

BRIDPORT and DISTRICT ALLOTMENTS SOCIETY

Newsletter

Winter 2009-10

The Dreaded Leek Moth

Terry Porter, a new member of the Society, with an allotment at Skilling, wrote: "We are currently experiencing a problem with our leeks which seems to be affecting other plots also.

"We first noticed that the leaves were dying back and was unsure as to the cause, after a bit of research it appears to be a pest called Leek Moth which leaves a small grub burrowing into the stem of the leek working its way down the plant. We're advised that there is not much that can be done to prevent this other than covering with agricultural fleece during the growing cycle. This apparently also affects onions.

"This appears to be a pest that is moving northwards up the country."

Sue Jones, also at Skilling, wrote: "My leek crop is dismal. The few I have retrieved from the ravages of leek moth have been delicious but not really worth the effort. Perhaps I'll net them next year, does anyone know how big a leek moth is? Presumably pretty small, as there must have been plenty about, but I haven't noticed them lurking round the leeks."

Your Editor can report that on the Palmers allotments at Gundry Lane, the leek moth, otherwise known as *Acrolepiopsis assectella*, has been an ever-present pest for the past twenty years.

The only solutions I have found are (as Terry suggested) covering the plants with fleece (which does seem to slightly stunt growth, but certainly seems to keep off the moth), OR to find the slimy little grubs (I usually find about one per plant) and squeeze them out. This is a laborious and slightly unpleasant task, but the plants do seem to recover, although growth tends to be quite significantly affected. A decent frost seems to do the trick, but we tend not to get those until it's too late to save the leeks.

What does the moth look like and how big is it? Well I didn't know, but a kind Skilling correspondent has sent me some information from websites, including a photograph, so here it is!

It is described as "a small, inconspicuous, brown moth" (wingspan 12-15mm), while caterpillars are yellow-green with grey-brown patches and a yellowish brown head (up to 13mm long at maturity).



Acrolepiopsis assectella (leek moth)

The caterpillars pupate in white silk cocoons found within the foliage, and contain the reddish-brown pupae).

A fact sheet issued by the Horfield and District (North Bristol) Allotment Society, goes on to describe the life cycle of the leek moth:

"Adult moths overwinter in plant debris. As temperatures rise in the spring, the moths start to become active and egg laying begins in April and May. Each female may lay up to 100 eggs on host plants. The caterpillars hatch about a week later and tunnel into the leaves to feed. They mine the leaves, leaving the outer skin intact, eating down through the outer leaves to feed on the inner leaves and growing points of stems. On onions, they mine the hollow leaves, sometimes boring down into the bulb. The caterpillars feed for about a month before crawling back up the leaves to pupate in cocoons.

"The first generation of caterpillars causes damage in May and June. As these become adults and lay more eggs, a second generation of caterpillars emerges to cause damage from August to October. As populations rise through the summer, so plant damage increases through the growing season, being most noticeable in early autumn. Adult moths and pupae of the later generation hibernate in plant debris to overwinter, emerging in spring to start the cycle over again." Recommendations include later plantings, after May, to avoid the first generation of caterpillars, and encouraging predators, such as birds, bats, hedgehogs, frogs and beetles which will eat adult moths, pupae and caterpillars.

**Date of the next Allotments Society meeting: Thursday 3 December 2009
7.00 pm, NB: at MOUNTFIELD (Town Council offices), Bridport**

How was 2009 for you?

We have had such a great response this month that for lack of space, the Editor has had to cut or hold over some of the contributions for next time (though sadly no news from Flaxhayes). Apologies for cuts, and thank you to everyone who wrote in.

First, from the new Orchard allotment site, Laura:

As to successes and failures, I was someone who warned everyone that the cabbage whites would take over the **brassic**s if one didn't think of protection, and accordingly grew under fine nylon mesh sunk into the soil to be safe. Some netting sold as "butterfly netting" allows the cabbage whites to either get in or lay through the holes so I was careful to get mosquito netting - the cheapest came in attractive (ahem) pink and lilac, so my apologies for that shocking display.

There were no eggs laid on my broccoli, but soon one of the varieties was being totally stripped by the caterpillars. They had walked in, working their way through overlapping layers of netting (I'd had to use two pieces) which the butterflies had been unable to negotiate.

I suppose the lesson is, if the whole allotment site is inundated, due to unprotected crops being laid on, even *more* severe measures will have to be taken! I found the purple sprouting variety and the black nero kale, having had the caterpillars removed by hand, did come back and recover as they should do. I will probably aim to grow vulnerable plants through the winter in future to avoid the main butterfly season. My husband's suggestion of "caterpillar recipes" is logical but I'm not sure will have many supporters? There *is* an organic (nematode) control available, but at the moment, only on a commercial scale. This would require all allotment holders across Bridport to club together to buy it, which probably isn't viable.

I know we all suffered with the blight - perhaps we could let each other know which varieties came off best? It also seemed to matter when **potatoes** had been planted. We found that Rooster, almost ready to harvest, when hit by the blight, was hardly affected (we lifted the potatoes immediately). Young Devon reds we had put in rather late were totally wiped out.

Most of us probably found it "contrary" weather this year. I shaded and dragged water to new **strawberry** plants in severe heat, protected the crop from birds, and once they were heavy with ripe fruit, the deluges which brought blight to the potatoes, also unfortunately wiped out this crop with botritis. I wasn't too upset as I hadn't meant to get a crop from them in their first season and I'll take more care next time to pick fruit at the first signs of spoiling.

Great crops this year for us were **successional** carrots, beetroot, sugar snap peas and various varieties of beans (some of which did start to cross-pollinate by the end of the season and produced some strange mutants - purple and green blotched french beans with the skin of runners.)

I used some seeds which were trial varieties. I found white **beetroot** Alba to be slightly slower to grow than the traditional red, but produced huge roots eventually and tasted just as good, though I confess I grew a fair amount for my guinea pigs! A golden (non-trial) I tried was very attractive, producing sunset-coloured roots with very good flavour, again the price being paid in being a little less vigorous and slower to swell. (*more from Laura next time*)

Laura Dron



St Mary's Church Field, site of the new allotments

And from the Community allotment:

This new plot is set up to cater for all gardeners - or would-be gardeners - who would like to come and grow at our beautiful, supportive and accessible plot, which is fully equipped and largely on raised beds for easy gardening for all. We can be found on the new Community Orchard site which, with the young fruit trees and comfortable benches, wildlife area and organic gardening policy, is a green oasis in the middle of town.

I've learnt a lot in this first season of growing on the allotment, about what thrives, survives - or otherwise - which I'm hoping to carry through to an even better planting plan next year. In common with many other plot-holders, we experienced problems with blight on the Community Allotment, which seems to be increasing year-on-year. The other main pest was all that pesky wildlife - cabbage white and cabbage moth caterpillars wreaking the most damage. Next year I'll be aiming more for **brassic**s that can be planted to miss the worst of the insect hordes, and for more resilient species, so we'll probably be growing kale—under cover - which grew well on our plot this year, and also purple sprouting broccoli, which goes in late enough to grow on in tunnels while the butterflies are about. I have some on my own allotment now which is looking lovely.

Top performers on the Community Allotment included **Florence fennel**, which no pest seems to eat - fantastic! and we will be planting pea beans, runners and french beans from seed saved from a bumper crop this year. One last change for next year is - fewer **courgettes!** we grew, and were given, far too many plants this season, and at the peak of the season, you can't give 'em away!

If you'd like to volunteer, as an individual or as a group at the Community Allotment, Sunday morning (not too early!) is a good time to call in. Experts or beginners are welcome. Or contact me on 01308 425455.

Look out for regular gardening sessions and workshops on the plot next season.

Carolyn Brightwater, Community Gardener

News and views from Skilling

Roger Pollock: Soft fruit, blackcurrants and redcurrants were very good this year: two bushes of redcurrants produced 8 lbs each! I have a feeling that this could have been in part due to the colder than normal winter that either killed off bugs or gave sufficient "cold time" to set the fruit.

I also had remarkable success with **butternut squash** (variety Avalon F1 hybrid). Each of the five plants produced five fruit approx 2/3 lbs each. All ripened very well and this was also probably weather related due to a better than normal autumn. The best thing about squash is that they store for months and make excellent soup.

There are always disasters, this year it was **broad beans**, wiped out by blackfly. This year, for the first time I am planting in late October to see if this makes a difference.

Sue Jones: In 2009 my best crops have been **purple sprouting, carrots, beans and butternut squash**. In the spring I dug sand into the carrot bed, the silver sand I had been using for winter carrot storage for four years. I have treated myself to fresh this autumn. I had the **best carrot crop** ever. They were surrounded by a fence of enviromesh to keep out the low-flying carrot flies, there has been slight damage so some flies have braved the dizzy height of two foot and got in from the top, but not many. It is handy to have an open top for weeding, thinning. The start of the year was purple sprouting and Aquadulce broad beans, plenty of both. I went away for a month in the middle of June, so missed the raspberries, sugar snap peas and Canadian Wonder dwarf French beans. The peas were past it when I got back, but a good crop, I made soup. The **beans** too were past eating green so I let them grow on to be dried. Runners and Blue Lake climbing French beans cropped heavily. **Onions** did well, I used two varieties of onion set, my usual stuttgart, and setton. On harvesting the stuttgart had done better, setton seemed slightly more likely to rot at the neck.

My main crop **potatoes** got the blight but had grown a reasonable crop. After I had cut off and removed all foliage, I left the potatoes in the ground for a few weeks to allow blight spores on the soil surface time to die. (Sue's comments on Leek moth—see front page.)

Mandy Rathbone: This has been the third year on my allotment at Skilling and I do feel I am beginning to get the measure of it. I now know that though at times it will be so wet there is water sitting on the surface (this week) and at other times it will be hard as concrete on the surface but still remarkably wet and sticky a few inches down, there are also occasional times during the year when it's actually perfect – when I go down there and stick a spade in, turn it over, and the lovely rich brown soil breaks up into small (ish) crumbs. You just never know when these times are going to be ...

Despite this I feel 2009 has been a good year on my allotment. Nearly everything seemed to thrive and crop well. My main disappointment has been **tomatoes** which looked so good and then were struck down with blight overnight. I have decided sadly not to grow them again but use the space for something else more reliable. Particular successes this year have been **sweetcorn, courgettes, onions and especially pak choi**. This was a new one for me – I planted the seed in small pots and then planted out the small plants when I harvested the onions (August). The pak choi flourished, growing so

quickly I was beginning to crop them by the end of August. And they are so delicious – like a combination of spinach and celery. Also long-lasting as I am still cropping them. I can highly recommend them, especially for following another crop, as they come on so fast.

Now I'm looking forward to 2010 – though there's lots of hard work to do before then, tidying up the allotment for the winter. Nevertheless I like this time of year, looking at the empty spaces and planning what will be in them next year. Best of all is browsing through the seed catalogues or gardening articles looking for something else new to try.

Gundry Lane (Palmer's allotments)

The Palmer's site off Gundry Lane grows good Marfona **potatoes** also an old Irish/Scottish variety called Kerr's Pink which is best cooked in its skin and then peeled. I have learnt not to dig them up too early especially after a dry period. **Kohlrabi** grew very well. I'm looking forward to parsnips after the first frost.

David Rapson

Burton Bradstock

Although not perfect, the season has been better this year, with more sunshine and plentiful rainfall. We have had good crops of **peas, beans, butternut squash and turks-cap squash**, and an excellent number of parsnips still to harvest through the winter. Germination of **parsnips** has been very good, and this is probably because we left sowing until late March, when the ground was reasonably warm. **Sweetcorn** survived predation by the badgers, thanks to our patented urine deterrent (an unlimited supply!). However, the kernels were unevenly set on the cobs, and this was no doubt because of little sunshine at critical times. Our **soft fruit** has been plentiful, especially blackcurrants (Ben Conan mainly), and autumn raspberries (still just about going in spite of the wind and rain). We also have a Worcesterberry, which although viciously spiny, gives a lovely crop of large dark red berries. Our dwarf Egremont Russet apple tree had its first good harvest (10 apples, many of which were eaten by our temporary harvester, while we were on holiday!) Herb Borage has seeded among our vegetables, and has been a great attraction for bees, hoverflies and butterflies.

Our new crop for this year has been **celeriac**, which seems to have grown well. This has not yet been harvested, so watch this space. Swedes have also done well for the first time, unsure why!

Burton Bradstock Parish Council, who own our allotments, allowed the local school children to cultivate a small plot this year. They had great fun growing tomatoes, sunflowers and a selection of vegetables, many of which went to the Harvest Festival. Like cooking, growing your own food should be a life skill, and these children now know some useful things to help them in the future.

The village produce show held in July, was very successful. A competition for best allotment was held, and the Tebbs plot came 2nd. 1st prize deservedly went to Mark Monroe.

Now the season is coming to a close, apart from cabbages and leeks. Our members are busy clearing debris, and putting the soil to rest for the winter. We will be covering cleared ground with membrane or cardboard to prevent run-off during bad weather. Time to read the tempting seed catalogues and decide on something new for 2010.

Margaret Tebbs, Burton Bradstock Allotment Assn

Worm composting

As an allotment holder, I would ideally compost all my kitchen waste on a conventional heap. However, I don't fancy cycling down to the allotment with a bucket of kitchen waste, and my back garden is too small/steep for a conventional bin, so I've ended up with a worm compost and I thought I would share my experiences of using one.

There are various **designs** available, or you could make your own from untreated wood. Ours is a Wiggly Wigglers "Can-O-Worms", which is a set of stacking trays on four legs with a tap to drain off the liquid that is produced. We bought our bin second-hand, but new they cost around £50.



The worms used are not normal earthworms, but **Red worms** (sometimes called Tiger or Brandling worms) or Dendra worms. We got ours from the previous owner but you can transfer them from a conventional heap or you can buy them from West Bay Water Sports (01308 421800) or from "Wiggly Wigglers" (01981 500391). I think it pays to buy, say, 500 grams as otherwise it does take a long time for the population to build up sufficiently.

We compost our vegetable and fruit peelings (but it is not recommended to add too much citrus or onions as these are acidic); tea bags; egg shells are fine; paper is recommended to keep the mix from getting too wet - in fact ideally wrap your waste in paper and this will reduce problems of fruit flies); and cooked waste is OK, but we don't have much so I can't say how much the worms would actually relish.

Start with just one tray, and add some finished compost as a bedding material, plus kitchen waste and worms. The worms (ravenous by now) get munching, but they start off slowly until their population increases. Don't overwhelm them to begin with. If you put too much on at once the worms will not have time to eat it before it goes rotten and starts to smell bad. Normal household amounts are fine though. Normally the bin does not smell bad. As they munch their way through your vegetable and fruit

peelings, the worms also produce juice which must be tapped off frequently (or else the worms will be "not waving, but drowning").

Opinion is varied as to the benefits of this juice. It must be said, it smells repulsive. I have used it as a plant feed (on the soil not on the leaves), as recommended diluted 1:10 with water, but have not noticed any dramatic effects.

As the first layer fills up you can add a second tray and the worms will make their way up through the holes. If the level of waste in the first tray drops too much then you may need to provide the worms with little ladders to reach the second tray (just kidding - simply add a bit more waste or alternatively pile up the compost at one end to bridge the gap). Some climb up the walls.

Some worms seem to like to stay in the bottom layer: even when the compost seems broken down it's still full of big fat healthy worms. The compost can be 'harvested' by moving the bottom tray to the top of the stack with the lid off for a while to encourage them to move down to the next layer. This compost can then be used on the garden but sparingly as this 'wormiliser' will be very high in nutrients and may cause an imbalance in plant growth. Alternatively mix it in with some general compost.

As far as **problems** go, as previously stated, we have had problems with fruit flies. As the name would suggest, they like fruit: they tend to go for wet, acidic conditions, so adding a lime mix and dry material, and keeping a mat or paper on top of the compost should deal with this problem.

You don't need to worry about worms escaping and going on the rampage - they do not like the light and quickly retreat under the surface.

In cold weather, the cold-blooded worms slow down their activities so you may need to ease off and consider alternatives for your waste. If the temperature drops too much you may wish to protect the wormery from freezing or you may be left with worm icicles.

On balance, I would have to recommend a worm bin if you can't accommodate a conventional compost bin. It also provides a great deal of interest: I like to think of these hard-working, beneficial creatures munching away for the good of all. If you do get yourself a heap you'll find they'll be worming their way into your affections in no time!

Richard Edwards

Membership of the Bridport & District Allotments Society costs £2.00 per annum. Our Membership Secretary/Treasurer Mandy Rathbone will be pleased to receive your subscriptions. Please contact Mandy on manwell52@hotmail.co.uk.

Receiving the newsletter by email: If any member who currently receives the newsletter/minutes of meetings through the letterbox could receive them by email (and save us delivery cost/time), please contact Bob Driscoll—drisc.juggs@talk21.com.

Newsletter contributions welcome: if you have any items you would like to see included in future issues of our Newsletter (which comes out quarterly) or if there are subjects you would like us to cover, please contact the Editor, Charles Wild, Flat 3, Montrose, 91 Crock Lane, Bridport DT6 4DH; or email entries to charleswild@freeuk.com.