirmed.

Complete the enclosed booking form and return it to Jeanne with your deposit of £50 per person (or £75 if you want Motts travel insurance) by **January 13th**.

We will be staying at the Hadlow Manor Hotel, Goose Green, Hadlow, TN11 0JH
Tel: 020 3027 9806.

<https://www.hadlowmanor.co.uk>



Sunday June 24th

Penshurst Place near Tonbridge

A historic garden dating back to the 14th century. More than a mile of clipped yew hedges divides a series of garden rooms. From spring bulbs to the famous peony

border and formal rose garden, there is a long season of interest to enjoy.

www.penshurstplace.com



Timbers near Maidstone

A private 5 acre garden stocked with unusual hardy plants and designed with owner Sue Robinson's flower arranger's eye. Of particular note are the parterre, the

colour combinations in the herbaceous border, fruit lawns, fine mature trees, wildflower meadow and the 100 year old Kentish cobnut plat.

Monday June 25th

Walmer Castle near Deal



Originally a Tudor Fortress, the Castle has evolved into a homely residence for many well known names from the Duke of Wellington to the Queen Mother. Outside discover the majestic sea view and 8 acres of magnificent gardens including the Broadwalk Gardens and the Queen Mother's Garden. See what's happening in the kitchen garden too, where food and cut flowers are grown for the tea rooms.

www.walmercastle.com

Salutation Gardens

Known as the Secret Gardens of Sandwich, this restored garden is hidden away behind high walls in the quaint town. The Lutyens and Jekyll gardens spread out from the Grade 1 listed manor house – now a hotel. Many original features have been reinstated, such as the characteristic double borders with their changing ripples of colour. Other areas include woodland, productive gardens and a lake.

<http://www.the-salutation.com/gardens/>



Tuesday June 26th

Goodnestone Park Gardens near Canterbury



Jane Austen visited her brother when he lived at Goodnestone, which dates from the 18th century. The 15 acres of garden include outstanding trees, a gravel garden, 'the best walled garden in Kent' with clematis, cornus and wisteria, as well as a parterre and terraces. The nursery is run by Francis Plumptre and concentrates on selling stock propagated from plants growing in the garden.

www.goodnestoneparkgardens.co.uk

Frith Old Farmhouse – near Faversham.

A private garden tended by Doctors Gillian and Peter Regan it is a riot of plants growing as if in the wild, developed over 40 years. No neat edges or formal beds, but several hundred interesting and unusual

plants. There are trees and shrubs for year round appeal.

<https://www.ngs.org.uk/?bf-garden=21584>

Wednesday June 27th

Great Comp Gardens near Sevenoaks

Described as 'a paradise for Garden Lovers'. It is a wonderfully quirky 7 acres of garden, with beautiful and rare plants, surrounding a 17th century manor house. There is an Italian Garden, romantic ruins and one of the most comprehensive and exciting collections of salvia in Europe. William Dyson, the Garden Curator, runs the nursery specialising in Salvias.

www.greatcomparden.co.uk



Leydens near Edenbridge



A private garden owned by garden designer, nursery owner and author Roger Platts. Next to his home and nursery, the garden has a relaxed air with densely planted curving borders bursting with a broad range of shrubs and perennials. Plenty of planting combination ideas and a handy fact sheet with our visit.

www.rogerplatts.co.uk

How to popularise novel fruits and vegetables

Nowadays it is easy – just create the belief that you are selling a superfood (a term introduced from California by the Daily Mail) and people will believe that blueberries, cranberries, quinoa, or whatever you are offering them, have some magical health-promoting properties.

Historically it was different. Wealthy landowners (or, more likely, their gardeners) vied with each other to produce exotics such as pineapples, peaches, grapes and figs to grace the table. It is noteworthy how often carved pineapples appear in stately homes. Meanwhile, the lure of the exotic was not for the majority of the population, who were often hungry, and suffered from scurvy (vitamin C deficiency) by the end of winter because of the lack of fruit and vegetables.



Through the Middle Ages and later, wheat and other cereal crops were unreliable in northern Europe, with frequent famines due to drought or flooding. By contrast, the potato, introduced into Spain from Peru was well suited to the colder and wetter climate of northern Europe, and spread



rapidly as a hardy and reliable crop. We know now that the potato is valuable as a source of vitamin C, and despite its relatively low protein content, provides about 4 – 5% of the protein intake in average diets, as well as a good source of energy as starch. If you can eat enough potatoes to meet your energy requirements, you will also more or less meet your protein needs.

However, the potato was not universally accepted. Shakespeare and other writers believed that it was an aphrodisiac –

possibly because its shape resembled an ovary – a belief that was perpetuated by later writers, including the 18th century herbalist William Salmon who wrote “they nourish the whole body ... and provoke lust”. Perhaps this was a subtle way of promoting potato consumption – sex is always a good selling point. Clergymen in the 18th century banned parishioners from planting potatoes saying that they were unworthy of human consumption because they were not mentioned in the Bible – perhaps this was more in response to their supposed aphrodisiac effects than a literal interpretation of the Bible.

In 1760, the Frenchman Parmentier was captured by the Prussians, and was fed almost entirely on potatoes for three years, remaining in good health. On his return to France he popularised the potato among the nobility – but the problem was to persuade the hungry Parisians who could not afford bread (and were not impressed by Marie Antoinette’s comment “let them eat cake”), to eat potatoes. He planted 40 acres of potatoes outside Paris, and arranged for soldiers to patrol the fields at harvest time. This led people to believe that there was something valuable there, and when the soldiers were withdrawn at night, locals sneaked in to steal the King’s valuable crop. So, eating potatoes became routine in France – and during the French revolution when other staples were scarce, the plentiful potato became “the food of the revolution”.

That quintessentially British dish, fish and chips, has a curious origin. Fried fish was introduced to Britain by Jewish immigrants from Spain and Portugal. The chip may have been invented as a substitute for fish rather than an accompaniment. Before the days of deep sea trawlers, when fish was unavailable because lakes and rivers were frozen, ingenious housewives cut potatoes into fish-shaped pieces and fried them. It is unclear who first combined fish and chips into a single meal.

David Bender

William Speechly, head gardener to Sir William Quintin, at Scampston Hall, which we visited in June, developed the first effective way of growing pineapples in England, in 1779, after a lifetime of horticultural experimentation. His method was as follows:

In the month of April or May, let the sward or turf of a pasture where the soil is a strong rich loam, and of a reddish colour, be pared off, not more than two inches thick, and carried to the pens in sheep pasture ... Lay down the turf with the grass side downwards; here it may continue two, three or more months, during which time it should be turned with a spade once or twice ...

Their urine and dung will enrich it, and their feet reduce it, and prevent weeds from growing. After it has laid in a heap for twelve months, it should frequently be turned, and made fine with the spade, but not sifted; it will then be fit for use.

From an information board at Scampston

An invasive thug with unwanted side effects

There are many examples of introduced non-native plants that have become serious environmental threats: azolla and water hyacinth blocking canals, Himalayan balsam crowding out other plants, and even rhododendrons. However, the prize must go to the southern American mesquite, *Prosopis juliflora*, although fortunately not in this country.



It is a drought tolerant plant, growing to 12m tall, with a trunk diameter of 1.2m, and its roots can penetrate up to 50m in search of water.



During the 1970s it was introduced into parts of Africa, in an attempt to reverse the effects of deforestation and “green the desert”. It can best be described as a horticultural thug, and now covers hundreds of hectares in Africa, presumably lowering the water table in arid areas even further, so endangering the viability of bore holes for villages. However, recent research suggests it has an even more unwanted side effect. It is the nectar source for mature malarial mosquitoes (*Anopheles* spp.), which breed well in artificial ponds created to trap rain water.

A trial in Mali of removing the flowers from plants around some villages, and leaving them intact in others, showed a significant reduction in the number of blood sucking young female mosquitoes (the ones that transmit the malarial parasite) in the villages where the flowers were not available to the older insects.



What the report of the study did not tell us is how you go about removing all the flowers on 12m tall trees.

<https://malariajournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12936-017-1878-9>

On the naming of plants

Our system for the formal naming of plants was devised by Carl Linnaeus (1707 – 78), a Swedish doctor and botanist. At that time knowledge of plants and their uses was an important part of medicine, and Linnaeus realised that there was a need for a system of nomenclature that was both simple and universal – and Latin was then the common language of scientists and all educated men. (As was German, especially for chemistry and engineering in the 19th and early 20th centuries. When I was a biochemistry student in Birmingham in the 1960s, German or Russian was a compulsory additional course unless you had O-Level in either. Nowadays the international language of science is English, and it is rare for international scientific meetings to have simultaneous translation, or indeed any papers other than in English.)



The basis of the Linnean system is to group plants (and also animals) into families, based on overall similarities, then assign them to genera, based on closer similarities, then assign each plant a species that is unique within the genus. Thus, the rose is in the family *Rosacea*, which has almost 5000 species in 90 genera. This family includes the genera *Alchemilla*, *Rubus*, *Sorbus*, *Crataegus*, *Cotoneaster*, and *Prunus*, with 200 – 270 species in each genus. Different species in the genus *Rosa* are named variously for their place of origin (eg *Rosa californica*, *Rosa alpina*) or the person who first described the species (eg *R. banksia*, *R. davidii*), or sometimes the shape of the flower (eg *R. elliptica*) or a Latinisation of the old or common name (eg *R. canina* for the dog rose).

Perhaps the oddest bit of botanical “dog Latin” is the systematic name for frogbit, an aquatic plant that floats on the surface of ponds and lakes. Its small water-lily like flowers bloom in July and August, and in winter it sinks to the bottom of the pond. Its Latin name is *Hydrocharis morsus-ranae* – literally “bit of frog”.

As botanists examine plants further, and as more genomes are sequenced, they refine the classification, leading to some, often annoying, changes of name for well-loved plants. Our indoor coleus plants are no longer coleus – plants that were originally

assigned to the genus *Coleus* have been reassigned to one or other of two new genera: *Plectranthus* and *Solenostemon*.

The portrait of Linnaeus in his Lappish robes above is a mezzotint engraved by R. Dunkarton in 1805 – we are fortunate to have a rare copy of it hanging on our landing wall. It was a gift to my late father, and the day he took it into his office in Queen Elizabeth College, the Professor of Botany expressed deep envy. Linnaeus was from southern Sweden, but travelled widely in Lappland collecting plants, and it is believed that the robes were a gift from his Lappish hosts – he is said to have worn them around town in Uppsala frequently. (If you think that there are not many plants to be found in Lappland, think again. There is a fascinating botanic garden in Tromsø in northern Norway, featuring plants that are native to the Arctic – but don't bother going there in winter, it is under deep snow!).

It might seem somewhat arrogant for Linnaeus, whose father was a pastor, to say “God creates, Linnaeus disposes” (or arranges), but the continuing use of his system of nomenclature for more than 280 years since the publication of *Systema Naturae* in 1735 is testament enough to this man of genius.

David Bender

The need for systematic names

further justification for Linnaeus, if more is needed



Fat hen is a common wild plant (*Chenopodium album*); the leaves have a strong scent of chrysanthemum leaves when crushed, and can be used in soup or fried as a vegetable. The name comes from the fact that it was formerly used to feed hens. The seeds can be ground into a flour for preparation of bread, cakes, and gruel; they have a flavour similar to that of buckwheat.

It has a variety of common names, including: bacon weed, dirty dick, muck hill, or dung weed (because it commonly grows around dung heaps), goose foot (because of the shape of the leaves), and pig weed.

Quinoa has recently become popular in western countries as a high-protein non-cereal grain. It is an important food crop in Peru and Chile. While mainly known as *Chenopodium quinoa*, this name is considered to be synonymous with *C. album*. Perhaps people buying expensive imported quinoa should look around the hedgerows and dung heaps.

How to weed a wide border, Norwegian style



Two snails with a sense of symmetry



If snails can't fly, how did it get here?



Red helleborine – a challenge to grow



Red helleborine (*Cephalanthera rubra*) is an orchid – it is very rare in Britain, but it grows near us at Windsor Hill, a woodland just to the east of Princes Risborough. If you want to grow it, you face a serious challenge. It grows on the edge of beech woods, in partial shade, where the clay cap meets the exposed underlying chalk, and is reliant on fungi associated with the beech roots for germination of its seed, then is partially parasitic on the fungus, which in turn both receives nutrients from the tree and also acts as an extension of the tree's roots, supplying the three with water and nutrients from the soil.

Don't get excited if you have a beech tree casting partial shade over the junction of chalk and clay. The flower is pollinated only by the male carpenter bee. However, to make it more difficult, the female carpenter bee feeds only on bellflower, not helleborine. So, you need chalk/clay junction, beech tree, bellflower, helleborine and both male and female carpenter bees. No wonder it is so rare in Britain.

We are grateful to John Tyler for this information.

In the August newsletter I noted the statement in Sellar and Yeatman's *Garden Rubbish* that "flints breed underground". Since then I have learnt where flints really come from; they are crystallised silica from sponges that dissolved in sea water some 100 million years ago. Before I heard a talk by John Tyler I had assumed that like granite, flints were igneous rock – but given that they occur in chalk, which is composed of the calcareous bodies of prehistoric marine organisms, I should not have been surprised to learn that they too are organic in origin.

A deadly little moth

Burnet moths are unusually brightly coloured, with black bodies and wings, and large bright red spots on the wings. This is a warning to potential predators that they are not good to eat.

The adult moths and their caterpillars contain a relatively large amount of cyanide. Some the caterpillars produce by metabolising toxins in their food plant, birdsfoot trefoil, and the rest they can synthesise themselves. The cyanide is also used as a mating tactic. Females can release plumes of the chemical, which is likely to combine with normal sexual pheromones and help attract males.



A ghostly plant under our hedge



We have a new arrival in the narrow border under our front hedge – broomrape, a parasitic plant. The seeds can remain dormant in the soil for years until they are stimulated by chemicals released by the host plant's roots, and they latch onto the host and grow and flower.

We have ivy under the hedge as well, so we do not know which of the many varieties of broomrape, each adapted to a different host plant, this is. Broomrape is related to the semi-parasitic yellow rattle that people grow to reduce the vigour of grass in wildflower meadows.

Some requests for help

We always need people to meet and greet members and visitors at our meetings.

If you can help, please contact Felicity Vickery Tel: 01494 726284, email felicityvickery@yahoo.co.uk

We need people to help with the tea and coffee at our meetings. There is a rota so you are not expected to help at every meeting.

If you can help, please contact Liz Moulton Tel: 014494 784913, email libbym6740@gmail.com

Please remember the raffle at each meeting. The profit on the raffles makes a very useful contribution to our expenses; subscriptions alone do not cover the cost of meetings and speakers.

Publicity. If you know where you could put a publicity poster please contact david.bender@btinternet.com

At present we have posters in the following places:

White Hill Centre, Chesham
Robertson's butcher, Chenies parade
Van Hage garden centre
Little Chalfont Library
Amersham Library

Amersham Community Centre
Amersham Council Offices
Amersham Station
Coleshill Village Hall
South Heath Garden Centre

Committee and Contact Details

President	Tim Hillier	president@amersham-gardening.org.uk
Chairman	Colin Ross	chairman@amersham-gardening.org.uk
Secretary	Jean Bowling	secretary@amersham-gardening.org.uk
Treasurer	David Bender	treasurer@amersham-gardening.org.uk
Visits Secretary	Joan Clark	
Show Secretary	vacant	
Membership Sec	Clive Symes	membership@amersham-gardening.org.uk
Talks Secretary	Anne Webb	
Archivist	Carol Barratt	
Web Coordinator	David Bender	webmaster@amersham-gardening.org.uk
Committee Members	Frances Billington Carol Daw Irene Glyn-Jones Liz Moulton	
Newsletter Editor	David Bender	newsletter@amersham-gardening.org.uk

Discounts for members

[East Building & Timber Supplies](#), 43 - 47 Chiltern Ave, offer a 10% discount on compost, gravel and pebbles, etc to AGA members.

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

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>