

In praise of the humble allotment

Contributed by Dunc

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In these days of soaring house prices and land speculation, of globalization and high rise living, it is all too easy to despair at the availability of fresh vegetables or a place to grow your own. To those of us who are fed up with tasteless tomatoes and limp lettuce it can sometimes seem like a losing battle. But even in the year 2004 there is still a beacon of slightly earthy hope. The humble allotment.

Firstly, I must confess that I am not a veteran gardener or allotment holder. In fact at the time of writing I have been the proud tenant of plot 23, Cemetery allotments for just over two months. Obviously, I have not had a chance to even taste the first fruit or veg from the plot yet, though I have my eye on the rhubarb left by a previous tenant. I'm not discouraged though, if you'll forgive the pun these two months have not been entirely fruitless.

From the first moment my wife and I called in to view the allotment, we were amazed at how welcoming and friendly everyone was. When the secretary showed me around the plot, he obviously didn't see 40 feet by 15 feet of barren earth, populated only by a few struggling rhubarb plants and a half-built greenhouse frame. He saw the finished greenhouse, one which would be finished with the help of the other allotment holders, he saw a plot filled with fresh plants and fruit bushes, to be helped along with seedlings and cuttings from his own plot. His enthusiasm was infectious and as he introduced me to a few of the other plot holders, I realized he was not alone. This was a small community who really were working together to a common goal.

By my second week on the plot I had received donations of a door for the greenhouse, enough timber to complete the frame and a reminder that membership of the allotment society entitled me to a discount at a local builder's merchants where I could get the rest of my materials. By the time the frame was finished I had volunteers to help with covering the structure, and the offer of more seedlings to give me a head start when the time was right. More recently I have been digging over the plot, planting raspberry canes and

gooseberry bushes. I could not believe the satisfaction to be gained not just from a few hours digging in the spring sunshine but from the approving nod and "good work" I received from one of the plot veterans.

In 1998 a parliamentary report considered the merits of allotments, and their praise was high indeed. Apart from the obvious benefits of fresh fruit and vegetables, the report referred to the health benefits of exercise in tending an allotment and the sense of community fostered around the plot. The report stated that an allotment enabled people from many different backgrounds and races to come together with a common purpose. There are

environmental benefits too, from the "green lung" effect of the plants and trees to the recycling culture which is fundamental to allotment keeping.

I warn you now, allotments would appear to be addictive. I no longer daydream about a lazy afternoon in the pub or the previous weekend's football. I catch myself planning the next row of spinach, or wondering how the chilli seedlings are coping. Some of the best plots on the site are occupied by people with only a few years experience of gardening, and there is good sport to be had in arguing the merits of different approaches. We're all looking forward to seeing the result of an ambitious "pile o' spuds" made from a stack of used tires.

The allotment is a grand tradition in British life, and the waiting lists with some councils are testament to its enduring popularity. It is a chance for so many people to have a go, to get their hands dirty in an enjoyable effort to produce at least a small part of their own food requirements. In the process they will be able to enjoy fresh air, exercise, good company and still help the environment. They will be able to look forward to the freshest strawberries in summer, and the plumpest pumpkins in autumn. I am delighted to be one of those people and I'm off now to check on that rhubarb.

{modulebot module=googlecontent} The autumn update.

As the autumn storms rattle the windows and the frost lies in wait around the next corner, I have time to reflect on my first year as a plot-holder on the cemetery allotments. I can honestly say that my first growing season has been everything I could have hoped for. The frustrations have been outweighed by the successes, the irritations pale into insignificance next to the enjoyment.

I have been delighted to find that when I plant things, they will grow. Not every time, but at least the fears that I would be a complete failure have been pushed aside by bumper crops of potatoes, tomatoes, chillis, spinach and raspberries. I have not had to buy potatoes or onions in months, and I am enjoying a solid crop of leeks throughout the current months (and expect to keep harvesting through to Christmas).

The promised assistance with the greenhouse arrived, when required, and it was this which housed the tomatoes. When I lost the door to the October storms last week, it was one of my new found friends who shored it up until I was able to make a new door. The fabled "pile o' spuds" was not a great success, indeed my own crop inspired some jealousy, blessed as I was by beginners luck.

Once again, I cannot recommend an allotment strongly enough. Taken in isolation it can offer so much, and as a first step towards independence of food production it can provide priceless lessons.

Duncan Arthur