

## Chairperson's Report for Dunkeld and Birnam Community Growing SCIO 2016

This report will expand on issues significant to this year of our project in the three areas of our charitable remit : organic growing ,biodiversity and community involvement and education. I also intend to quote from the poems entered to the Summerfest competition. Growing vegetables ,fruit and flowers through our entertaining Scottish weather is extremely interesting ...so although the folk in the village may see the end result - our wonderful, ample and delicious produce on the stalls -the growing team has certainly been challenged this year and not just by the weather.....

The deer ate our overwintering swedes in January. Then, flocks of pigeons made short work of two sowings of peas and beans before we realized what was happening. A flock of pheasants came to feast in October. In February, we noticed small white eggs on the overwintering kale and, from then on, we have had an explosion of slugs at the field. These voracious creatures ate up most of the courgette plants the children in the Beavers planted out in May and then went on to feast on the courgettes themselves. Similarly the beetroot has proved very attractive..... and beans and carrots and lettuce and brassica and spinach... even potatoes.

John Small cleverly referenced this in his winning poem at the Summerfest. He had fun with the titles of some of Louis Armstrong's songs and came up with the verse

Did you ever shout Jeepers!  
At the Creepers  
Burrowing through your spuds!

We have had some success in reducing slug numbers with beer traps but basically the slugs are winning. Apparently, the average garden has between twenty and thirty thousand slugs. Only 5% of these can be spotted at any one time They keep active if the temperature is above 5° C and they can travel about 150 feet per hour. How do we deal with all this?!

In some ways these invasions have been good for us. They forced us to make repeat sowings and plantings which was to be one of our aims this year. We have been helped in this by the purchase of an Earthway mechanical seed sower. We certainly haven't mastered its potential yet but it does help to keep the earth covered with a crop, dissuading weeds from taking over. However, nearly all our spinach this year was sown and harvested single-handedly over the season by Hari. Claire experimented with repeat sowings of a whole variety of salad crops- all to our benefit .Thank you.

Crops which have grown merrily without complaint are onions, red and white, now stored and leeks, thousands of them still standing on their carpet of black mulching fabric. Garlic and fruit also had a good year .The field carrot crop has been excellent and delicious. In fact, we are delighted with the harvest from all our crops as you will have seen at the stalls.

As Lizzie Small wrote

From the tatties to the kale there  
Is nothing better the fresh veg being  
Eaten on the day it was picked rather than being  
Left on the shelf in Tesco until its sell-by  
Date arrives.

Perhaps even we are feeling rather relieved that we don't have to relive the season when we harvested and stored hundreds of marrows below Kettles!

For the record ,we sent 93 bags of broad beans down to the stalls ,70 bags of runner beans ,186 of French beans ,127 bunches of beetroot,282 bags of carrots,72 bunches of flowers,131 bags of kale ,104 bags of salad leaves,354 bags of potatoes, 236 bags of spinach!!

There are wider ecological questions about the issue of sharing our produce with this array of other creatures. The range of answers to these questions can depend on what your values and beliefs are. Yes, even growing vegetables quietly, locally, no hullabaloo generates debate!

Where are the slugs natural predators? toads, thrushes, hedgehogs et cetera .Should we promote these ? How much should we intervene in the cycle of growth and decline which nature gives us? Has a slug as much right to eat as we have? Should we allow the hard work and time given by our volunteer gardeners to be disregarded by allowing pests to claim part of the harvest?

As touched on already, our experiences with the slugs have been humbling. It is tricky getting our efforts to promote biodiversity quite right, trying to build up variety in nature. Promoting biodiversity is a way of investing in our future by growing and encouraging a broader stronger base to resist threats to our very existence such as disease, climate change and soil degradation. If it is so important, why is it so difficult to achieve?

It was with all these considerations in mind that we planted our wild harvest hedge( of hazel blackthorn , crab apple, dog rose, elder) some years ago now .It is growing well and indeed will need a good cut back in the coming weeks. Did you have the pleasure of seeing our beautiful and welcoming Scottish native wildflower patch? Sandy Howe took the lead with this and Jim Sutton, Dave Roberts and Michael Trafford helped him sow it. Seed has been saved from it and the plan is to double this area next year .As well as the array of wonderful poppies , marigolds and other cottage flowers which Maddy Hand and Jim Sutton tended ,we sowed phacaelia which the bees adore and yarrow along plot edges too to boost food supplies for insects . An inspection and clean up of the bird boxes showed that three out of four families had reared young there.

We reduced our potato growing area to one plot last year .This is an attempt to maintain a healthy crop rotation, discouraging diseases and pests from building up in the soil, and to reduce the number of hours of digging required to remove volunteer or rogue potatoes. One knowledgeable suggestion for cleaning and turning over the potato plot is to invite a couple of pigs to visit in February for a few weeks and let them turn it over .As yet we haven't fully decided on that step. In the meantime, we are extremely grateful to George Ness and the diesel vintage tractor for ploughing, harrowing, putting up tattie dreels, lifting tatties, moving dung, topping long grass and in general being an excellent source of advice.

Another significant feature of growing organically is in the use of natural fertiliser, mostly horse manure. As well as dung from the horses adjacent to us, we received vast quantities of manure this year from the horses at Scotstoun farm, transported by Graeme Tinto. Please remember to wash your veg!

Our three new huge compost bins are in active use as we have plenty of green waste to compost . More awkward for us is finding the quantity of brown waste such as wood chippings or shredded cardboard needed to generate the right conditions to really compost this down.

A welcome new facility on the field is our eco loo. It provides a comfortable private space and is actually rather attractive with the honeysuckle growing up it. Raymond Simpson designed the shed and Kenny Allan built it .We received a donation from the hill runners which paid for the actual loo and a micro grant via the Community Council for the shed. If I can quote from an unsuccessful but accurate poem entered to the Summerfest competition.

We love our produce roots leaves and fruits.  
We compost everything weeds pee and poops!

We have a separate bin for the humanure!!!

This notion of variety and ecosystems puts me in mind of our own project, our organisation, our team effort. Just as with biodiversity, it is difficult to get communication quite right.

Barbara Dunlop gave us something to aspire to when she wrote

If all the world were like the field  
worked in happy community ,  
drawing from diverse talents  
respecting of all.

Something to aim for indeed!

Specifically, when we asked you to collaborate in the summer round of harvesting ,packing, transporting and selling at our twice weekly stalls, you responded generously, taking on roles at specific time slots as you are able .This was coordinated by Elspeth Baillie and proved to be not only successful but also somehow bonding. It made the organisation itself feel stronger and more resilient. So, on behalf of us all, I'd like to thank everyone who played a part and especially Elspeth. There are other ways in which a small job done occasionally could help make the field go smoothly and ,encouraged by this summer, we could experiment with inviting those of you with less time and energy to do a little bit .

Some volunteers are however the backbone of the growing year who give many hours ,hopefully happy hours ,to our project.. People such as Jim Sutton ,Ginny Carlton, Claire Ash, Hari, Dave Roberts, William Hogg and many more. A special acknowledgement to them, please .Also to Lorna Walker who tended the stalls from the start of the season to the Summerfest with her usual flair.

The Summerfest this year was especially successful. We were blessed with fine weather. It was rewarding to see so many people enjoying being at the field. This was also the start of an ambitious and entertaining series of events on the issue of climate change organized by Live Earth, Birnam.

We are delighted to have local people up to the field.

A class from The Royal School of Dunkeld and the Beavers planted leeks and courgette plants. Just last month, we hosted a very memorable and enjoyable visit from the two and three-year-olds in the playgroup. A group we labelled the dads did some powerful work installing an industrial sink and soak away area .All these connections and shared experiences! Can we call this educational ? I think so .

William wrote a song to the It's a Wonderful World tune .One verse says

There's people chatting , as flowers grow,  
we learn together and soon we know,  
what a wonderful world ,is our own local field .  
what a wonderful world is our own local field.

We are invited regularly to speak to other groups about the field and to show people round. I went down Whitmuir, East Lothian to give a talk and slides about how our community supports our growing. John Small delivered a talk to a conference here held in Birnam Arts discussing issues around land, its ownership and use. Dave Roberts escorted a group from Blairgowrie round as they pondered how they might start something similar to the field.

It is fair to say that the field is an inspiration to many. We do hope it will continue to thrive. More than ever, projects like this are needed - a cooperative venture which has a positive environmental impact and which brings such pleasure in the form of wholesome food. Thank you all for being part of this.

Linda Simpson

