



**SUSTAINABLE  
LIVING  
INITIATIVE**

## Annual Report 2016-2017



**Sustainable Living Initiative**

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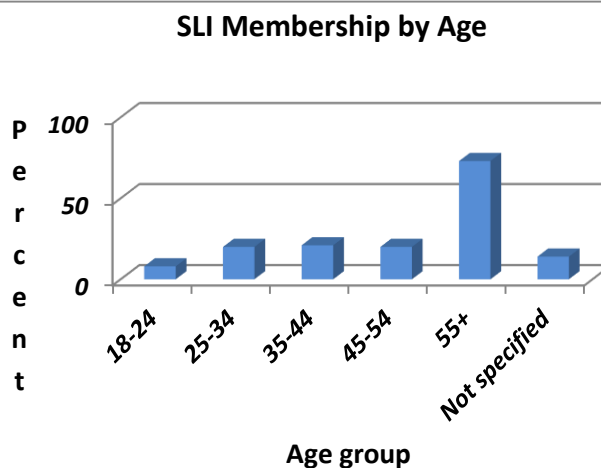
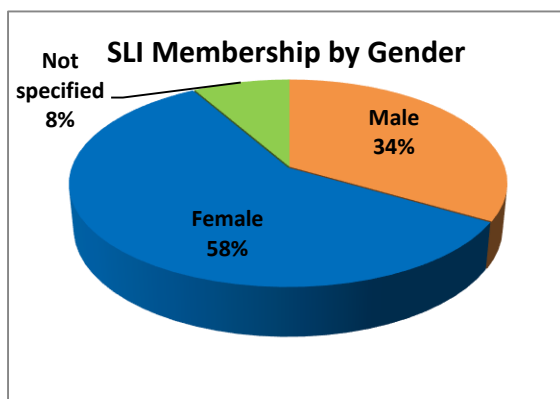
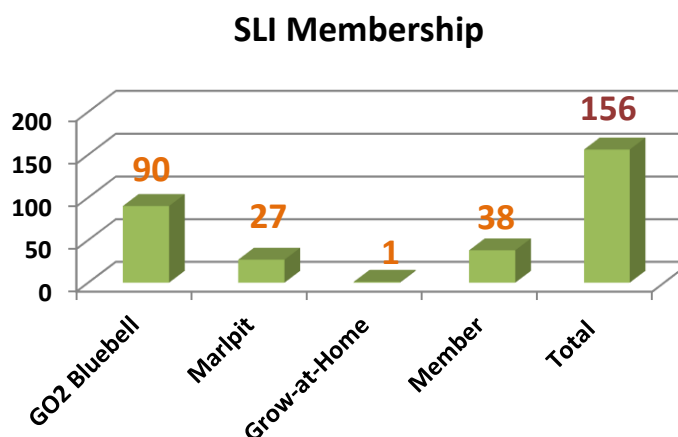
## Introduction

The Sustainable Living Initiative (SLI) is a registered charity run by Trustees and [its office is at Marlpit Community Centre](#) on Hellesdon Road. Founded in 2004 as a pilot project, it now runs two community gardens in Norwich; GO<sup>2</sup> Bluebell which is at the city council's Bluebell South allotments, and Marlpit Community Garden, which is at Hellesdon Road, Marlpit.

SLI is a membership-based organisation and is open to those who support its objectives and wish to be involved in its activities. Young people below the age of 18 are welcome to join but parental consent is required. SLI membership shows a commitment to promoting environmental awareness and sharing resources to improve our quality of life. It is a forum for sharing ideas and skills and initiating collaborative practical projects in growing and using food sustainably.

## SLI in 2016-2017 at a glance

There were 156 members, more than half of whom, were growers at GO<sup>2</sup> Bluebell, and the majority (58%) of whom were female. Almost 75% of our membership was aged above 55. About 13% had some sort of disability. Seventy-six per cent was White British which also reflects the ethnic composition of Norfolk. The rest of the members were European (11%), Asian (7%) and the remainder included Irish and mixed race.



The umbrella organisation, the SLI, has for the first time, a professionally designed logo, thanks to Milly Nicholson's hard work. We have printed leaflets using the new logo. Steve Jenkins, Graphic Design Consultant, helped us to prepare an interpretation map of Marlpit Community Garden.

SLI ran 10 training/workshop sessions during the year. These included growing and pruning soft fruit and fruit trees, soil care, plant care, pests and diseases, forest gardening, scything, and growing and using herbs. We organised two jam making sessions – one with rhubarb and one with gooseberries, both from the Marlpit Community Garden, and two cooking sessions – Indian cooking and cooking with beans. This training was free for SLI members. Although we always had very positive feedback

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about our training, the number of SLI members attending the training could have been better. Each training session costs us more than £150 to run; it is disappointing that these sessions were not fully booked for most of the time.

Roberta Manners, an SLI Trustee, carried out an evaluation of SLI in November-December last year. The purpose of this evaluation was to provide information to the SLI trustees on what the SLI project has done well or not so well - particularly in the last three years - and how the project can be improved. The response was very positive. Suggestions for improvements have been implemented. The full report was published in the SLI April Newsletter and is available on our website.

### GO2 Bluebell

Grow-Our-Own (GO<sup>2</sup>) at the City Council's Bluebell South Allotment site in Norwich was the first pilot scheme of SLI. It grew rapidly between 2007 and 2010 but after that declined steadily, from 180 members at its peak to 90 now. As a result, we have reduced the number of allotments rented from the City Council (from 18 full-sized plots to 11 plots now).

A team structure was set up to manage the GO<sup>2</sup> Bluebell Scheme, following the decision of the SLI to start a new project at Marlpit in 2011. The new system has worked well with responsibility divided among teams to include the tasks of providing seeds, plants, compost and tools, maintaining the land and water supply, sharing gardening knowledge and skills, administering the scheme, and organising food sharing lunches.

It was recently decided to designate new trustees Roberta Manners and Gillian Damerell as joint overall GO<sup>2</sup> coordinators but the management team (now six) remains in place with Peter Medhurst replacing Mark Newman who left and Bridget Beauchamp replacing Tessa Phillips who sadly died in July after a long battle with cancer. It was decided not to continue with a separate training and skill-sharing team as all members can participate in the sessions held at Marlpit.

GO<sup>2</sup> at Bluebell had another very busy year. A team of volunteers staffed the shed on Wednesday and Sunday mornings helping members with advice and directing them to seeds and plants.

The Open Day took place on a rainy Sunday, 1<sup>st</sup> October, the deadline for renewal of membership and many people came and enjoyed good food, bought mostly jam made by members and honey from Marlpit, sampled pear juice (competently pressed by Phil, despite the rain) and generally had a good time. Allotmenting on a small scale such as in GO<sup>2</sup> ticks all the boxes for health and wellbeing: exercise, fresh air, organically grown vegetables, and companionship, and we are constantly seeking to publicise the benefits of joining such a scheme. (see separate reports)

### Marlpit Community Garden

The newer scheme, Marlpit Community Garden which is wholly owned by SLI, is still developing. It is a seven-acre site with plots for individuals, families, schools and community groups. It is also home to a wildlife area, an herb garden, forest garden, bee hives, an orchard, a soft fruit area and a demonstration plot which provides vegetables for our volunteers' lunches. During 2016-17, there were 27 individual growers, one school and two community groups growing food in Marlpit.

At Marlpit, the fruit orchard at Marlpit is well established; we had a lot of soft-fruit some of which was used in making jam for our own use as well as for sale. In the coming years, we need to find outlets for our surplus fruit, vegetables and herbs. The Marlpit pub (next door) is keen on supporting us by using local produce in their kitchen.

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Forest garden and bee-keeping is progressing well; we have five bee hives and this year we harvested nearly 200 pounds of honey. Our honey was awarded first prize for taste by the judge at the Norfolk Beekeepers Association Autumn Honey Show. Tish Kerkham, who manages our forest garden and bee-hives in MCG attended external training on forest garden and growing mushrooms. (see separate report)

The task of maintaining the orchards, forest garden and other communal areas and facilities in Marlpit Community Garden has been carried out by a group of regular volunteers (about 12) who attend weekly on Tuesday and some on Thursday as well. On Tuesday, volunteers get a home-cooked lunch and are offered any surplus fruit and vegetables to take home at the end of their work.

In addition to our regular volunteers at Marlpit, we had the Earlham Early Years Centre bringing their children to garden every week, and regular visits from a large number of corporate volunteers. In the past 12 months, we had more than 80 volunteers from MARSH and AVIVA (both Norwich based insurance companies), GoodGym and students from University of East Anglia.

### SLI Finance

Income for the year was £24,562 and the expenditure was £25681, creating a shortfall of £1119. However, there was a surplus of £8,054 from last year, so there's no need to panic.

Of the total income, 76% was from grants and donations (see the grants received document), and the rest was self-generated mostly from plot rent in Bluebell and Marlpit, produce sale including honey and jam and the renting out of a grazing field in MCG.

Of the total expenditure, just over half (55%) was spent on the management and conservation of Bluebell and Marlpit Community Garden (plot rent to the City Council, seeds and plants, tools and equipment, bee-keeping and training) and the rest (45%) was on overheads (programme manager's salary, insurance, accounts, office rent, telephone and internet).

### Plans for 2017-2018

As mentioned earlier, we have reduced to 11 the number of allotment plots rented from the City Council in GO<sup>2</sup> Bluebell, reflecting the current level of demand for plots and the capacity of the Team to manage the scheme. We would like to maintain our membership at this level if possible.

We need to increase the number of people who can access and benefit from our Community Gardens. In addition to providing small individual plots, we will encourage individuals, schools and community groups to come and visit our Community Gardens and enjoy a short walk or learn about gardening, bees and wildlife.

We need to reach out to local communities through various organisations, schools and groups working in the area. To this end, we are going to improve the physical facilities at MCG and have clear maps, signs and noticeboards. We will be producing simple leaflets explaining the resources and facilities available in our Community Gardens.

We will continue running practical training sessions on growing fruit and vegetables as well as making jam and chutneys. These training sessions will be offered free of charge to SLI members but there will be a small charge for non-members. With a view to reducing our training costs, we will only be offering refreshments instead of lunch.



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The income we generate from our activities is far from enough to meet our core costs let alone the cost of improving and maintaining the facilities in our Community Gardens, so we need to find ways of raising funds for the short-term as well as for the long-term. We will be asking funding organisations and the business community to support our work by providing volunteers to manage our gardens.

### Grants and donations received in 2016-17

Name of the Organisation	Amount received	Notes
Charles Littlewood Hill Trust	500	Grant
Anglia Home donation	500	Donation
Trusthouse	5750	Grant
Foyle Foundation Trust	3000	Grant
One Stop/Carriers for causes	1300	Grant
Geoffrey Watling Trust	1000	Grant
Comic relief	1000	Grant
Archant Environment fund	1000	Donation
East of England Cooperative	200	Donation
Shelroy Charitable Trust	4560	Grant
<b>Total</b>	<b>18810</b>	

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## Accounts

	Marlpit	Bluebell	SLI	Total
<b>Income</b>				
Plot Rental	1,394	3,093	0	4,487
Prepaid Plot Rental	75	931		1,006
Allotment Sales	1,454	0	0	1,454
Open Day	0	0	0	0
Consultancy	0	0	0	0
Training Income	0	0	0	0
SUMA food coop - income	16	0	5,381	5,397
Other	455	0	503	958
Bank Interest	0	0	0	0
<b>Operating Income</b>	<b>3,394</b>	<b>4,024</b>	<b>5,884</b>	<b>13,301</b>
Grants & Donations	15,858	0	0	15,858
Capital Grant Income	1,300	0	0	1,300
<b>Grant Income</b>	<b>17,158</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>17,158</b>
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>20,552</b>	<b>4,024</b>	<b>5,884</b>	<b>30,459</b>
<b>Expenditure</b>				
Plot Rental	0	930	0	930
Seeds and Plants	547	498	0	1,045
Manure and Compost	6	153	0	159
Small Tools and Repairs	477	89	0	566
Maintenance	4,044	48	0	4,092
Conservation	687	159	0	846
Training	750	0	508	1,258
Members' Course Costs	0	0	0	0
Volunteer Costs	2,293	49	184	2,526
Bee Keeping	880	0	0	880
Equipment and Supplies	576	132	1,107	1,815
SUMA food coop - exp	0	0	5,564	5,564
<b>Direct Costs</b>	<b>10,261</b>	<b>2,058</b>	<b>7,363</b>	<b>19,682</b>
Services (Labour)	0	0	170	170
Insurance	208	208	0	415
Office Rent	2,195	2,195	0	4,389
Telephone & internet	288	288	0	576
Postage and Stationery	11	11	9	32
Programme Manager	2,500	2,500	0	5,000
Accounts	171	171	0	343
IT Costs	0	0	55	55
Travel	0	0	0	0
Subscriptions	0	0	0	0
Keys	295	179	0	474
Other	44	44	0	88
Depreciation	0	0	6,621	6,621
<b>Overhead costs</b>	<b>5,712</b>	<b>5,596</b>	<b>6,855</b>	<b>18,164</b>
<b>Total Expenditure</b>	<b>15,973</b>	<b>7,654</b>	<b>14,219</b>	<b>37,846</b>
<b>Profit /(Loss)</b>	<b>4,579</b>	<b>-3,630</b>	<b>-8,335</b>	<b>-7,386</b>

## Annexes

### *GO2 Bluebell: annual report 2017*

#### **Admin**

*Christine Wilson*

We have had another very busy year. The rota for Wednesday and Sunday mornings in the shed has worked very well so special thanks to Rita Gallard for organising it and all those who turn up. Apart from receiving visitors and potential members, there are always weeding and watering jobs, but it is also a companionable morning with refreshments!

It was recently decided to designate new trustees Roberta Manners and Gillian Damerell as GO<sup>2</sup> coordinators but the management team (now six) remains in place with Peter Medhurst replacing Mark Newman who left and Bridget Beauchamp replacing Tessa Phillips who sadly died in July after a long battle with cancer. Sophie Chollet left and we decided not to continue with a training and skill-sharing team as Mahesh would be sharing the training days with GO<sup>2</sup> and Marlpit.

We felt GO<sup>2</sup> members needed a monthly newsletter to GO<sup>2</sup> and Mahesh is now doing that.

Enquiries about plots come in steadily but not as frequently as we would like and as at October 2017 we have a number of vacant strips. People who had not renewed by 1 October, despite reminders, were deemed to have left.

Mahesh has taken on chasing-up members with overgrown plots by sending a photo and this usually results in a response.

The Open Day took place on a rainy Sunday, 1 October, the deadline for renewal of membership and many people came and enjoyed good food, bought mostly jam made by members and honey from Marlpit, sampled pear juice (competently pressed by Phil, despite the rain) and generally had a good time. Allotmenting on a small scale such as in GO<sup>2</sup> ticks all the boxes for health and wellbeing: exercise, fresh air, organically grown vegetables, and companionship, and we are constantly seeking to publicise the benefits of joining such a scheme.

Once more my thanks for an enjoyable year to the many stalwart helpers and supporters who make GO<sup>2</sup> such a fantastic project, and, of course, Mahesh who started it all!

#### **Food**

This year has been another busy one for the Food Team. Our regular "First Sunday Lunch" each month was as always well-attended, with members bringing a variety of cooked produce to Bluebell for sharing. We also supported special events – such as the 2016 Christmas Party and cookery sessions at Marlpit Community Centre and Open Days at Marlpit Community Garden and Bluebell Grow Our Own. Bridget and friends made jams and chutneys: so did Mahesh, and these were sold at events. Tish and her Community Garden bees made honey for us to sell - see her report. The 2016 Christmas lunch was cooked on the premises at Marlpit Community Centre and served to over three dozen members. It was enjoyable but a major undertaking. We will do it again this year.

#### **Tools**

*Jane Graham*

The early spring shed and tool day was held on 5th March. The tools were checked and it was noted that most of the larger tools were intact and matched with the previous inventory. Some of the hand

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tools were replaced from stock. The shears and edging tools were checked and sharpened and cleaned, and replaced in the main shed. The red and blue sheds were cleaned and the white shed was done at a later date. The weather prevented any further activity. During the year the red shed has been well maintained but the blue shed is often left in a messy state with uncleaned tools often found lying on the floor.

All new members are instructed to maintain shed cleanliness. The toilet is maintained and cleaned by the team leader and so far the original chamber is only half full. There will be no tool day this autumn but the team leader will do an inventory and replace any tools. The metal shed contains the motorised mower and strimmer along with petrol and oil. This shed is kept locked with designated members holding a key which complies with COSHH legislation. On 15<sup>th</sup> October a strimmer training session was held and those that attended were added to the list in the main shed with the names of members who have undergone training. Overall there would appear to be enough tools for everyone and the sheds are in reasonable order. Next year I plan to have the shed and tool day on Sunday March 4<sup>th</sup>.

### Seeds and plants

*Bridget Beauchamp*

The illness and death of our team leader, Tessa, meant a sad start to the year for the seeds and plants team. Tessa was a cheerful, positive presence and is much missed.

One of the main activities of the team is to ensure a constant supply of good quality plants ready for growers at the right time and on the whole we managed this. Shena, Heather, Sue, Sheila, Carole and Bridget sowed the seeds; Janet E and Janet H potted up. Roberta and Sheila, amongst others, planted out surplus plants in the beds around the greenhouse. It was a cheering sight in May, of the greenhouse full of healthy plants waiting for the threat of frost to pass before being put on the tables outside for growers to take. There were hiccups: several trays of courgettes and squashes became infested with aphids; a tray of seventy very healthy sweet corn plants was taken from the greenhouse. We tried a new compost this year, Sylvagrow Multipurpose. It is less coarse and so easier to use than New Horizons and the results seemed good.

Generally the rota for watering the plants in and around the greenhouse worked well, with Laura, Janet E and Janet J signed up as regulars. People on duty and other volunteers also watered. Not everyone consulted the rota so overwatering became a problem at one point, with the plants sitting in water.

Deciding what plants to grow and how many of each is always an issue. Brassicas, for example, were less popular this year while beans and courgettes were snapped up quickly. Next year we are asking more formally what growers would like to grow through a questionnaire sent out in the autumn.

The array of seeds on the table at the back of the big shed, along with a wealth of information on how and when to sow, was kept in good order by Mandy and Caroline. The throughput of little packets taken from the big shed and then replenished suggests that the supply for growers was about right.

We've had a couple of work days so far this year – where we give the compost areas a good tidy up. These have done the job in so far as the work that needed to be done was done. However they did again feature the same faces. Please feel free to come to any forthcoming days! The more the merrier. Days will be advertised in the newsletter.



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Another load of manure has been ordered for November which should hopefully see us through to the start of spring. Please though make use of the compost available. We tend to run out of manure whilst always having loads of available compost. There's a large bay of ready to use compost by the red shed and more located at the cross roads next to the manure and in the compost area next to the man shed.

If you look on the compost section of the notice board in the main shed you'll find a map showing the various bays and which contain compost ready to use.

Thanks

Phil, Compost Team

## Marlpit Community Garden

### Apiary

**Winter:** We went into winter with six colonies of bees. The mild winter meant that the queens carried on laying throughout the season. With a lot of larvae and young bees they needed extra food in the form of sugar fondant throughout January and February. By early spring the workers were out in large numbers collecting pollen from our snowdrops and crocuses as well as hazel, poplar and willow trees. On the first inspection in April, one colony was found to have lost their queen. The bees from this hive were combined with another colony.

**Spring and Summer:** During April and May I was struck by the large numbers of bees in the hives. In spite of my efforts to prevent them, two of the colonies swarmed. Luckily, I was there at the time and, with help, was able to collect the swarms and re-house them. Children from the Earlham Early Years group spotted a further small swarm (a cast) that had settled on the bee sanctuary fence. At one stage we had nine colonies of bees of various sizes - housing these was made possible by the second-hand equipment bought at the Norfolk Beekeepers Association auction in February. Later in the season we re-combined more of these, resulting in five strong colonies.

**Inspection:** On 23rd May our hives were inspected by the National Bee Unit's Seasonal Inspector, Peter Davies, who was checking apiaries near to Norwich Airport for exotic pests. He pronounced all our colonies in good health.

**Harvest:** The dry summer meant that on most days our bees were out foraging. For the first time, as well as extracting liquid honey we harvested some of it as cut comb honey - a total of 159 lbs liquid honey and 49 containers of 227grams of cut comb. This was a big improvement on the 90lbs of liquid honey extracted last year. Honey is available for sale to members and the public at £5.50p and £6.00p respectively (50p returnable on the jar). Containers of cut comb go for £9.00 each.

**Achievements:** We know our honey tastes good! This was confirmed by the judge at the Norfolk Beekeepers Association Autumn Honey Show, Paul Metcalf. Awarding us First Prize and the Leech Challenge Cup in the Novice Class he commented on the delicious taste of the honey. We also won second prize for liquid honey in the Gift Class.

**Learning:** Since May one of our members, John Thompson, has given me invaluable help each week with the bees. He is booked on a course next May to extend his beekeeping knowledge. I have attended training events with the Norfolk Beekeeping Association and the Norwich and District Beekeeping Association throughout the year. In March I took the British bee-keepers Association's examination Module 1, Honeybee Management, which I passed with a Credit.

**Public involvement:** Throughout the season we have encouraged visitors to our apiary. Children from the Earlham Early Years group viewed them several times from outside the sanctuary and I did some activities about bees with this group. About sixteen adults and children from seven years upwards, both members and non-members, have dressed in our bee suits, in order to see into the fascinating world of a bee hive for the first time. In September, I ran a quiz and talked about beekeeping to an audience of thirteen people at the launch of the Marlpit Community Centre's series of talks and activities.

**Plans for next year:** In terms of colony numbers, John and I have found that five permanent hives are enough for us to manage. Successful beekeeping is dependent on many factors, among them the weather, pests and diseases and the experience and skill of the beekeeper. Several people have

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expressed an interest in helping and learning about bees. If this materialises, I will work with a small group learning how to manage our bees. With two or three people committed to regular involvement there would be the potential to expand our apiary. We will continue to offer members and the public the opportunity to look inside a hive and learn more about honeybees.

Tish Kerkham, Beekeeper, Marlpit Community Garden Apiary, October 2017

### ***Forest Garden Report by Tish Kerkham***

A notable change in the forest garden during the year has been the establishment of a forest garden work day on Thursdays with the workforce of three regular volunteers, Aaron Wheaton, John Thompson and myself, being supplemented by other members and outside volunteers from time to time. This has allowed us to keep more on top of the work needed in these early years of developing the forest garden.

The forest garden is starting to show first signs of living up to its name. Willows planted in 2014 are getting tall and the hazels produced their first nuts this autumn. Most of the fruit trees planted in January 2015 are well established, with fruit sampled from our mulberry tree and a crop of about fifteen quinces from one tree. Three of our Italian alders are flourishing and the one we moved closer to the plots has established there. We have also started planting a further area parallel to the orchard as forest garden.

In January 2016 we planted two Blue Bean (*Decaisnea fargesii*) to replace the two which had failed the previous season. These ones are doing well. The strawberry tree survived transplanting from a protected position in the bee sanctuary. Also planted in January are two Mahonia aquifolia, a groundcover raspberry plant and three Japanese yams, *Deascorea japonica*. Our edible fuschias did not survive, so we have ordered some more to try again in the coming year.

The scything course on 30th May was successful and we have enthusiastically been putting the new skill into practice. Scything is particularly useful in the forest garden as it allows us to work round trees and planted areas, as well as providing cut grass for mulching and the chance to manage for wild flowers alongside paths and in the less shaded parts of the garden.

We have laid down plastic sheets and woodchip as well as cardboard as mulches to prepare for ground cover planting. Patches of comfrey have been planted around fruit trees and some other ground cover plants are establishing. A nursery plot is providing space for nurturing young plants near the pond and a wild flower bed offered extra forage for pollinators behind the bee sanctuary during the summer. We have taken cuttings to grow plants for next year. As the original labels on the trees have deteriorated we have replaced most of these with recycled labels made from drinks cans.

Wildlife seen includes many frogs, toads, newts, butterflies, moths and bumblebees as well as a wide variety of birds. There is evidence of foxes, mice and shrews. Not so welcome are the deer, particularly muntjacs, and squirrels are starting to come into the garden.

On 15th July Aaron ran a workshop on Forest Garden Food Production.

### **Plans**

The priority is care of the trees and shrubs already planted, making sure these are weeded and protected against deer.

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We will be working to raise shrubs, climbers and herbaceous perennials to develop the under story of the forest garden as the trees start to provide shade. We will continue to propagate plants by taking cuttings and to grow from seed. Our order this year is mostly of shrubs, climbers and seeds. We are seeding an area with yellow rattle as an experiment to see if this helps to control the grass.

We plan to make what we are doing in the garden more transparent by developing explanatory signs and literature and to provide a relaxation area with logs for seating, south of the pond. The main paths will be improved. A small shed would also be very useful.

#### Mushroom Cultivation Course by Tish Kerkham

The course, took place at the Brighton Permaculture Trust site at Stanmer Park in Brighton on 15th - 16th April, tutored by Bill Knight of Keveral Farm, Cornwall. It was a very intensive practical and theoretical course. The course notes describe it as an "Introduction to growing shitake and oyster mushrooms in small integrated farm systems" and participants went home with the skills to do just that.

I also left with a large bag of wet straw inoculated with oyster mushroom spores and a log inoculated with shitake spores. Getting these home to Norwich by bus, coach, underground and train was an interesting experience. The straw eventually produced some mushrooms this autumn, while we will have to wait until September 2018 to see if the shitake log has been successful.

The plan is to put the skills I learnt into practice by producing our own mushrooms at Marlpit Community Garden next year.

## Earlham Early Years Centre

Earlham Early Years Centre works with Marlpit community garden .

On Tuesday mornings you may see a group of nursery children and adults walking down Marlpit Road to work, learn and play at the Community garden . We have a small plot of our own and help out in the shared vegetable and fruit beds.



This year we planted runner beans and bush beans, sunflowers and sweet corn. The children have harvested potatoes and raspberries too. Each week we have enjoyed smelling different herbs and walking through the forest garden to visit the bee hives.

After a well earned snack you may see us staggering back up the hill, usually carrying produce to give to Colin, our cook, or to take home at the end of the morning.



The children have had a productive healthy morning and we hope their enthusiasm will encourage their families to get involved too.





## Community garden summer fun

I have been spending the last couple of months working on the community plots at Marl Pit Community Gardens in Hellesdon. The gardens are part of the Sustainable Living Initiative which is a Norwich based charity. The initiative aims to share resources and knowledge to people who want to grow their own organic produce and cook with and eat fresh food.

After finishing my second-year exams I decided that I wanted to try something new over the summer.

Gardening and permaculture was something that I had recently become interested in after attending an introduction to permaculture course organised by UEA healthy planet. I was also looking for somewhere to do some research for my dissertation and I was aiming to base my dissertation on sustainability in the community.



I came across the Marl Pit Community Gardens after an email asking for volunteers was sent to all the students in ENV and DEV. I decided to go along to the gardens to see what it was like.

I went on a Tuesday which is the volunteering day. People who have their own plots at the gardens can go at any point during the week. Since then I have been going on Tuesdays to work on shared community plots and have gone some of the Saturday sessions which are normally classes. For example, I went to a session on how to make jam with the gooseberries from the gardens. All the

cooking classes take place in the community centre down the road. We then took some jam home and the rest got sold the following Saturday at the open day for the gardens.



One of my favourite parts of going along on Tuesdays is having the group lunch cooked for us using the produce from the gardens. After getting stuck in to digging, planting, watering and weeding all morning it's the perfect way to refuel and have a catch up with everyone.

The gardening itself is great exercise and a great chance to get some fresh air and sunshine. I've found it a welcome break from the craziness of everyday. It's nice to go somewhere that is relaxed and friendly. It's also a good place to go to leave all technology behind. If you need an excuse to stop looking at your

emails or Facebook page it is the perfect escape! Even in the two months I've been there I feel healthier from all the good food I've been eating and the exercise I've been getting but also from the amount of smiling and laughing I do when I am at the gardens! I believe this ties in with the notion that looking after ourselves can benefit the planet.

One environmental benefit that growing your own produce has is that it reduces food miles. Eating seasonally from your garden will reduce greenhouse gas emissions that are released from shipping produce from other countries. Growing your own also means that you can eliminate harmful chemicals from your crops such as pesticides and weed killers that can get into natural systems and food chains. You will also be improving the



biodiversity of your local area.

Monoculture farming is where only one crop is produce on a farm to get the most profit as possible. Most shop brought produce comes from these types of farms. They can discourage local wildlife like insects, other plants, amphibians and birds as the habitat isn't suited to them. However small scale plots with lots of varieties of crops boost the biodiversity of an area. I have seen a lot of wildlife since being on the community gardens including frog and toads, lots of different birds and lots of different types of bees and butterfly.



Another sustainable aspect of growing your own is that it eliminates the use of packaging that you get in supermarkets.

There's no plastic wrap involved with growing your own!

Being part of the gardens has been an eye-opening experience and has made me live more sustainably and healthily. I have managed to bring home a variety of produce in the last couple of months including broccoli, spinach, broad beans, cucumber, kale, peas, potatoes, onions and a variety of herbs. However, the most valuable thing I have gained is a lot of new friends from a variety of backgrounds, ethnicities and ages. I have met people that I wouldn't have met otherwise and I am so glad I've had the opportunity.

I would encourage everyone to get involved in their community in any way they can. Community gardens are a great way to do this. If you want any more information on the Sustainable Living



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Initiative or would like your own plot to grow your own, visit [grow-our-own.co.uk](http://grow-our-own.co.uk) or email Mahesh at [sustainable@grow-our-own.co.uk](mailto:sustainable@grow-our-own.co.uk).

**About the author: Emily Lewis**

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