

May 2021 Newsletter

From the Secretary

This is the first year I can remember when my hebes were so devastated by the cold winds and frost. The early flowering azaleas were also affected as were my bergenias which had been a mass of bright pink and changed to grey overnight. The drought and frost continued through April and I'm sure all gardeners were hoping for April showers. The little rain that arrived at the end of the month was not enough. Let's hope the rest of the year will finally be a good gardening year as well as a healthy one.

Thanks to Sue and Julie, and David, we have had some excellent Zoom talks and these will continue until we can have large group meetings indoors. Meanwhile we are beginning to have some garden visits and all being well, an AGA holiday.

Sadly, we have learnt of the deaths of three long-standing members: Jim Elliott, Jean Glanville and Gil Knight.

Jean Bowling

The editor notes that, unheard of for England, he had to use the hose in April, but not at all in May.

Members first please for outings

We welcome visitors to our indoor meetings, and obviously want to share our love of gardening with friends and neighbours. However, we must make sure that members have priority in booking for outings when places are limited, as they always will be if the outing is by coach.

will only be allocated tickets after the demand from members has been satisfied.

If you are a member and want your partner or a friend to come on an outing, please make sure that they are members. If you are member and your partner is not, it only costs £7 extra per year to have joint membership.

In future, the organiser will check all applications for tickets against the membership list, and non-members

With this newsletter

The booking form for the afternoon visit to Richard and Jill Jones' Garden on August 25th.

Dates for your diary

[June 25th special visit to Bledlow Manor Gardens in aid of the Motor Neuron Disease Association](#)

20th October visit to [Montana](#), Cholesbury. Further details and the booking form in the August newsletter.

See the photos in this issue full size

[Click here](#) 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



Forthcoming meetings by Zoom

June 24th: Fuchsias my way, by David Dexter

David has been a member of the British Fuchsia Society for over 17 years and has 22 years experience of growing award winning fuchsias.

He has exhibited for 5 years at Hampton Court Flower Show - Silver Gilt Winner and exhibited at the British Fuchsia Society London Show - 12 First in Class Winners.

July 22nd: Gardens for Us and Them, by Ian Bedford

Despite many worrying facts about Global Warming and Climate Change and how it will affect the ecosystems, around 35% of Britain's land mass is protected from development within National Parks and Nature Reserves. Many projects are also underway to try and connect these protected areas so that their wildlife

doesn't suffer through geographic isolation. Home gardens can all become valuable stepping stones for our wildlife in the quest to connect the natural reserves. This talk explains some of the very easy things we can all do to help achieve this, for us and the future generations of our population and Britain's wildlife.

September 23rd: What to do with this space, by Daniel Lerigo

Daniel writes: This is a question clients often ask us and a question we often ask ourselves, but to answer this question, we have realised, is a huge undertaking. Exploring potential answers left us delving deeper and deeper into new ideas, unpacking thoughts and contemplating the words of garden philosophers, and feeling ever more entangled by the question we had set out to explore.

Really, you can do anything. The art or science or whatever you want to call it is left to you, the way you think and feel and what you know and don't know... and of course, the 'don't-knows' you are willing to explore. The talk takes in the work of people from all over the world - starting in Japan, then ending in a dream garden via Scandinavia, Spain, Uruguay, Sheffield and the kitchen of a Parisian chef. It also quotes Mother Teresa and Jack Gilbert, just to keep the audience on its toes!

Exochorda x macrantha The Bride, photographed by Sue Edwards in her garden on April 26th.

The [BBC Gardeners World website](#) says: "Commonly known as pearl bush, this is a hugely popular deciduous shrub, and with good reason. In late spring and early summer it's awash with masses of pure white flowers.

It's often planted alone along a wall or in the garden as a specimen shrub, but it also combines well with other plants in the border. For best results, grow it in full sun in moist, well-drained soil. It is important that it is pruned right after flowering, to ensure a good show of flowers the following year. Do this by cutting back each flowering stem by half their length, after blooming has ended. *Exochorda x macrantha* 'The Bride' has been awarded Royal Horticultural Society's prestigious Award of Garden Merit (AGM)."

[Burncoose nursery website](#) tells us *E. x macrantha* 'The Bride' is a hybrid produced in 1900 in France between *E. korolkowii* and *E. racemosa*.

These plants can be fairly short lived (say 25 years) as a result of overflowing and overseeding. The easiest way to propagate exochorda is from softwood cuttings taken in mid summer and rooted on bottom heat. Seed is best sown in the autumn in the cold frame.



Outing to Chenies Manor garden: April 26th 2021

On a cold but sunny day, Chenies Manor opened its gardens to 66 members of the Amersham Gardening Association. We were given an introductory talk by Charles McLeod Matthews, the owner, giving us some of the history of the house & garden. We were then free to explore the gardens & have refreshments.

It is tulip season at Chenies but, sadly, they have had a few problems this year. The South border has been attacked by rodents, and the tulips in the white garden had not yet opened. Boo McLeod Matthews told me that they are usually out at the same time as those in the

other parts of the garden, but we have had a cold spring this year. However, the tulips in the sunken garden & round the back lawn were perfect, a beautiful mixture of dark purple & burnt orange interspersed by very dark polyanthus.

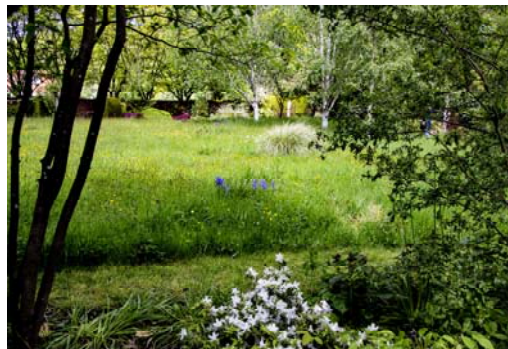
But the overriding impression from the morning was seeing the joy on members' faces as, once again, they were able to see friends they hadn't seen for over a year.

Liz Moulton; photographs by Keith Hoffmeister



Outing to Beech House: May 25th 2021

On what was probably the first afternoon in May that we had good weather, 60 members were hosted in two groups of 30 by Sue and Ray Edwards in their garden in Jordans. Ray told us that when they bought Beech House the garden was almost entirely lawns, on which the son of the previous owner had practiced cricket. This meant that apart from a couple of trees, they had a blank palette on which to design and create their garden. Then they had a stroke of luck. A plot of land behind their garden had been earmarked for a new house, but the developer had made mistakes in the access to the new plot, so building permission was not granted. They were able to buy it for a modest sum to double the size of their garden.



The front garden has a majestic tree (inherited from the previous owner) and a linear rockery, but the real delights are in the back garden. Here there are borders, a pergola that must be a fantastic sight when the roses are in bloom, and a vegetable plot, and birch and other small trees, all surrounding the wild flower meadow. See page 9 for a photo that Sue sent when the snake's head fritillaries were in bloom in April. When we visited the fritillaries were long over, but the meadow was still colourful, with bluebells, buttercups and red clover among the grasses. Everyone commented on the magnificent cornus in the border near the entrance to the back garden.



Thanks to Jane Jenkins for organising this visit and to Frances Billington for organising what can best be described as a great Amersham bake off. Although we could not see the cakes being made, all were prize worthy.



Jane Jenkins writes:

On 25 May 60 AGA members visited Ray and Sue Edwards' lovely hidden away garden in Jordan's. Way back in September 2020 when the date was fixed, May 25th seemed a reasonable date for a garden party. We were not to know what was in store: tundra type April followed by a deluging May; not what we had anticipated. Things got a bit tense as the date crept towards 25th. Would our lovingly baked cakes be embossed with hail stones? How would we huddle in a garage whilst maintaining social distance? Would the lovely plants survive? As it was, the weather gods relented; there was no rain. By lunch time a few bilious



In the front garden was a small rockery showing some miniature Solomon's seal. On the lawn, scillas and crocuses had given way to cowslips and epimedium (barrenwort) under the bushes, their swept back, yellow starlike petals floating over their red mottled leaves. Small trees like whitebeam add dappled shade. On the south wall of the house was New Zealand sophora, an unusual yellow flowered leguminous small tree called kowhai in Maori language. Close by was a mimosa with purple tinged foliage. Climbing roses promised perfume to come. At the side of the drive was lush herbaceous border, powering through it was a *Crambe cordifolia*, or less glamorously, flowering sea kale. Masses of white flowers later in the year.

Near to the house at the back, roses, little gems like erythroniums, and a curious double white primrose from Carole Klein, were growing. A neatly trimmed lawn stretched away from the house, and beyond it, a meadow inspired by Great Dixter was left unmown. This meadow was divided into two parts by a meandering path, so that it was possible to look into the grass without trampling buds. It was full of frillitarias, which were developing their elegant seed heads. Almost navy blue camassia were springing up in succession. Yellow rattle, the semi parasitic plant keeps the grass unvigorous allowed the wild flowers and pasture herbs to flourish. Especially important as there will be orchids later in the year.



To the left a fine specimen tree, cornus Eddies white wonder displayed brilliant white bracts, in a petal-like formation. The shape of the tree was very pleasing, made up of upward curving triangular boughs. On the other side of the garden, under a huge mature tree was a series of yew parterres, each box filled with different plants, some held acers and at the back of one was a delightful little fernery. Here polypodiums and Japanese painted ferns were thriving. An interesting bifurcated *Asplenium scolopendrium* had obviously enjoyed the winter. My favourite though was the scarlet tulip Spengeri. These elegant Turkish tulips were naturalised, they have a wild flower simplicity about them and can be grown from seed. On the pergola white and purple wisteria were in bud, and very fine new clematis, Guernsey Cream was just making a floral entrance. Very large white petals with a pale green bar setting off yellow stamens.

Healthy raised bed vegetables and herbs suggested plenty of delicious lunches to come. Tucked away in a

streaks of blue appeared in the sky. The wind however was uncompromising; winter clothes recently put away were rummaged out of newly filled drawers. Never have I been so grateful for long johns.

Ray's garden is two acres; he managed to acquire it courtesy of a builder who was not that good on planning law, so it is a large plantsman's oasis in a pretty village. The garden combines several different types of garden styles ranging from meadow to pergola terrace, which allows for a large number of different types of unusual perennials to flourish giving year round interest.

corner was a very weird plant I have never seen before, *Euphorbia mellifera*; even in the arctic blast a strong scent of honey emanated from this rather unprepossessing plant. Surprisingly there were no bees on it, as the bees were snuggling in their hives.

After walking around the garden we were glad to come to refreshments and then to sit down to enjoy delicious homemade cakes (provided by the visits subcommittee) and chat with our friends about a favourite topic, plants and gardens. Everyone kept a nice social distance sitting on their own chairs, and I was grateful I did not have to break up any unseemly hugging. It was a great shame that the numbers had to be so rigidly controlled and I'm sorry if people missed especial friends. All the while sitting in the house was a big red file with everyone's name and address in it, just in case we had to prove to the "COVID powers that be" that we had stuck to our "Risk Assessment" and everyone was traceable. Let us hope pandemic days are over soon, and we can go back to our freer and easier ways.

Some random thoughts inspired by rhubarb

I was surprised when washing up a pan to smell stewing rhubarb – the pan had been used to boil potatoes. Then I noticed that the washing up liquid was labelled “limited edition” and “rose and rhubarb”. I had not bought it for any reason other than that it was the nearest bottle of Tesco own label washing up liquid to hand, and I thought the red colour on the windowsill would make a nice change from the yellow bottle it was replacing. I had certainly never thought of washing up liquid having a “limited edition”. Perhaps I should have remembered back to my temporary job as a furniture porter at Bentalls of Ealing between leaving school and starting my gap year. The shop offered quite a significant discount on mattresses with last year’s ticking. I don’t really know why – after all, most people only see the ticking on the mattress when they change the sheets – and anyway, surely you don’t buy a new mattress that often – perhaps once a decade, or less.



In similar vein to my scented washing up liquid, I notice that my shower gel claims to have a “100% nature inspired fragrance”. I am not sure what this is supposed to mean – is it natural or not? Of course, not all natural (or nature inspired) fragrances are pleasant. We used to live in Kenton, and from time to time the wind changed so that we were downwind of the Harrow School’s pig farm. Very natural, but... I also recall the time I was traveling in the USA and ran out of shampoo

(in those days I did not stay in the sort of hotel that provided shampoo, etc for guests). I probably bought the least expensive shampoo I could find in New York. It was strawberry scented, and when I stayed with old friends in Boston a few days later I had to warn them that if they thought they could smell some-one making strawberry jam in the morning, not to worry, it was just me washing my hair.



Is my washing up liquid really using rhubarb that could be put to much better use? This started me thinking about rhubarb – perhaps because I noticed the first shoots of our rhubarb in early February. The 2017 AGA holiday in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire included a visit to Clumber Park in Nottinghamshire. As I wrote in the October 2017 newsletter: “this was somewhat disappointing, although there is a very impressive 3 mile drive up to the visitor centre, lined with two rows of lime trees on each side, and there are 120 different types of tree in the 3800 acre estate. The main features are the longest glass house in any National Trust property – unfortunately, half is being restored and the other half contains only trials of different types of tomato, some of which did not look at all healthy.” The walled garden there is home to a national collection of rhubarb – a total of some 130 varieties. (There is another collection of 100 varieties at RHS Wisley.) Much though I like rhubarb, and I do appreciate the value of maintaining collections of as many varieties of plants as possible for future breeding, this was one of the least exciting plant collections I have seen. Doubtless there are differences in flavour, disease resistance, hardiness, season of growth, etc, but still, one rhubarb plant looks very much like the next. Although rhubarb wine and rhubarb and ginger jam were on sale, there was no rhubarb on the restaurant menu.



Botanically, rhubarb is a vegetable – fruits contain seeds, so that tomatoes, bell peppers, French and runner beans, peas and cucumbers are all fruits. In the kitchen and dining room, the definition is different – fruits may be served with sugar, cream or custard, while vegetables may be served with salt or gravy. Just to confuse things further, chemically custard and gravy are more or less the same – a gel formed by heating starch (and thus also the same as old-fashioned wallpaper

paste) – it is only the flavouring, vanilla and sugar for one and meat or vegetable juice for the other. Just don’t ask about savoury tomato and oregano sauce for pasta.

James Wong has a piece in the lifestyle section of the Guardian / Observer website most Sundays. On March 14th he wrote in praise of growing fruit rather than vegetables, noting that the cost of growing, for example, parsnips is probably greater than the cost of the same

vegetables in the supermarket – not to mention the effort of clearing stones, etc so that you get straight roots. He makes the point that next year you have to do the same again – and parsnips are, he says, difficult to germinate in the first place. He then goes on to praise

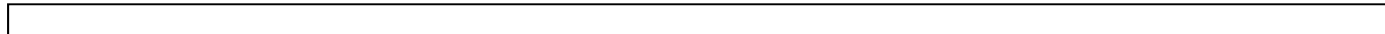
fruit – raspberries, blueberries, etc, all of which are, as he says, one-off investments of money and effort, with a crop every year. Perhaps as a botanist he should know better (his Twitter label is @botanygeek) – he ignores annual fruit such as tomatoes, etc.



The rhubarb triangle is a 9 square mile area of West Yorkshire, famous for producing early forced rhubarb. It was originally larger, up to 30 square miles between Leeds, Bradford and Wakefield, and once produced 90% of the world's early forced rhubarb. In 2010, Yorkshire forced rhubarb was awarded Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) status by the European Commission. Interesting that the national collection of rhubarb is in Nottinghamshire and not Yorkshire, but then as a native Yorkshireman I should not be surprised at loss of our “national fruit” to Notts. I well remember sitting down to a formal dinner in the Cutlers’ Hall of the University of Sheffield and noting with horror that the Viners stainless steel cutlery was made in Taiwan.

There is an old, but still reliable, early variety of rhubarb called red champagne. I don't know how it came by its name, but apparently relatively large amounts are exported to the Champagne region of France. Surely this must be to provide fruit for the vineyard workers, and not, as has been suggested by cynics, that it is used together with grapes to produce the sparkling wine that has protected status. The 1891 Treaty of Madrid established the rule that only wine produced in the Champagne region of France could bear the name, and the region then obtained official AOC recognition (appellation d'origine contrôlée) in 1936. In the 1970s I can remember on holidays in Spain drinking “champan” – in those days it was cheaper than lemonade. It was only after Spain joined the then EEC that Spanish producers were forced to abandon the name, and call

Spanish sparkling wine made by the méthode champenoise (second fermentation in the bottle, rather than bulk fermentation in tanks) Cava instead. The USA was slower to recognise this, and Californian sparkling wine was, for a long time, known in USA as champagne. Eventually the French, and especially Moët et Chandon (founded in 1743) forced the Americans to cease using the name champagne for domestic sparkling wine. Some years ago I was taken for lunch to the Napa Valley Domaine Chandon winery (yes, owned by Moët et Chandon) where I was served an excellent sparkling wine that they could not call champagne despite owning the name. Perhaps this is slightly better than “Swiss cheese” in USA, which is a coverall name for any cheese with holes in it. You can choose between “domestic Swiss” or “imported Swiss”.

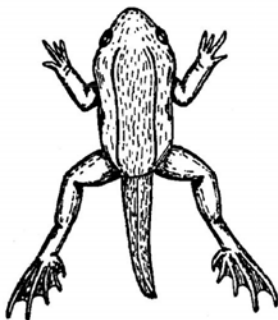
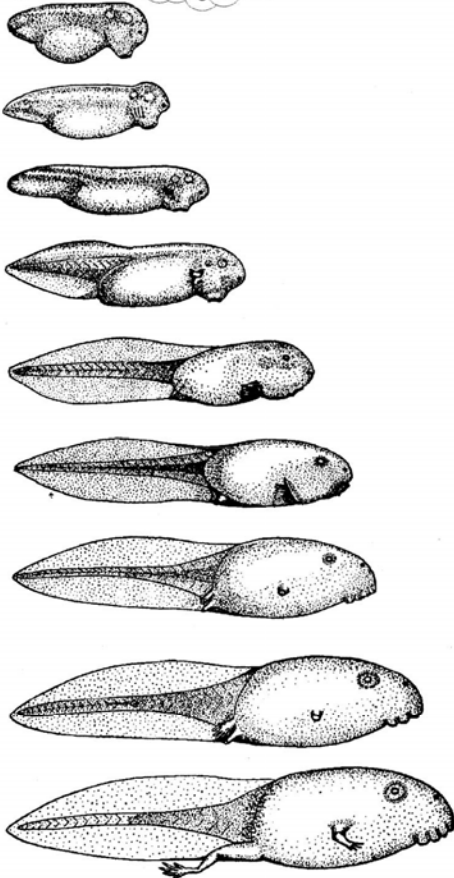
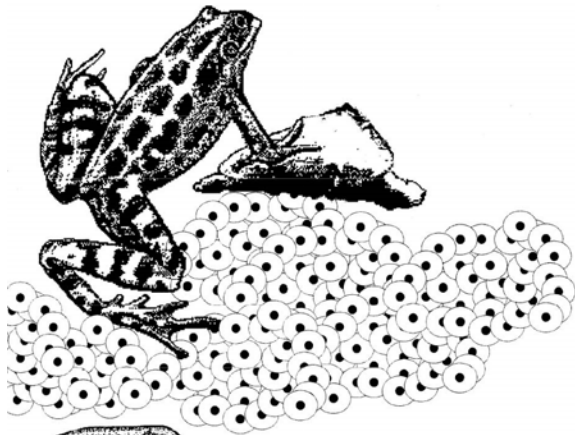


Much of the “domestic Swiss” cheese is made in Wisconsin. In 1977 I was in Madison Wisconsin for a scientific meeting. Before that I had been in New York, where every news bulletin on TV and radio was about the prolific serial killer called “Son of Sam”. I put on the TV news, and after the local news, which included the wholesale prices for Wisconsin Swiss cheese and Wisconsin weenies (Vienna type sausages) the bulletin ended with something along the lines of “New York police say they have arrested the Son of Sam – he killed some people or something”. American news can be very parochial. I remember meeting my parents at the airport in autumn 1980 when they returned from a trip to the USA. They asked me if anything had happened while they were away, so I told them about the start of the Iran / Iraq war. They had wondered, because at the bottom of a page in the Boulder newspaper they had seen a small paragraph that just said “Iran and Iraq went to war today”. That war lasted almost 8 years.

is a sparkling floral perfume. Experience this vegan and cruelty-free fragrance with 10% off....”. A visit to <https://floralstreet.com> tells us this is “an unexpected and bubbly white floral perfume. If you could bottle that feeling of laughing and sipping perfectly chilled Prosecco on a balmy summer's afternoon - this would be it. This vegan perfume is for the sparkling, luminous, charming and fun-loving. White florals and powdery sandalwood are combined with the scent of English Rhubarb and an unexpected blast of salty sea air. Floral Street partnered with The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) for the launch of Electric Rhubarb which perfectly fused RHS heritage with the modernity of the Floral Street brand.” The key ingredients are English Rhubarb, Australian Sandalwood, Island Gardenia, Frangipani, Jasmine Sambac. The RHS website says “Launched at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2019, the RHS partnered with Floral Street to create their Electric Rhubarb fragrance, inspired by the National Collection of Rhubarb held at RHS Garden Wisley. The partnership ties together RHS heritage with the modernity of the Floral Street brand.”

And finally, back to rhubarb. The March issue of *The Garden* has an advert for 10% off Electric Rhubarb perfume. We are told that “Floral Street's award-winning Electric Rhubarb, created in collaboration with the RHS,

David Bender



Day length or temperature?

Some plants are sensitive to temperature at the start of the growing season. For example, bluebells in woodland now flower some 2 weeks earlier than they did 25 years ago – Perivale Wood Local Nature Reserve had to shift its open day 2 weeks earlier because one of the main attractions to the public was the splendid carpet of bluebells. Similarly, I remember when I was a student in the 1960s I would enjoy the flowering cherries along the A4 in west London (now almost all felled) over the Easter vacation, then return to Birmingham (only 100 miles north) to find the cherries only just beginning to flower.

By contrast other plants are sensitive to day length. For example, poinsettias need more or less equal light and dark (which is normal in their sub-tropical home) to flower – those we buy at Xmas have been “forced” into flower by manipulating their day length. This explains why, even if we have managed to keep the plants from Xmas alive, they will not flower for us at home.

You might think that frogs, being cold-blooded animals, would be sensitive to temperature. This is probably so for prompting them to come out of hibernation, but it is not so for mating and spawning. In my misspent youth we always went out to collect frog spawn over the third weekend in March – it was freshly laid then. Some 65 or more years later they still spawn at the same time – the first clumps arrived in our pond on March 20th.

Avian homelessness averted

The blue tits started to take a serious interest in the birch log nest box in late February, and by the end of March they had started to take in nesting material. Then disaster struck. The squirrels use this nest box as a launch pad to jump onto the bird table and fat ball feeder, and one had obviously kicked hard, and dislodged the box – it was on the ground. Unfortunately, it was not a matter of just re-hanging it, it needed some reinforcement and a new base to allow fitting a stronger bracket. This was not a five minute job, and the box had to be left in the garage overnight.



Next morning, while the repairs were being undertaken, I saw a very confused blue tit with a beak full of nesting material flying between the now empty space on the tree, the bird table and the rose bush from which it usually approaches the nest box. This carried on for some time, and it then disappeared. So far, we had at least learnt that this early in the season, before they have laid eggs, the birds roost elsewhere and do not spend the night in the nest box.

Fortunately, within half an hour of the repaired box being screwed to the tree, the tits began to show interest, and were soon flying in and out with nesting material.

David Bender

Advice for new (vegetable) gardeners

The March issue of *The Garden* has an article about growing vegetables in small gardens, using containers, small raised beds and a variety of high-yielding miniature varieties of crops. The first paragraph

Choose crops that naturally yield well.

Perhaps yes, but some of the highest yielding tomatoes available to amateur gardeners have less flavour than

Grow hard-to-come-by cultivars.

Yes, if they are interesting, better tasting, etc, but there may be a good reason why they are not widely grown such as poor disease resistance. Of course, some of the interesting varieties are not grown commercially because they have lower yields, or ripen unevenly. For

Focus on those [varieties] that command high prices in shops.

This is a grey area. Yes, if I were to grow potatoes I would probably grow something like pink fir apple (expensive in shops when available and also hard to come by, but certainly an interesting flavour and

Cultivate what you enjoy eating.

Duh. However, I must admit that over the years we have grown vegetables that one of us likes and the other

..... especially edibles best consumed at peak freshness.

I think this is the most important. Tomatoes straight from the plant (if no-one is watching, eaten while standing next to the plant); runner beans and sweet corn picked after the water has started to boil are delights that cannot be achieved from the supermarket. On the other hand, frozen petits pois are fresher than anything on the

So, what do we grow?

Tree roots run through almost all of our garden, and the borders are really not suitable for vegetables, so we grow runner beans and tomatoes in containers. The runner beans are trained up an arch, so providing a decorative feature – when first introduced from the Americas, runner beans were grown solely as ornamental plants, no-one thought to eat them. We have Ailsa Craig or another variety of bush tomato in pots, and Tumbling Tom cherry tomatoes in hanging baskets. We sometimes do attempt to grow yellow courgettes, but despite our best efforts, including growing them up obelisks, the slugs get more than their fair share, and we get none. We do have a couple of crowns of rhubarb, which yield well, and four small gooseberry bushes that,

contains some advice for those who have not grown vegetables in small gardens before – I will dissect each piece of advice as follows:

the varieties I can buy in the supermarket, although this is not always true.

a gardener it is an advantage that not all of the crop ripens at the same time, but for a commercial grower it is costly to have to keep coming back to the same plants for a little more picking.

texture). On the other hand, I hesitate to count the cost per tomato, strawberry or runner bean if you include the compost, fertiliser, etc as well as the seeds.

cannot or will not eat – sweet peppers and courgettes for one; cauliflower and Brussels sprouts for the other.

fresh produce aisle – they are frozen within hours of being harvested – and I am told that frozen Brussels sprouts are at least as good as those from the green grocery aisle. I wouldn't know, I can only just bear to be in the same room as sprouts when they being cooked.

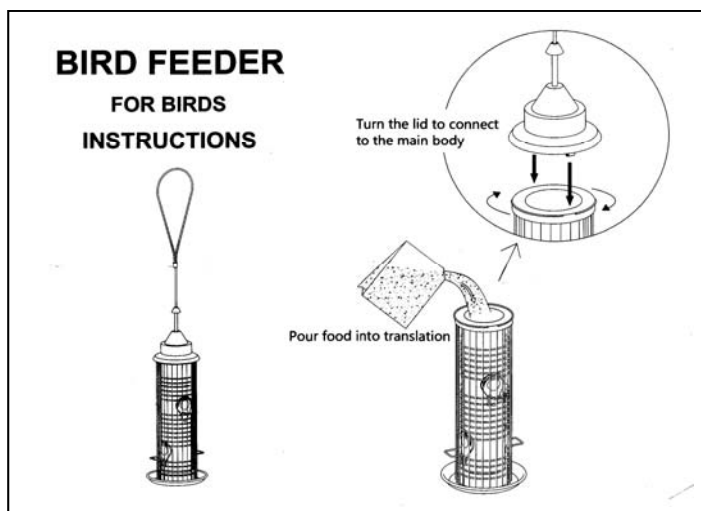
to date, have produced only a few fruits, but at least they can be left to ripen for eating raw, unlike those from the supermarket. We have given up on sweet corn – our trees host a large population of squirrels which demolished the crop before it was ready for picking. For the same reason, we have given up growing sunflowers, although last year some-one (bird or squirrel) did plant a sunflower seed (presumably from the bird feeder) into the pot of hosta, and it did well on the patio. Because of the tree roots and flints, if we wanted to grow root vegetables, it would have to be in containers – see my comment above about the cost of compost, etc.

David Bender

Sue Edwards sent this photo of her meadow on April 9th



... and these were the instructions for the new niger seed bird feeder we bought in May



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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>