

Greenspace Groups Forum no. 12

Meeting held 08/06/15 at Claver Hill growing project, Lancaster

Present: Andrew Halladay and Stuart Hunt (Whalley Fields), Louise Belcher (Thwaite Brow Nature Reserve), Pete Turnbull (Barley Cop Woods) , Peter Turnbull (Barley Cop Woods), Kathy Barton and Caroline Jackson (Claver Hill), Sarah Blackler (Greaves Park), Simon Gershon (Lancaster Green Spaces), Dave Brookes (Aldcliffe Road Triangle), Paul Bullimore (Community Forester), Hillary Smith (Williamson Park)

The meeting was preceded by a tour of the Claver Hill project which is behind Central High School; 36 acres was bought in 2013 and 6 acres has been put into a charitable trust. The remainder of the land had had 8,000 trees planted this season and also has two wildlife ponds. The local farmer is allowed use of two fields for cattle grazing and in return he has done some ploughing for the growing project.

The 6 acres donated to the growing project has a group of shared growers. Each visit they can take a carrier bag of veg. There are a lot of potatoes coming on, other crops include leek, chard, onion, garlic. Three shelter belts have been planted to protect the crops, mostly of willow but they include apple trees Two large polytunnels have recently gone up and there will be a functional compost toilet soon. A lockable container provides secure tool storage. A couple of other groups have also been allowed growing space.

The theme of this session was ' Creating an Edible Landscape'

There is a wide diversity of involvement with edibles, with current voluntary groups. Most groups do not cultivate any specific edibles for human visitors, but of course in managing their areas for wildlife, they are doing so for lots of non-human species. Some groups have just a few edibles, such as fruit trees or bushes. A few groups are primarily about creating open-source nutrition, such as Incredible Edible Lancaster.

Plants which have been bred to put more of their energy into the parts we like to eat, are usually a bit more delicate than their wild counterparts. Fruit tree branches break more easily than people expect, and over-picked rhubarb will not survive. Formative pruning is needed while fruit trees are getting established; this requires some prior knowledge. Many perennial edibles bear fruit on first or second year growth so need annual pruning to stimulate this, and removal of old woody shoots. An extreme example are grapes, which can be very productive in a sunny spot, but need pruning back each year, and the new shoots tying in as they grow.

Some plants are very reliable e.g. blackcurrants, jostaberries

Some plants can be more prolific than we want, so need containing (e.g. mint) or regular hard pruning. Using forest gardening and permaculture design principles, we can create a balanced and highly productive area with a wide variety of plants occupying different physical and temporal spaces. This creates a woodland ecosystem, but substitutes non-edible plants with edible ones. So tall and short trees, tall and small shrubs, ground cover, climbing plants and underground ones. Best books on the subject are probably 'How to make a forest garden' by Patrick Whitefield, and 'Creating a forest garden' by Martin Crawford'.

Foraging is increasing in popularity and is probably something to encourage, as it brings more people into contact and appreciation of nature. But not if too much is taken – education is needed, including what to avoid. Blackthorn sloes, brambles, elderflowers and elderberries are always popular, some people make jelly and cordial from hawthorn berries. New growth in spring is less tough, and more nutritious e.g.

use lime tree leaves in a salad, or make soup from nettle tips. Many flowers are edible, such as chrysanthemums and nasturtiums.

Domesticated versions of wild edibles are widely available, such as thornless blackberries and larger hazelnuts. Raspberries are a native woodland edge plant, adapted to keeping ahead of the trees that will shade them out. Dark cherries, wild garlic and rhubarb are adapted to the shade – in general the sweeter the fruit, the more sun it needs to ripen.

Keeping animals such as chickens and ducks is possible but needs commitment – Bowerham allotments has a chicken club with 14 members, who each do 1 day a fortnight on chicken duty. Bees are possible but bee-keeping is not easy! Bees are unlikely to be successful near public places. You may want to encourage bees for preservation and pollination benefits, rather than honey. In either case you should encourage plants that between them offer a year-round food supply. Some groups have created signed 'bee trails'; others have built habitats for solitary bees.

Fungi growing has had mixed results. Most reliable method is to buy plugs of known variety, put into holes drilled into newly cut logs of the appropriate type for the fungi species. But even then does not always work. But if you buy 'spent' mushroom compost from Drinkwaters, you will get several free mushroom crops!

Japanese Knotweed continues to be invasive; it appears that grounds maintenance people often do not tell Paul Cocker when they see it, so it is important to inform him directly. You can make a nutritional syrup by boiling down the stalks, but it is illegal to transport it. There are bamboos which grow well here and whose new shoots are edible, but you will need to ensure that it does not likewise become invasive. An excellent mail-order supplier generally is [Burncoose Nurseries](#).

Many herbs are easy to grow and are either perennial or self-seeding. They often originate from the Mediterranean so prefer sunny/sandy locations.

We did not mention this at the meeting, but you may want to include medicinal plants –before the invention of pharmaceutical chemicals, nearly all medicines were derived directly from plants, and common names often reflect this e.g. feverfew

The next Greenspace groups meeting will be on Monday July 20th, 7.15pm at the Storey Gardens, Lancaster. The theme will be 'Improving public access'

This will be preceded by a tour of the site, meeting at 6.30pm. NB The entrance to the gardens is at the back of the Storey, opposite the main castle gates.