

CWA Woodland Gardens & Allotments Seminar

Bothwell

Wednesday 19 May 2010

Attendees: 18 people attended. This included a returnee from the seminar in Ardrossan and someone who came all the way from Cornwall by train. Michaela also brought a colleague who was a local climate challenge officer [?]. The communities represented [within Scotland] were: Argyll, Comrie, Echline, Edinburgh, Kincardine, Lanarkshire, Paisley, Peebles, South Queensferry, Tinto and Wooplaw. Almost all attendees were representing volunteer organisations.

Introduction

Hosts were Ron Gilchrist and Marion Jess representing Greenway. Unfortunately Rosslyn was ill and not able to attend.

Ron and Michaela Hunter were trainers for the day.

Marion detailed the Housekeeping arrangements for the day and explained Rosslyn's absence and thanked CWA for giving us all the opportunity to get together.

Presentation – Ron Gilchrist:

Key Objectives for the day

- To realise the significance of growing sustainably
- To learn how to live sustainably from what ground we have
- To learn techniques for maximum plant and soil fertility
- To specify a personal or group task plan based on what we've learned

We began by introducing ourselves – each person stating their interest and why they were there. The types of land and interests represented were wide: orchards, community gardens, walled gardens, community woodland, allotments, food awareness, local growing, and stopping destruction of woodland for house building.

Ron's approach, as usual, was interactive and enthusiastic. Technical information was interspersed with group tasks for reinforcement. The sequence was as follows:

Group Task 1 – list the 5 most damaging threats facing the planet in the next 25years.

Ron outlined what we've done to the planet:

- Climate Change
- Peak Oil
- Lack of Food Security
- Lack of Food Quality
- Food Shortages
- Lack of humus in the soil
- Weak plants, high use of pesticides

A practical example was given by an attendee of damaged soil in East Lothian – prime growing area in Scotland, being unable to support tree growing. However before we all sink into depression Ron assured us that we **can** make a difference. We can create Sustainable Communities with Sustainable Lifestyles. The Fife Diet was given as an example of local action.

Ron encouraged us to learn from the forest and woodland, which is not treated with fertilisers, yet without human interference will regenerate and stay in balance.

Group Task 2 – On a flipchart sheet with a small tree drawing in the middle – list all the physical and biological action going on in all levels of the tree's surroundings – from under the forest floor to above the tree canopy.

Ron then explained what a powerful operation was taking place as each tree acts as a water pump – pumping water sometimes hundreds of metres above the ground. A drawing and explanation of the capillary action within a tree was given.

There are 4 layers in the forest – they are all producing and the soil CAN support it – HOW?

Ron showed pictorial examples of what happens when we copy the forest – use wormcast as fertiliser, plant closer together and raise strong vigorous vegetables.

Learn from the Forest –

Fertility – the key to fertility is the recycling of the organic materials into wormcast.

Soil – build up the humus in the soil – chemicals harm – nature already shows us how to maximise soil fertility and hence plant vigour

Litter Worms – the surface dwelling litter worms which inhabit the forest floor and create nutritious waste from fallen leaves and other decaying material. Vermiculture is the process of copying the biological activity in the forest floor through worm husbandry.

Microbial Husbandry – We can harness these same litter worms to consume our organic waste/create wormcast which will give plants, trees etc in our gardens exceptional vigour. Add to this the trace elements missing from our soil [through the addition of basaltic rockdust] and the use of litter worms becomes of supreme importance = copying the forest.

Ron explained

- The chain of organisms required to make the whole composting process work.
- Thermophilic [heat] phase is crucial
- Use of Hotbox and creating conditions to let the microbes do their work.
- The basics of worm husbandry with mineral enrichment.
- How, by keeping your garden heavily mulched, as the worm population increases in your soil, your garden will become self-fertilising. THEN you will be copying the sustainable fertility of the woodlands.
- showed some sample projects where these techniques were being used – from schools to householders to community gardens

Michaela Hunter – Kilfinan

Michaela told us about her situation and growing conditions – a garden running east to west, surrounded by trees, under pylons, but with fairly good soil. She is essentially growing vegetables in a woodland setting. We saw her greenhouse INSIDE a polytunnel which extends her growing season considerably. The polytunnel was built on rocky ground but this meant the rocks retained heat. The ground was on a slope and this enabled a mixed planting scheme to replicate the forest floor. It was south facing and they could even grow grapes.

She showed us “goodies” that inhabited her garden – slowworms, frogs, butterflies and bees – but also the “baddies” New Zealand flatworm – which she said pigs will eat!

In Kilfinan they operate a 4 year crop rotation. They feed plants with comfrey water, chicken manure and seaweed – also rockdust is applied once a year. Bracken used for chicken bedding with their added manure goes onto the potato patch. She was an enthusiastic proponent that Scotland can grow its own vegetables. We sampled some of her very tasty salad produce which they sell to local hotels and monthly farmers’ markets.

After lunch

Group was bussed to see Bothwell Community Garden. This garden is nearing completion. The group saw the “talk” in practical operation – a steaming hotbox, busy wormery, raised bed mini allotments and polytunnels. Bothwell also has a septic tank and reed bed. They are collecting rain water from their shed roof and their composting area will have a shelter built over it which will have a living roof.

On return to our conference room there was a session encouraging individuals/groups to join CWA and to compost. Ron showed some case studies where things were happening. As well as Michaela's model this covered Islay Community Garden, Isle of Seil Community Garden, Dumfries College Show Garden, Hill Holt Garden, Traditional Allotments and the original design for Bothwell Community Garden. These showed a range of features and considerations e.g. dealing with a rabbit problem, wind protection and therapeutic gardening.

Q & A Session – covered

- What can you grow in raised beds over the winter
- How long did Bothwell Garden take to build
- Companion Planting
- What were all the bays for in the composting corner
- How do you make a mulch mix
- Does Ron have a handbook he could sell

One attendee said publicly that this had been a life changing day for him – realising what people could do with even a small area.

Michaela invited us to visit her garden in June – to be arranged with CWA.

Final Group Task 3

Write out your Action Plan: Think forwards – a week/month/year – what will you actually try to achieve as a result of what you've heard today.

Various attendees spent time speaking to Ron and Michaela and each other about individual situations.

Dispersal was around 3.30 – 4pm.

List of Resources for future reference

Bothwell Community Garden

Kilfinan Forest Garden – Michaela invited CWA to visit her site