

# Lavant Horticultural Society

## ‘An Allotment Year’

**Alan Williams**

Wednesday 14th December 2023

In his enjoyable talk Alan gave a down-to-earth review of vegetable growing, based on 16 years’ experience of his own allotment (now given up, as moving house has given him his own very large garden).

He recommended starting by making a plan what to grow where – anything from a rough sketch on paper to an Excel spreadsheet. Also, he stressed the importance of crop rotation to avoid the build-up of pests and diseases and look after the soil; he practices a three stage rotation: roots > legumes > brassicas, although four stage ones are also popular.

He suggested always trying something new and showed three of his attempts: Patty pan squashes – very successful, now part of his regular plan; Horse radish – a success in terms of growing. However, the resulting horse radish relish had been far too fiery to eat; Mini pumpkins – these had produced pumpkins the size of apples, but hard and practicably inedible.

**Onions, shallots and garlic:** he starts by planting in November; garlic anyway needs the low winter temperatures to split into separate cloves. He makes a second planting of onions and shallots in spring, early April, to get a later crop. Any sets that may be left are planted in modules, to be used to fill in any gaps.

He recommended preparing the trench for **runner beans** well in advance of its use in late May, putting cardboard and manure in the bottom to retain the constant supply of moisture essential to a good crop.

**Comfrey tea** – an excellent liquid fertiliser that is easy to make: put comfrey leaves into a bucket that has a lid, cover with water, put something on top of leaves to keep them under water and put the lid on, with something on top to make sure it stays closed – the smell is disgusting! After 2-3 weeks, decant the liquid into bottles (with tops!) and use as a liquid fertiliser – a few millilitres in a 5 litre watering can is enough. Any residue in the bottom of bucket can go on the compost heap.

### **Pests and companion planting:**

**Peas and broad beans** – holes eaten around the edges of leaves are due to pea and bean weevil. One remedy is to sow early, as the adult weevils that do the damage do not appear until June-July. Also, you can put trays of water under plants and shake them, so that weevils will fall off into the trays. Silver mottling on pea leaves is due to thrips – again sowing early helps as thrips are only active June-August. Thrips can also be shaken off.

**Blackfly can be a major problem in broad beans.** They are particularly attracted to the soft new growth, so when all the flowers are open, remove the clump of small new leaves from the top of each plant (do this even if there are no signs of blackfly) – these are edible and can be used in salads or stir fries.

**Harlequin ladybirds** come in a wide variety of colourings; they have good and bad sides: out-competing the smaller native ladybirds, they have now become endemic; however, like the native ones, they are still useful as predators of aphids.

**Asian hornets**, on the other hand, are still fortunately quite rare and any sighting continues to be notifiable.

Violet ground beetles are good guys – not often seen, as they are nocturnal, they predate smaller insects, including vine weevils, and slugs.

**Cabbage white butterfly**, both large and small: will lay eggs on any brassica – the caterpillars that emerge cause the damage. Cover brassicas with netting of a mesh small enough to stop the butterflies getting through and not close enough to brassica leaves for the cabbage white to reach through the net to deposit its eggs. Alan recommended fine mesh scaffolding netting as will last for some years. Old lace curtains could also be used. If you only have a few brassica plants, the eggs can be removed from the underside of the leaves by hand before the caterpillars emerge.

He showed a picture of trashed **sweetcorn**. Badgers seem to know when it is getting ripe, push the plants over onto the ground and eat the kernels from the cobs. Foxes also do this. The only protection is to physically keep them out, which requires a very strong post and wire mesh construction.

**Companion planting to deter pests: Onions and garlic** grown in carrots can deter carrot fly by confusing the scent that attracts them, also in tomatoes to deter aphids. **French marigolds** grown under tomatoes will deter whitefly and aphids.

**Companion planting to attract pollinators** to improve yield: use sweet peas, calendula (pot marigold), yarrow (be very careful as yarrow can be very invasive).

**Nasturtiums** can be particularly useful grown in **brassicas** once the brassica plants are established – they will draw in aphids and other insect pests from the brassica plants whilst attracting predators to feed on them.