

DUNKELD AND BIRNAM COMMUNITY GROWING SCIO AGM 2017
CHAIRPERSONS REPORT

It is my pleasure to give the annual report of our organisation, Dunkeld and Birnam Community Growing SCIO or as we know it @ the field.

It will cover the three areas of our group's aims ie organic growing of food ,biodiversity and involvement of the community in our project.

This is our sixth growing season. Growing food and flowers is a remarkable experience as yearly we have sown, planted, nurtured and harvested by hand everything grown at the field. You could say that we are very mindful of the food we grow and even that other cares and concerns drop away !

The polytunnel is a busy place in the early spring when we sow thousands of seeds there. This year's seed sowing team were helped enormously by excellent sowing and potting compost called Moorland Gold. We sowed as usual into our recycled fish boxes and found germination rates of our organic seed to have a high rate of success.

Hamish Carlton set up an excellent working watering spray for all the seed boxes.

The hardening off stage was so much easier this year too because of our new outdoor wooden staging, made possible with money from the local Coop community grant and the skill and good will of volunteer carpenters George Baxter, Raymond Simpson and Graham Cook.

We also managed to plant out these dozens of boxes of an increased quantity and variety of brassica, leek and bean plants before they became too leggy and these have mostly done very well.

The seed sown directly into the ground in the field plots ,however, struggled to germinate as April and May were very dry. When the rain did come ,slugs attacked. This resulted in a dearth of early carrots and a halting start to the beetroot and spinach.

You will be pleased to know that the autumn and winter may prove to offer the best produce with gorgeous leafy spinach, top quality yellow and red onions ,leeks aplenty, Brussels Sprouts, flower sprouts, kale, cabbage beetroot, parsnip and potatoes all in fine form.

The quantity and quality of the soft fruit this year ,following judicious pruning and feeding by Sandy Howe and Ginny Carlton has been remarkable, especially the blackcurrants.

2017 was the year when a select band tasted the first asparagus spears. Thank you to William Hogg for cajoling the asparagus along. Other innovations were sweetcorn and a proper headed brocolli ,striped beetroot and edible violas in your salad bags.

It is important to note that organic growing needn't mean laborious growing. We are always looking for ways to minimise disturbance of the soil and back breaking hand maintenance. We were especially delighted when George Ness our vintage tractor driver appeared with a new ,pre loved tattie lifter. We are convinced it has increased the crop of tatties we lifted and pray that it will decrease the number of volunteer tatties we have to clean from our plots every year.

Organic growing focuses on feeding the soil rather than the plants and to this end we are pleased to say that we are getting more skilled at using green manure cover crops when ground becomes vacant. Also we are always grateful to those who supply us with horse manure: the folk in the

adjacent field , Graeme Tinto from Scotstoun Farm and Jackie Muirhead from Murthly. We have instituted a new policy this year of stacking our manure separately ,covering it and checking it regularly to make sure that we stay free of New Zealand flatworm.

Although appearance isn't everything, the field has been looking very tidy this year. This is because we made an advantageous swap for a mulching mower with Sarah Davidson and Hamish Carlton set to to master it and the grass.

Ultimately, all this field work is aiming towards a harvest. Ginny ,Claire Ash and Hari and Jim Sutton and Marilyn Howe have been the chief harvesters this year.

Elsbeth Baillie quietly and efficiently coordinated a rota of volunteer assistants to get the crop to the stalls all summer. We really appreciate time given by those who work throughout the week when they appear to help pack on a Saturday morning.

The public face of the organisation are those folk who have served at the stalls: Lorna Walker , June Mitchell at Birnam Arts and sometimes Zoe Levy. Thank you.

We sent huge quantities of our wonderful produce down to the twenty seven stalls: such as 169 bags of Broad Beans ,91 of Runner Beans, over a thousand onions 106 bunches of flowers,111 salad bags,53 bags or heads of broccoli.

When it comes to involvement with the community, we are always delighted when individuals or groups want to come to the field. We welcome the opportunity for the community to get involved and perhaps we can learn from them and they from us. Two families of pre school children enjoyed the freedom at the field as we prepared and planted beans, onions and potatoes. A class from the primary school walked up armed with interesting questions about biodiversity and food miles. Other budding growing groups frequently seek out our experience and advice such as a group from Alyth this year. The annual antics at Summerfest were enjoyed by members, local and visitors alike. Live music enhanced this year's event.

To help us keep an eye on our goals, we held a members' Reflection of 2016 meeting in January and sought areas to develop and work on in the 2017 season. The group present scored our achievements highly. We always strive to do better though in getting a response from parents and school age children. Perhaps these younger folks keep in touch via our Facebook page and field website both ably managed by Sally and John Small. We also had an open Trustees meeting in October with very useful input from the members who attended. Our joint meeting with the Historical Society on the Lost Gardens of Perthshire was well attended.

The AGM and Harvest Supper are social highlights with the hall full at 53 people last year. Birnam Arts have made our produce stall very welcome .This location has introduced all sorts of different customers to our produce. The local Deli sold our vegetables over some of the winter months at no cost to us which was a great help to the elderly.

Our wonderful produce was on display again when we were invited to take part in the 450th anniversary celebrations of the Royal School of Dunkeld. HRH Prince Edward showed particular interest in the location of our field and Ginny was able to point him in the right direction.! She and Jim Sutton were very able representatives of our project.

It must be said that we have to thank Dave Roberts and Dave Amos for all the networking they do. They keep us very well connected.

After six growing seasons ,we have noticed this year a distinct increase in confidence amongst our volunteers, eg making very useful suggestions or taking helpful initiatives .We are delighted to have seen new volunteers appear at the field. These fresh faces enliven the mix and reassure the older ones amongst us that this remarkable project will maintain into the future.

Indeed, work at the field itself up to the end of September .comprised of no less than two and a half thousand voluntary hours this year! and approximately the same number of coffees! Many other hours were given in working at the stall, the Trustees meetings and other duties.

And what about Biodiversity? We have seen this year with the effects of the weather and other conditions that our practice of using different varieties of each crop not only makes our growing efforts more resilient but also provides diversity as well.

You may notice stands of nettles on the field edges .We leave these deliberately to feed butterflies. Areas of long grass provide cover for field voles .Bundles of twigs provide homes for hedgehogs and scrubby margins offer habitats for insects and small birds like wrens.

Last year's report pointed up the diversity of tolerance there was amongst us for allowing birds and animals to take a share of our growing seeds and crops .We accommodated to this by using more protective covers at appropriate times and increasing bird scarers etc. So as you can see, on the one hand we try to encourage wildlife and on the other we are trying to discourage it!!!

A recent report from German nature reserves has shown a 75% decrease in flying insects over the last twenty five years. Sadly, we also have noticed that bees are fewer, especially honey bees. The bees have had wonderful encouragement from the splendid array of flowers that Maddy Hand and Jim Sutton have grown, giving nectar from spring through till now.

Also Sandy Howe and helpers expanded the beautiful wild flower area.

It may be however that we have to increase our tolerance for annual weeds and also grow more flowering green manure to induce more bees and insects to our field.

There is now a white board on the shed wall to make it easy to record sightings of wildlife. Initial recordings show lots of pheasant ,partridge ,crow and pigeon. Occasional other sighting have been made of smaller birds such as wagtail, blue tit, chaffinch wren and nuthatch. Also a couple of more unusual butterflies with a sighting of an osprey and buzzard overhead. Sadly ,for the first time, we don't think the oystercatchers bred this year.

Looking to the future, we now have moved from a short to a long term agricultural tenancy lease. Dave Roberts , our invaluable secretary and Jim Cockburn, our very able treasurer attended a meeting about good governance for Charities and this will help keep us on the straight and narrow in the coming years. We also have plans for a larger polytunnel where we can grow into the ground ,extending our season and expanding our range of crops. There is a confidence now we have the skills to embrace this marvellous opportunity .This new polytunnel may well expand the community interest in the field and provide the chance to have all weather growing. Its only a rumour that we also plan to outfit it with hammocks and deckchairs!

Finally this is my third and final year as the chair of the Trustees who manage your organisation. It has been a very satisfying role. It has been humbling to witness the hard work, passion and commitment of so many volunteers. I hope you continue to find satisfaction .You deserve to! Thanks also to the wider membership who through their subscription, encouragement and purchase of flowers and veg give their invaluable support. Finally, special thanks to my fellow Trustees for their constant support and the wide variety of roles they fulfil.

Linda Simpson