

Vernal Equinox Newsletter 2014



The last newsletter in deepest winter spoke of poetry weeks before the rains had come to test but not to break our spirit!

Now with rain and wind abated, and new life emerging everywhere, poetry seems fitting once more:

“Though floods of winter bustling fall.....
Yet when from clouds the sun is free
And warms the learning bird to sing
‘Neath sloping bank and sheltering tree
‘Tis sweet to watch the creeping spring.”

John Clare.

Dates for your Diary

April 1st	Subscriptions & Rent due.
April 5 th	Monthly Meeting.
May 3 rd .	Monthly Meeting.
June 7 th .	Monthly Meeting.
June 21 st	Summer Solstice.

Remember Subscriptions Due April 1st

Hi all

It looks like Spring is springing after all the wind and rain of the past few months.

In spite of the weather, much has been achieved, not least the planting of the new windbreak/hedge. Progress has been made over the positioning of the pond and hopefully work will start on that sometime soon.

Its been great to welcome some new members.... and to feel that as we approach the end of a full year as Exeter Growers Co-operative, the group is thriving and looking forward to the next growing season.

Remember to renew your membership!

Jan

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Membership Update.

In defiance of wind, rain and a washed out Wassail we have been joined by two new members already this year!

A gentle reminder is that subscriptions for 2014-2015 are due on 1st April. The rates are as agreed at our January meeting that as from 01/04/14:

	New rate
Full membership rates increased by £20 to	£80
The concessionary rate will be increased by £2 to	£50.
The Friends' rate will be increased by £3 to	£15
The concessionary rate remains unchanged at	£10.

Paying by quarterly instalments of £20 would ease any cash flow problems.

However any new member who has paid their subscription in the last two months is considered to have paid for the coming year!

Margaret.

Flowers of the Field and Hedgerow and the Willow Dome.

With the 'Demonstration Area' renamed 'The Garden' it seemed fitting to hope for flowers there. In early March it was a joy to discover tiny bright blue Scillas, the paler flowers of Rosemary already attracting bumblebees, and the mid-blue of Borage. I found almost hidden in the grass "Daffodils, that come before the swallow dares, and take the winds of March with beauty." A solitary Marigold was already flowering, along with "The daisy with its golden eye, And Primrose bursting into flower." Wildflowers too, some maybe less welcome but nonetheless lovely: sparkling blue Speedwell; starry Chickweed; Field Woundwort (I think!); Bittercress; White Clover; and the bright bold ones, Buttercup and Dandelion (I love the name, its wine too!) And in the hedge the earliest blossom of Blackthorn, parent to the sloe.



Willow is coming into leaf and flower too, nudging Sarah C. and Margaret to repair winter's ravages, restore, strengthen and complete the Willow Dome that took first shape last year. We hope it will give fun to children to play in, in their own as yet unimagined ways!

Margaret.

Getting Involved

Would you like to get more involved in a certain area of the field?

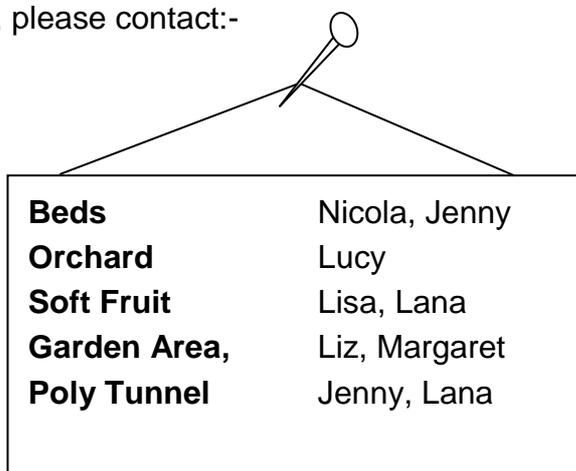
Sowing seeds or tending tomatoes in the **Poly Tunnel**?

Taking care of herbs and flowers in the **Garden**?

Nurturing our sweet **Soft Fruit**?

Tending our bountiful **Beds**?

If so, please contact:-



Beds	Nicola, Jenny
Orchard	Lucy
Soft Fruit	Lisa, Lana
Garden Area,	Liz, Margaret
Poly Tunnel	Jenny, Lana



Our first seedlings, Pixie Cabbages which germinated in just a week!

Lana

Field Update – from Members' Meeting, St David's Day, 1/3/14

A busy members' meeting on 1st of March covered lots of ground (literally). Work is to start preparing a level base for the tool shed's new position, just down from the willow dome. We agreed to order extra bush tomato plants to grow a bumper crop on both sides of the polytunnel, and extra leek seedlings for the allium beds. As we can't grow potatoes this year on the existing ground (need a 4 year break before re-planting), we agreed to plough new ground extending the old triangular area near the small gate. A sowing calendar for propagation of seedlings in the polytunnel is in preparation and members committed themselves to writing clear and detailed 'task notes' on the small board on the shed door. This is to enable members to know exactly what to do if there is no-one around to ask. Members were asked to ensure that whenever they finish a job (composting/sowing/planting etc) on any of the beds, they record and date it on the quarterly bed plan on the back wall of the shed. Richard and Jake will be fixing the wind damage to the framework on the west end of the polytunnel and plans for a cold frame construction on the east end of the shed were agreed.

There is continued work to be done protecting the orchard trees, with full details drawn up by Lucy and posted on the shed back wall. The Co-Op is very tight on finances after paying for all the alder saplings, stakes and tree guards that were planted to form the wind barrier. Any contributions by members to the 'hedge fund' would be really helpful!

We have 20 full members and a regular 12-14 turn up for our monthly members' meetings. This is great participation and helps us all.

David

Planting for the future - Exeter Growers new hedge

On March 1st a team of 13 of us started our windbreak hedge running north-south all alongside the growing areas. We've been deliberating for a while about putting in a living windbreak as our site is very exposed and in the long term the hedge will give great protection. It's been a big investment for the future. We were so lucky with having a dry day. The line had previously been prepared by removing all the turf 1m wide for the 139m length! This gives the new plants the best chance of succeeding without all the competition from weeds.

Once we'd got ourselves sorted with a system of slot planting and heeling in (into what proved to be pretty hard ground) we planted 280 bare-rooted Italian alder plants to form the outer line of the hedge. Italian alder is a fast-growing species often used for windbreak hedges, growing 1m or more a year. The species also provides nitrogen to the soil, and in the long term could be coppiced for fuel.

All the alder have been staked and protected from voles and rabbits by guards - and the hedge line is already giving the vision of future protection.

The second, inner line of the hedge will be planted on March 8th, using willow cut from our willow beds as well as some donated. Willow is another fast-growing species, and is great for pollinators providing pollen early in the season.

We'll need to keep a good eye on the young plants, and water when (if!) we have any dry periods - but it's looking pretty exciting.



Nicola.

Orchard News

For the second time it was decided to cancel our Wassail on our Orchard Day the 8th February due to extreme weather conditions, most notably high winds. Sally however managed to get up there and do some work with a new member on one of the tree guards before the wind just got too strong!

Lisa's trees, an apple tree and a plum tree kindly donated by her father are now protected from nibbling deer!

Tree guards restoration



Harvested willow



We managed on 22nd February (scheduled as a willow day), to finish most of our restoration of tree guards with some work on new batons, and barbed wire still to finish. Most of our willow has now been coppiced with the more vigorous varieties being put aside for the Hedge planting day on the 1st of March. (The hedge is now planted-ed)

One of our new Members, Chrissie, has asked us if her daughter could donate a young bare rooted Cherry Tree which was given to her, not having as yet a suitable place to plant it out. The group working in the orchard thought it would be great to have another Cherry, so we have marked out a spot with posts near to Alastair's apple trees ready for planting in early March. Thank you Chrissie.

Many thanks are due, too, to Patti O'Brien who has already donated blackcurrant and gooseberry bushes and who has now offered a Morello Cherry Tree.

The Orchard group of five members has met a couple of times. One focus has been on grass management, and possible options have been researched: animal grazing and free range chickens have been considered but these present complications. Scything is therefore the preferred approach, with a well organised team taking shared responsibility. The possibility of mechanised cutting and dispersal of grass by a "Grillo" machine is also being explored..

The group have been looking at ways of integrating the Orchard more closely with the rest of the field. One suggestion has been to create a visibly defined connection between the two, though any living structure would need time for maintenance. The Orchard is also now a regular feature for news and planning at our monthly meetings.

Spot the 'Grillo'



Lucy.

A Short History of our Soft Fruit

Originally, we started off with just 6 Blackcurrants, 3 Redcurrants, 3 Whitecurrants and around half a dozen Autumn Raspberries which were planted in a small bed on the East side of the field.

These were transplanted to their present position in the East Soft Fruit Bed in the autumn of 2011, when we changed the orientation of all our growing beds. I can't remember but at that time we must have increased our stock of Raspberries, using suckers from the original plants.

All the soft fruit in the West Soft Fruit Bed are a result of hardwood cuttings which Nicola and Lana took in the autumn of 2012.

Last autumn, under Lisa's instructions, we lifted suckers from the original Autumn Raspberries and planted 3 more rows, to the north of their parents. Autumn Raspberries need to be cut down to the ground in late winter, and this has been done.

Just above the black and redcurrants in the East Bed, are 3 bushes which were donated by Patti, a Friend of EGC, thanks Patti. She has offered us two more bushes, a Loganberry and a Gooseberry, which we will plant with the others.

The fruit on the east side was protected last year with netting. I am told that if we do not net our fruit, especially the currants, they will be lost to the birds. So this is a task which needs to be seen to! Last year we had a good crop of blackcurrants and I'm already looking forward to them again.

We have some netting and some poles, but will need more. As we are low on funds at the moment, if anyone has any netting or tall sticks/poles lying around at home which they would like to donate, please let me know.

In the spring, well very soon now, we will need to apply a mulch of manure to all the soft fruit.

Last year, we created a strawberry bed from 2 or 3 plants which were rescued from an over grown bed, originally the Children's area.



If you are interested in becoming more involved in this delicious Soft Fruit area, please speak to Lisa or Lana.

Lana

The Pond – Water storage and a more ‘Eco’ approach

For me the concept of water storage in a pond for the field, has been present for the entirety of my engagement with Exeter Growers. Indeed when I was first fortunate enough to meet Richard & Lana, Richard ensnared me with his beguiling tales of a water collecting system.

Our first storage system was and is the 1500 litre water butt, collecting rainwater from the roof of the shed. It soon became apparent that given modest rainfall this was soon filled to overflowing; unfortunately it is also readily emptied when used in earnest. So we have water but are not saving enough of it. This led to the obvious solution, a pond, but how big and where? The top of the field is favourite; it has to be close to the shed (the collector) and this position would allow us to use a siphon/gravity system to deliver water to the plants.

In August Jan commenced application to SWS Water for a grant of £998 to fund the project. In about the end of September she obtained a grant of £250. A further £225 was obtained by members of the group participating in a focus group. So we have some finance.

Some figures:

Annual precipitation on Shillingford Abbot is around 850 mm (<http://en.climate-data.org/location/61473/>)

The roof area of the hut is around 40 sq m

This gives us $40 \times 0.85 = 34$ cu m or 34,000 litres or about 22 times the water butt full

So a pond of about 8mx5mx1m deep was proposed = 40 cu m, 40,000l

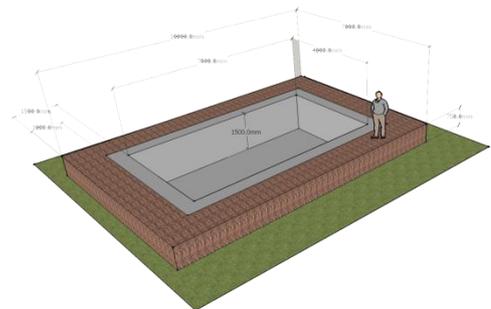
Yes, this is more than the roof will collect but the pond surface of 40m sq will also collect 34,000l, so even with evaporation, the pond should fill.

Discussion & site survey suggested that a better size would 7m x 4m x 1.5m = 42,000l, and the best site requires the tool shed to be moved to a new location.

The final pond is 7m x 4m = 28,000l surface collection, this still gives a total of 55,000l.

So we have decided on a size and a site, what about construction?

To minimise the amount of earth moving, we could have a hole 7m x 4m x 0.75m, with banks 1.5m wide and 0.75m high. This gives an overall footprint of 10m x 7m. Those who like doing sums will find that the soil excavated = volume of the banks = 28cu m. In practice the banks will be a little taller than 0.75m, since the calculation assumes them to be rectangular in section when they will be more like a trapezoid.



On 7 January we purchased a pond liner with underlay with a 40 year warranty.

All set! Well nearly.

Sensible concerns were expressed about the blackthorn adjacent to the site. Would the roots or suckers penetrate the pond liner? We shall have to wait and see. The hope is that the underlay & liner will not be easily penetrated, and if they are, the intruding material will form a reasonable seal if it passes through.

There is also a debate as to whether the pond will be an open system with its own flora & fauna or a sterile water container.

Ironically the heavy and persistent rain, (that we want to harvest) that seems to have fallen consistently until early March, has prevented Mike from entering the field to move the tool shed and dig the hole.

With the better weather perhaps Mike will be able to get into the field or alternatively we could hire a digger for the weekend and get it done.

Jake

Recipes:

Here are a couple of ideas of how our one plentiful green vegetable, kale, may be used.

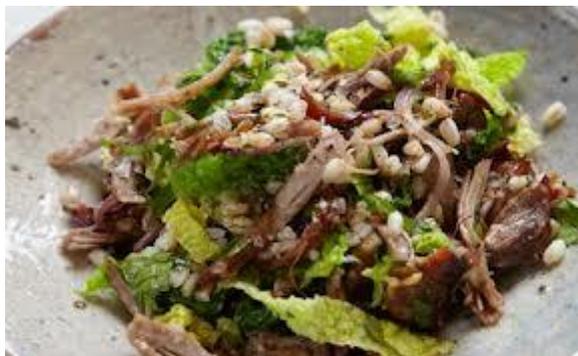
Kale Speltotto. (from Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall.)

Ingredients:

1 litre vegetable stock
50gm butter
2tbs rapeseed/olive oil
1 onion and 1 clove of garlic, finely chopped
A few sprigs of thyme leaves, chopped
2-3 medium leeks or equivalent
About 150gm kale or spring greens
300gm pearled spelt (obtainable from Bon Gout in Magdalen Road)
125ml white wine (optional)
50gm hard cheese, grated
Seasoning to taste

Method:

With half the butter and oil, the onion, garlic, spelt, wine and stock make a



'speltotto' as you would a 'risotto' but allowing about 25 minutes until the spelt is tender but still has 'bite'.

Meanwhile sweat the leeks in remaining butter and oil, steam or wilt the

greens.

Stir the leeks, greens and grated cheese into the finished speltotto, season to taste and serve with extra cheese on top if wanted.

Kale and Mushroom Lasagne

This is another way of using kale.

Make as you would any other lasagne, using a béchamel sauce and fairly equal quantities of kale and mushrooms.



Margaret.