

## HOBBY GARDENING IN THE ALLOTMENTS

The allotments came into being with the Act of Enclosure in 1852. They were then intended to provide relatively large spaces for people to graze their animals and cultivate their crops within the boundaries of the village in which they lived. The space for allotments has shrunk dramatically in recent years because of lack of interest in cultivating them. They are now universally referred to by allotment holders in Shipton, Milton and Ascott as places of convivial camaraderie for hobby gardeners.

Milton is reputed to have the best organised allotment users and I was told by one that it is a great form of exercise, everyone looks after each other, and no one particularly worries if the allotment holder has more enthusiasm than knowledge, as there is plenty of free advice floating around. Shipton has quite a few unused allotments and those who do cultivate in Shipton tell me that it is difficult to be entirely organic these days because there are so many really persistent pests and weeds that one needs something pretty strong to deal with them.

Rationalisation has tidied up the Ascott allotments which are located on land belonging to the Cornbury Estate. There are only two people from Ascott using the allotments, so a great many are available there.

One of the original purposes of the allotments was to provide for the poor and needy, but one allotment holder has told me he wonders where all the poor and needy people have gone...to the supermarket, perhaps? The younger generation seems more interested in computer generated virtual vegetables than in cultivating them! Rhubarb, leeks and various brassicas are the most pest resistant crops, I hear, and therefore the easiest to cultivate, but some people are successful with potatoes, onions, cabbages, runner beans, french beans, beetroot, and carrots. Roger Taylor in Shipton is mad about parsnips but can't get them to germinate, I bet he would appreciate any tips you may have!

The enemies, of course, are ever present. The top enemy is the weather, which frequently fails to cooperate, although there are water troughs. The birds are always interested in soft fruits, and so netting to keep them out is essential for a successful crop of berries. Local ruffians have been known to make off with garden equipment whilst the allotment holder takes a well deserved break from tilling the soil. Not all dog owners show respect for the allotments, and some fail to keep their dogs from treading on carefully planted seedlings, and allow their animals to foul the area. Dog poo is definitely not organic and should always be collected and taken away. But, despite the enemies, there is a great deal of satisfaction which comes from cooking up the vegetables you have carefully grown yourself.

In rough terms the average allotment is about 70 metres by about seven metres, but they are not all the same size, and vary from village to village. In some cases, it may be possible to take only half an allotment if you are new at the job. Now is the time of year to obtain your seed packets and join your fellow villagers. Gardening is the English passion so why not join the fun and apply for an allotment from the clerk of your local parish council.