

SOUTH EAST ESSEX ORGANIC GARDENERS

NEWSLETTER NO: 125 – JANUARY 2016

<http://seeog.org.uk/>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/43705483846/>



SEEEOG was formed in 1994, to promote the principles of organic gardening by:

- Composting organic waste
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- Protecting wildlife Reducing pollution
- Encouraging species diversity



Soil Association

Membership is currently £8.00 per annum, £12.00 family.

Is your local school a member of SEEEOG? If not, we offer free membership on receipt of application form!

Venue, notes etc.

The Cheryl Centre, Growing Together Westcliff: please use the entrance in Prittlewell Chase, Westcliff-on-Sea SS0 9AG (corner of Fairfax Drive and Prittlewell Chase).

We want to know if you have difficulty with transport as we can then try to coordinate a lift for you.

Unless stated otherwise, our speakers start at 8.00pm sharp, but Growing Together is open from 7.00pm to prepare the room, etc.

The next committee meeting is on Thursday 14 January at Jane's, starting at 7.30pm. STILL WANTED: Minutes Secretary!

Please notify Graham Oster-Ritter if you wish to receive your newsletter by post/email, or to change your email address: grahamoster@btinternet.com

For future reference, our newsletter copy 'deadlines' for 2016 are as follows:

March	Sunday 28 February
May	Saturday 30 April
July	Saturday 30 June
September	Tuesday 30 August
November	Sunday 30 October

Monday 16 November 2015

'Can't tell you how much we enjoyed last evening. So informative and well presented. We grow nearly every form of soft fruit you can think of, so as you can imagine, we were like sponges soaking it all up! Well done! Thank you! Mike and Gill' – well, we have to blow our trumpet some of the time!!

Monday 18 January: The Restoration of Shopland Churchyard

Steve Oakley and Faye Owen are the founders of The Friends of Shopland Churchyard. Following a trip to Jenny Murrell's campsite at Shopland Hall Equestrian Centre in September 2013 (very much recommended if you are a camper), they stumbled across the Churchyard. The site has an incredible magnetism and air of peacefulness but was in a terrible state of disrepair. An enthusiastic team has been granted the relevant permissions to restore the site to its former glory.

Saturday 27 February: SE Essex Seed Potato Day: 10.00am - 2.00pm

Venue: Growing Together Westcliff

Please use the entrance in Prittlewell Chase, Westcliff-on-Sea SS0 9AG (corner of Fairfax Drive and Prittlewell Chase).

This event is organised and run entirely by volunteers from both SEEEOG and Trust Links.

With the best will in the world, however, your hard-working (and depleted) committee cannot 'do its bit' without more volunteers from SEEEOG! There are gazebos to collect and put up, potatoes and onions to be set out, etc. etc., not to mention going to Growing Together the day before to assist with the tidying and setting out the tables in the polytunnel. Please do volunteer whatever help you can and help to publicise the event by way of our Potato Day poster, etc.

We will be selling approximately 40 varieties of seed potato (some organic), sold individually at 15p per tuber, plus:

Stuttgart Giant and Turbo onion sets: 70p per half pound
Organic fertiliser: £1.30 per pound

Please check website for updates: <http://seeog.org.uk/>

Free admission Refreshments available

First Early seed potatoes ordered for February 2016 - harvest around July

First Early varieties are quick-growing, cropping in around ten weeks. Not recommended for storage; a good choice to avoid potato late blight.

Accent, Colleen (organic), Epicure, Foremost, Home Guard, Lady Cristl, Orla (organic), Red Duke of York, Rocket, Ulster Prince (also good drought resistance), Ulster Sceptre, Winston

Second Early seed potatoes ordered for February 2016 - harvest around August

Second Earlies can be eaten young as new potatoes or left to grow bigger, and lifted as required for fresh Summer use, or storage.

Anya, Blue Kestrel, Bonnie, British Queen (organic), Charlotte (organic), Kestrel, Marfona, Maris Peer (organic), Salad Blue, Wilja

Early Maincrop seed potatoes ordered for February 2016 - harvest around September

Amour, Apache, Bambino (organic), Blue Belle, Desiree (organic), Highland Burgundy Red, International Kidney, Maris Piper, Nicola, Pentland Dell, Picasso, Rooster, Setanta (organic)

Late Maincrop seed potatoes ordered for February 2016 - harvest around September/October

These varieties take the longest time to grow, and will give large yields of potatoes which can be stored for several months.

Arrran Victory (organic), Cara (organic), Golden Wonder (organic), Kerr's Pink, Linda (organic), Pink Fir Apple, Sarpo Axona, Sarpo Mira (organic), Valor

We cannot, of course, guarantee that all we have ordered will be available on delivery and we therefore ask you to check our website regularly for updates: <http://seeog.org.uk>

Monday 21 March: Henry Webber, Mistletoe Trees

Mistletoe Trees is a small business and hobby, selling crab apple trees with mistletoe already growing on them. Mistletoe is such a fascinating plant and there is still much to learn about it! From mistletoe to mapping soil variation, Henry's talk will also include a brief outline of his PhD integrating archaeology, soil science and precision agriculture! Don't miss out!

Monday 16 May: Pesticide Action Network UK

Dr Keith Tyrell from PAN UK will be talking about the pesticide-free towns and cities movement across the world and how communities are working to help pollinators in the face of government inaction.

www.pan-uk.org/pesticide-free

Wednesday 4 June: Essex Schools Food & Farming Day, Writtle College

Monday 18 July: 'Garden Organic's Vision for the Future'

The Chief Executive, James Campbell, an organic grower for 30 years, and with many years' experience in sustainability, will talk about the role of Garden Organic in the 21st century"

Garden Organic represents organic growers and gardeners - especially ordinary gardeners and allotment holders, community groups and not-for-profit growers - to protect and preserve the rights of organic horticulture, and to resist attempts to restrict and contain organic growing.

They work with a wide variety of like-minded organisations to promote the benefits of organic growing for plants, people and communities, to share best practice and to engage hard-to-reach and disadvantaged communities in organic growing practice, backed by scientific research supporting a range of beneficial outcomes. Not to be missed!!

Monday 19 September

Ben Lambert, Crapes Fruit Farm

Saturday 8 October: Apple Day at St. Laurence Orchard, 11:00 to 15:00

Monday 21 November: English Saffron

Speaker still awaiting confirmation - otherwise SEEOG panel 'Carry on Composting – The cornerstone of organic gardening'.

Allotment Bird Survey 2016

Over the last couple of months we have been liaising with the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) about bird survey methods that might work well on allotments and have now concluded that their "BirdTrack" method seems the most appropriate method of the BTO surveys which are explained here at BTO Core Surveys:

<http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/core-surveys>

Setting up a BirdTrack user account (it's free) is easy and just needs a contact name, an email address and optionally a "group name", perhaps "Such-and-such allotment birders". There is plenty of on-line help and advice on their website:

<http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/birdtrack/taking-part/quick-set-guide>

Graham Adamson gave BirdTrack a quick "dry run". He created his own account and two sites, the first centred on his allotment and another centred on a portion of the local Promenade.

Creating a site was done from the left hand "Your Options" menu via "Sites/Create new site".

The BirdTrack website utilises Google Earth to locate the intended site, then a "shift + click" brought in the grid reference and then it was just a case of giving the site a name and recording the birds seen.

You get a one km square for your site, which seems to fit the BTO grid, and he was lucky in that it enclosed the whole of his allotment site apart from the clubhouse.

It is possible to have larger squares with, of course, no obligation to observe in every sq metre.

Observations were recorded after selecting, from the left menu, "Add Records/Casual" and then, from the Casual Records Form, selecting your site and entering the observations line by line.

Observations will, hopefully, come from several people, perhaps by word-of-mouth, email or 'post-it' and so there might be a need for some "administration" in garnering and collating to avoid double counting.

When starting to type a name under "Species", you are prompted with some suggestions; then the rest is bird identification skills.

As for getting the observations back from the system, please see 'Help Exploring Your Records':

<http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/birdtrack/taking-part/viewing-your-life-and-year-lists>

Again from the left menu, "My Records"/"Explore my records", a search by site and date, then downloading the results via the green cross icon at top right of the list.

Graham viewed the results in OpenOffice and obtained a spreadsheet and a "view in web browser", both of which seemed presentable to him.

Weekly or monthly lists by site can be printed out.

All in all, an easy to use and useful system with probably more features yet to discover.

The GBW and BBS options are available where desired by the participating volunteers:

BTO Garden BirdWatch (GBW): <http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/gbw>

BTO Breeding Bird Survey (BBS): <http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/bbs>

Broader wildlife links:

Hedges for Wildlife:

<http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/wt-main.live.drupal.precedenthost.co.uk/files/files/HedgesforWildlife.pdf>

Wildlife Trusts Consultancies – local knowledge, national delivery
<http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/how-you-can-help/working-business/ecology-consultancy>

For more information, please email both ga.adamson@gmail.com and caroleshorney@hotmail.com for the time being.

Allotment news from NAS

1. The 2016 Annual General Meeting of the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners Ltd will be held on Saturday 4 June 2016 at the Royal York Hotel & Events Centre, Station Road, York, YO24 1AA. Nominations and Motions for the 2016 AGM must be presented on the appropriate form and received by the Head Office at Corby by 2 January 2016.

<http://www.visit-york.org/natsoc@nsalg.org.uk>

2. The Edible Garden Show, the UK's ultimate grow-your-own event, is returning to its roots in 2016 along with Good Life Live, a fantastic lifestyle event. After two successful years at London's Alexandra Palace, the award-winning three-day annual show returns to Stoneleigh Park in Warwickshire.

How about organising a trip from your site to the show?

When booking 10 or more tickets, you get to purchase your tickets at just £8 per ticket and for every 10 booked you get another ticket free of charge. For example: If you want 15 tickets, you will pay a total of £112. Saving £128 on their door prices!

3. A new study by researchers at the Universities of Westminster and Essex has found that even a small amount of participation in allotment gardening can have significant benefits on health. Their findings were published in the Journal of Public Health.

The authors concluded that allotment gardening "could contribute to a greener and healthier economy focused on the prevention of ill-health. This preventative approach could result in substantial savings to the UK economy, particularly in the treatment of health conditions such as mental illness, obesity, cardiovascular disease and loneliness."

<http://www.nsalg.org.uk/news/just-half-an-hour-in-the-allotment-can-have-physical-and-mental-health-benefits/>

4. The theme for National Allotments Week 2016 (8 to 14 August) will be "Growing Together" and the NAS will be looking for case studies that show the inclusivity of allotment gardening:

Disabled gardening

Inter-generational knowledge sharing

Bio-diversity on the plot

World Food from the plot

Gardening practice from other cultures

Grow, Cook, Share

Please get in touch if you can tell them about your project or site - they are looking for some great images to use in posters to be displayed at garden shows in 2016. diane@nsalg.org.uk

Chase Organics & The Organic Gardening Catalogue

Dori Halliday (PR & Marketing) has kindly said that she would be very happy to help out with donations of seeds for our members to trial – perhaps there are some specific varieties that you would like to sample and they'd be happy to arrange. And please update us later, for a future issue!

dori.halliday@chaseorganics.co.uk

<http://www.organiccatalogue.com/>

Crapes Fruit Farm: Andrew Tann's December update

It is so unusual not to suffer with chilled and chapped fingers whilst sorting and packing apples during December. By now, we have looked at just a few apples and the effects of the warm days and heavy rains just before and during picking are showing, as the fruit is maturing early, including the Sturmer Pippin, which you will remember were harvested two weeks earlier than usual last month.

The best apples are now all gone. For those hoping for a last pack in the New Year, we can only manage pack III economy while stocks last.

Thoughts now turn to the behaviour of the trees themselves as their root systems will not have received any chilling influence yet, and the daylight hours will soon be extending again. So, carefully with the pruning otherwise there is the risk of them responding with a lot of growth at the expense of blossom quality and fruit numbers. Also, with this warmth and damp there is an increased risk of canker infection around the pruning cuts.

Never mind the weather we *might* see ahead, that which has occurred during recent months is likely to have considerable influence on 2016 results.

<https://crapes.wordpress.com/>

Ben's Diploma site is at: <http://dreadbensdiploma.weebly.com/index.html> - just hover over Projects at the top of the screen to view each of one.

Farmers' Markets 2016

These are the two markets where we have a stall and always appreciate help, produce and plants where available!

Leigh-on-Sea (buy fresh, keep it local!) at Leigh Community Centre, 71-73 Elm Road, Leigh-on-Sea, 09:00 to 12:00, apart from December, 08:30:

Fridays on 19 February, 18 March, 15 April, 20 May, 17 June, 15 July, 19 August, 16 September, 21 October, 18 November; Saturday 17 December, 08:30 start

Regular stalls*:

Sarah Green's Organics:	Organic vegetables
Highfield Farm:	Beef from rare breed cows
Ann Cushion:	Local honey
Hilltop Farm:	Soft fruit and top fruit in season
Rhyne Park Farm:	Pork from famous breeds
Liz Smith:	Garden plants in summer months
Chillichutneyman:	Chutneys and sauces
Elixirs of Life:	Skin care products from natural sources
Brown Bread:	Bread and pastries
And SEEORG!	Plants and information

* As at November 2015; others throughout the year

Rochford at the WI Hall, West Street, 09:30 to 12:00:

Saturdays on 6 February, 5 March, 2 April, 7 May and 4 June – further dates to follow for the rest of the year

Regular stalls:

Roots & Shoots, Rochford	Fresh vegetables, fruit and bedding plants
Rhyne Park Farm	Pork, chicken, bacon and sausages
Leigh's Fine Cheeses	British and Continental cheeses, fresh baked savoury pies
Highfield Farm	Free range eggs, beef and homemade cakes
Donald Swinburne	Wide range of homemade chutneys
Ann Cushion	Selection of honey and related bee products from local hives
Mena's Indian Foods	Homemade samosas, bhaji, curry and spice mixes
GlennGarry Family Bakers	Variety of traditional loaves, cakes and pastries
And SEEORG!	Plants and information

Garden Organic news: date for your diary!

Their AGM and Members' Day will be held at the Green Britain Centre, Swaffham, Norfolk, on Thursday 12 May 2016. They will send our invitations with the Spring/Summer issue of The Organic Way.

GMWatch Review 363 – items of interest

1. Venezuela passes national anti-GMO and anti-patent seed law: Venezuela's National Assembly has approved a draft Seed Law, which provides that the state shall promote sustainable agriculture as the strategic basis for food security. The rule seeks to consolidate national food sovereignty, regulate the production of hybrid seed, and reject the production, distribution, and import of GM seeds. The new law has taken years of collective grassroots effort to construct and has been through a public consultation. The law proposes the creation of a national seed institution, which will audit and control the seed supply in order to prevent, identify, and punish violations of the GMO ban.

The new institution will protect peasant seed, which has long formed part of the culture of the people and which is the product of natural cross-breeding.

2. The new report on GM insects by the UK House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee reads like an advertisement for the British GM insect company Oxitec. It is also a crude lobbying attempt at weakening Europe's GMO regulations. The report says Britain has a "moral duty" to carry out a field trial of GM insects, which could be a weapon against some infectious diseases and agricultural pests. It attacks Europe's GMO regulations as holding back progress in this field.

In fact GM insects are proving far less popular with governments around the world than with these irresponsible House of Lords committee members. Out of several countries that have hosted Oxitec's open air GM insect trials, only Brazil appears to be continuing with them, according to a Genewatch UK report.

So it's understandable that Oxitec is desperate to open up new markets for its unpopular and risky technology. But it's disappointing that the Select Committee is operating in the role of the company's salesman.

You can carry on reading at: <http://www.gmwatch.org/>

Manure/Compost

This information is now on our website, apart from updates, of course, which we trust won't inconvenience too many people.

Members' contributions

1. Simon and Mary, now living on the island of Gozo, are feeling their way as to what will (and won't grow) - though they've found a really helpful website from a gardener based on Cyprus, where the climate and conditions are similar to here - and it is proving most helpful. Though chatting to the local farmers and looking around plots is also very instructive!!

<http://www.cyprusgardener.co.uk/>

2. Interesting to see the views/perceptions of Gozitan farmers detailed on Climate Change. The full report can be read via this link - and it is worth a look (Simon)

<http://gozonews.com/59791/perception-attitude-of-gozitan-farmers-towards-climate-change-study/>

3. And something else...

<http://gozonews.com/59511/maltese-bees-buzz-commonwealth-summit-new-report-on-saving-bees/>

4. Plus a new report on waste prevention:

<http://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/waste-prevention-in-europe-2015>

5. Scientists say they have found the "missing link" in the debate over the risk of pesticides to bees:

<http://focusingonwildlife.com/news/bees-and-pesticides-missing-link-found/>

6. A few Garden Design Trends from 2014 were the following ... from Darren

1) Good soil, water and food will become treasured.

2) Meadow mixes will be used more.

3) More focus on plants.

4) Don't landfill.

5) Use large planters.

All sounds sensible, right? Try reading what 2015's garden design trends brought us...

<http://modernmint.co.uk/garden-design-trends-2015/>

And lastly, what will you be doing for your garden in 2016?

7. Back in the Winter of 1947-48, we might now be hoping to order our Fowler's Soil Sterilizer, which 'will destroy all insect pests, weed seeds, spores and fungi, without harming the soil bacteria necessary to the growth of plants, seeds, etc.' Any reminiscences here? (Carole)

8. 'Did you know that it is best to sow seed during a waxing moon? That garlic deters greenfly from roses? That hollyhocks thrive on beer? It was not actually an Old Wife who told us to put hair in the

bottom of a trench when planting beans, but a hairdresser who abandoned his salon to go round the countryside doing the hair of invalids and elderly pensioners in their own homes'.
Courtesy of Old Wives' Lore for Gardeners by Maureen & Bridget Boland

New members

When you join SEEEOG, not a lot will happen in the beginning. If you join on Group Night, you can collect a current newsletter from Carole, our Secretary. Alternatively, you can download a newsletter from SEEEOG's website at <http://seeog.org.uk/resources-information/newsletters/> - our website will also give you lots of useful information. In future, you will receive a newsletter bi-monthly either by email or post. We do not issue receipts or membership cards at present in order to keep down costs.

Pesticide Action Network UK and news from Toronto

PAN UK has recently launched a new campaign to end the use of pesticides in towns and cities. They know it is possible; hundreds of towns around the world have already gone pesticide free and France has introduced a law that will ban the use of all non-agricultural pesticides by 2020. PAN UK wants to see the same in the UK.

More information on their campaign can be found at <http://www.pan-uk.org/pesticide-free-towns-and-cities/>

However, they need help: as part of their campaign, they have set up a petition on the Prime Minister's website – they need 10,000 signatures to get a response from the government.

Please could you sign the petition and ask your friends and other contacts to sign, too. Your support and assistance is greatly appreciated.

The petition can be found at the following link and it only takes 40 seconds to complete - <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/109257>. The deadline is 29 March 2016.

How Toronto's Pesticide By-law Cut Use and Protected Citizens: Is legislation an effective tool to reduce human exposure to potentially harmful pesticides? This case study from Toronto clearly shows it is. It also offers some lessons for UK towns and cities wishing to follow Toronto's example and restrict the use of pesticides in the interest of human health.

The Canadian city of Toronto introduced a pesticide by-law in 2003 with the aim of reducing public exposure to pesticides. This in turn led onto a wider Province-wide pesticide Regulation across the whole of Ontario.

This case study examines the steps Toronto took to introduce the by-law, assesses whether it has been successful and identifies lessons for other towns and cities trying to protect their citizens from pesticide exposure. <http://www.pan-uk.org/images/pft/toronto-pesticide-bylaw.pdf>

Publications

1. 'Tradescants' Orchard' is the name given to a leather bound volume of over 60 water-colours of varieties of different fruits painted in the 17th century and held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. These pictures, which are often seen reproduced on postcards, notelets and so on published by the Bodleian, were the subject of a book in 2013 by Dr. Barrie Juniper and Dr. Hanneke Grootenboer: *Tradescants' Orchard, the Mystery of a Seventeenth-Century Fruit Book*.

The authors explored many avenues of investigation in pursuit of the origin and purpose of the paintings, but the most intriguing question remained – who was responsible for painting the fruit pictures? Now, Dr. Juliet Ralph of the Bodleian and Dr. Juniper believe they have solved the mystery and their findings were published in a recent issue of *Oxford Today* (Vol 27, No 2, 2015).

<https://fruitforum.wordpress.com/2015/11/02/tradescants-orchard-who-painted-the-pictures/>

2. You can now buy Spiralseed's The Vegan Book of Permaculture, Permaculture A Beginners Guide, an exclusive Salvage™ Spiralseed T-shirt plus extra booklets and greetings card for the special price of £39.95, including postage and packing!

<http://spiralseed.co.uk/products-page/product-category/spiralseed-special-gift-package/#sthash.uRRdE0DC.dpuf>

SEEOG library

Please contact us if you wish to change your books. Any book may be borrowed by members at a cost of 20p per book for each 2-month period. We would very much like to hear from anyone who could take out a few of the books from the cupboard and set them out on Group Night – there are some good titles in that cupboard, including the new one that hasn't yet seen the light of day!

SEEOG talks

Monday 1 February 2016: Lavers & District Horticultural Society

Soil Association news: 'From Potato to Planet' - watch their new soil film They've made the film with Aardman Animations (the people behind Wallace & Gromit and Shaun the Sheep) and, as well as helping us understand the importance of soil to the planet, it also shines a spotlight on the role organic farming and shopping can play in protecting our soils.

They want to get people talking about soil and organic so please share it with your friends, families and colleagues, and encourage them to share it again!

<http://www.soilassociation.org/soilfilm>

South Essex Natural History Society's meetings

Thursday 28 January, 2-4pm: Members' contributions at Beecroft Art Gallery, Victoria Avenue, Southend-on-Sea SS2 6EX

Wednesday, 9 March, 7-10pm: Inter-Society Quiz at Avenue Baptist Church Milton Road, Westcliff-on-Sea SS0 7JX

Everyone is welcome - free entry

For further details, please contact their Chairman, Pat Wortley – 01702 588115 or email

pjwortley@btinternet.com

'Three Acres And A Cow show

We are currently liaising with the Producer, Robin Grey, about the possibility of a co-promoted event between Squeezebox Folk and SEEOG, which would frame the event nicely and mean that it would get out to a wide range of people in the area between our two networks.

'Three Acres And A Cow' connects the Norman Conquest and Peasants' Revolt with current issues like fracking, the housing crisis and food sovereignty movement via the Enclosures, English Civil War, Irish Land League and Industrial Revolution, drawing a compelling narrative through the radical people's history of Britain in folk song, stories and poems.

Part TED talk, part history lecture, part folk club sing-a-long, part poetry slam, part storytelling session... Come and share in these tales as they have been shared for generations.

I think we're looking to April/May now, so that there is plenty of lead time – but keep looking out for updates!

<http://threeacresandacow.co.uk/about/>

<http://squeezeboxfolk.com/about/>

Trust Links events

1. Sunday 7 February, 13:30-15:00: Wassailing at St Laurence Orchard
2. Saturday 27 February, 10:00-14:00: Seed Potato Day at Growing Together Westcliff
3. Saturday 14 May, 11:00-14:00: May Fayre at Growing Together Westcliff
4. Saturday 2 July, Colourthon at Chalkwell Park (in aid of Trust Links, of course)
5. Saturday 8 October, 11:00-15:00: Apple Day at St Laurence Orchard
6. Saturday 26 November, 11:00-14:00: Christmas Fayre at Growing Together Westcliff

They will no doubt announce events at Growing Together Shoeburyness and Growing Together Thundersley in due course! Their new website is <http://www.trustlinks.org/>

Websites & information

In this video, courtesy of The Permaculture Association, Rosemary Morrow talks about working "with the earth and its systems without running them down."

<https://knowledgebase.permaculture.org.uk/resources/videos/rosemary-morrow-cutting-edge>

Gozo Growing #1 (January 2016)

Just over three months ago we moved 1300 miles from Westcliff-on-Sea to start a new life on the island of Gozo. This smaller, greener sister island to neighbouring Malta measures roughly 14 km long by 7.25km (67 square km or about the same size as Manhattan). The island has a sub-tropical Mediterranean climate and is located just south of Sicily enjoying very mild winters and warm/ hot summers with long hours of daylight, even during the winter (10.3 hours in January).

Part of the plan was to rent or buy some land nearby our house and grow organic fruit and vegetables. Ahead of the move, our good friends in the village of Qala bought a small piece of land, and asked if we would/could help them clear it, and in return have free use of part of the land.

Handily, the plot is literally at the bottom of our garden and accessed by a right of way across neighbouring fields and past a stand of Olive and Pomegranate trees. Roughly square-shaped, the plot measures approximately 40 foot across by 65 foot long, with sea views over neighbouring fields and beehives to the North, and the village windmill to the South. We also get to hear the nearby church bells of both Nadur and Hondoq, along with donkeys, sheep, goats, competing cockerels and song birds all adding to the audio mix. We also enjoy the regular company of Albert, our plot Chameleon-in-residence.

The land is surrounded by traditional limestone "rubble" walls, similar to those you find in Yorkshire. The free-draining humus sandy soil is called "red earth" locally, but it also has lots of stones and both the soil depth and quality varies across the site – in places the island's limestone bedrock is just below the surface. There is no immediate source of water on the plot.

Our friends generously undertook a lot of the initial heavy duty clearing work. It was very overgrown and to begin with it was not possible to see from one side of the plot to the other! According to the neighbours the field had not been cultivated since the 1970's, so the land reverted to type i.e. large stands of Prickly Pear, collapsed boundary walls, lots of thistles, perennial and annual weeds, (such as Bahamas Buttercup), wild flowers, daffodils, herbs, all surrounding half a dozen neglected almond trees.

We began by repairing the surrounding rubble walls, which serve several roles; protecting crops from strong, cool, northerly winds, retaining the soil during the heavy winter rain showers and acting like plot storage heaters, releasing warmth gradually, allowing early crops to ripen quicker. A lot of the clearing work involved hard graft, axes and chainsaws - Prickly Pear roots are deep and the very fine hairs on their cactus pads are very difficult to remove from your fingers. (Tip: remove the hairs using parcel tape).

We established a large composting area in the North West corner of the plot under the large neighbouring Carob tree, using deconstructed skip pallets free from the local Cash and Carry, some sturdy metal rods and a retaining "fence" made from some chunky pieces of Prickly Pear root. We created gabion seats using some of the many small stones and chicken wire, and also pruned the Almond trees - though it turns out they are Bitter Almonds containing toxic Prussic Acid when eaten in their raw state, though the spring blossom will be attractive to the bees nearby!

Using more pallets and some recycled wooden pine doors from our house, we sandwiched a shed between two large plastic water tanks (previously containing fruit juice concentrate). The tanks will be filled with rainwater - when it rains, using a pipe collection system from the roof of nearby apartments.

Our friends are using surplus concrete blocks to create a series of super raised beds at the North end of the plot and we've adopted a raised bed system on the South side, leaving a path around the walls (for wildlife and flowers). The digging and weeding is best done in small batches as temperatures during the day have been averaging between 18 – 24 degrees, whilst at night time it drops down, but still remaining in double figures. Since the start of September a mere 187.5mm of rain has fallen - typically we would expect over 300 mm by now.

Mulching, it seems, will be key to successful growing, and with that in mind we also brought a Hotbin composter with us from the UK, along with a water butt to collect rainwater from our house roof and balconies. We are also using grey water from the kitchen on our seedlings and emerging vegetable plants.

We also have a ready supply of "vintage" manure, as the village shepherd keeps flocks of both sheep and goats. Quality dung is just a wheelbarrow trip away! – and we exchange this for some of the harvested fleshy leaves of the prickly pear: goats have a particularly liking for them. There is also a plentiful free supply of the Giant Reed (*Arundo donax*), so we will be able to set up bamboo-like frames for climbing French and Lab Lab beans later in the season. To date we have broad beans, potatoes, garlic, leeks, and peas all showing on the plot. Cabbages and Kohl Rabi and climbing Tomato plants are doing particularly

well, and we have just planted some lemon trees. Gozitan Bitter Oranges are also in plentiful supply - so marmalade production was in full operation over Xmas.

It was difficult to find any useful gardening books for Malta - so chatting to our new neighbours and farmers has proved really helpful, as has the very useful website by an organic gardener based on Cyprus - see <http://www.cyprusgardener.co.uk/>

If SEEEOG folk are interested, we'll share our future experiences as we learn to grow and garden organically here on sunny Gozo.

Simon & Mary Wallace, cats x2 and Albert the Chameleon
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