

## PESTS ON THE ALLOTMENT

My general attitude towards pests is “live and let live”. The quantities of vegetables and fruit which I grow in the garden and on the allotment are great enough so as to be able to afford losses to pests. Also, a key part of my strategy is to grow as wide a variety of crops as possible, so that if there is a severe pest attack against a particular fruit or vegetable there will be plenty of other crops to eat instead.

Another reason for my “live and let live” strategy is that I want to be as truly organic as possible. The very long term effects of pesticides are not known – and I would rather not find out the hard way.

There is the monetary aspect also – pesticides are expensive, especially where continuous spraying throughout the season is called-for. Supermarket fruit and vegetables have been subjected to multiple doses of pesticides during their cultivation. On average, crops are sprayed 5 times per year – up to 11 times for potatoes. Even “organic” farmers are allowed to spray 7 types of chemicals onto crops. We can avoid the side effects of those chemicals, and avoid the cost, by growing our own crops and avoiding pesticides if at all possible.

I must add here that one has to bear in mind that most insect pests have natural predators. If there is a pest attack on my crops then the abundance of “food” will attract their predators who will devour them with gusto. I give as an example the annual attacks my asparagus plants suffer from asparagus beetles which eat the green foliage and stop growth (this is after one has taken the crop). I used to lightly dust the foliage with derris dust, a natural insecticide, which worked. Then I had the idea of leaving an infected plant and waiting to see what happened. After a few days the asparagus beetles had disappeared. Evidently a predator (I know not which) had made the most of a golden opportunity. Another example of a natural predator is that of wasps attacking flea beetles. I had a bad attack of flea beetles on my brassicas and along came a wasp. You should have seen the wasp operate! It moved quickly along the leaf and all the flea beetles in its path miraculously disappeared – the speed of the wasp’s mopping up operation was faster than the human eye could detect.

Nevertheless, there are times when, if one does nothing about a pest, one loses one’s entire crop, so what do we do? Here are some of my solutions:

1. **Badgers.** About 1995 the badgers developed a taste for the sweetcorn on my allotment. They also ate my entire crop of grapes. The Badger Trust said that the only remedy was to put a bare wire round my plot, about a foot off the ground, with 12,000 volts on it. I did not particularly want my neighbours on the allotments to have a shocking experience so that idea was no good. So I grew my sweetcorn in our (enclosed) garden and raised my grapes from wires 18 inches off the ground to 4 feet. Both techniques worked.
2. **Muntjac Deer.** In our area there are many muntjac deer and one seems to have our allotments as its territory. For years a deer grazed my sorrel right down to the ground in the middle of winter (the hoofprints identified the culprit). I did not mind – sorrel is perennial and puts forth new shoots every spring so there was no real harm done. However, in 2005 the deer went for my carrots, to the extent of digging down with its hooves to graze the carrot lower and lower. I grow delicious organic carrots! It is almost impossible to keep deer out. One tip I did hear was to put lion dung round one’s plot but waiting behind a lion with a bucket seems somewhat hazardous to me. My latest idea is to put fine mesh netting over the carrots. The jury is still out.
3. **Pigeons.** For 30 years I planted out my brassicas and down came the pigeons and ate a few leaves. I did not mind. When planting out, I surmised, one should perhaps reduce the amount of foliage so that the roots can cope better with being transplanted, so the pigeons were probably doing me a favour. They hardly ever ate the growing point and never came back later in the season. Then in 2005 there was an abrupt change in their behaviour. They did come

back later in the season and stripped my brassicas down to bare stalks and the plants hardly recovered. That happened again the following year so now I net my brassicas from the time they are planted out to harvest time. I simply drape a loose large net over the brassica plot and weigh the sides down with bricks. The net is large enough to allow the plants to grow properly – there is no need for a wooden frame. It works.

4. **Cabbage-White Butterflies.** Following on from the above the other pest affecting my brassicas has been the familiar cabbage-white butterfly which lays its eggs on the leaves and, if unchecked, the resulting caterpillars strip the plants of all their foliage. I used to leave them to it in the old days, when the damage was slight, but since 2005 our allotments have been hit by a veritable plague of the monsters. The same net as mentioned above was the solution. I chose an extremely small mesh size, about a quarter-inch, which kept them out completely. The bricks all round did not leave any gaps for the butterflies to pass under the net. When they did alight on a leaf covered by the mesh (and that happened almost every minute of every day throughout the summer) they still did not lay their eggs. The mesh must have put them off. Perhaps they lay their eggs only under the brassica leaves. One can also use derris dust, which is effective, but I prefer the net.
5. **Flea Beetles.** Now to a real problem, or a real problem for me. The flea beetles seem to come suddenly. One day there are none and the next day any members of the brassica family (including radishes, swedes, etc) are covered in flea beetles. The only reasonably organic remedy seems to be derris dust, which does work. However, it is the speed of the attack which causes the problem for me. As an example, I sowed some swedes, spring cabbages and late spring broccoli at the end of July, and watered the patch daily because of the extremely hot and dry conditions. Up came the seedlings and all was well until they were about two inches high. Then in one night they were grazed to the ground by flea beetles – completely wiped out. The only solution I can think of to avoid that in future years is to puff derris dust along the row at the time of seed sowing and repeat as necessary during the period of early growth. Flea beetles do not seem to be around during the usual sowing period of March/April but sowings done in the middle of the summer are at high risk.
6. **Slugs and Snails.** Despite being on top of the chalky Chilterns, my allotment is fortunate in having a layer of clay under one foot of topsoil – ideal for moisture retention and ideal for slugs and snails. On average there are supposed to be 60 slugs per square foot in the UK but I'm sure that I have many times that figure. (Most slugs never come to the surface so I can't count them.) I also mulch heavily with well-rotted farmyard manure and my slugs and snails think they are in heaven. So how do we give them an accelerated passage to heaven? I'm afraid to confess that I use slug pellets. Because of the problem of songthrushes eating poisoned snails, I nearly always cover the particular plot with horticultural fleece thus keeping out birds. In March I sow most varieties of seed, apply slug pellets and cover the plot. In March I also cover my extensive strawberry beds with fleece and keep the fleece on until the plants have fruited. When the first strawberries are green I apply slug pellets to the plot and re-cover with fleece (which serves also to keep out the strawberry-devouring birds). My asparagus bed and celery/celeriac plot receive similar treatment. There are of course many plants which are not on the slug's and snail's menu, such as sweetcorn, the marrow family, beetroot and other fruit so there is no need to use slug pellets for them. Potatoes are a special case. What I do there is to plant the tubers early, in March, and cover the plot with fleece to give protection against frost – and to make them crop early. The fleece comes off at the end of May, having been pushed up by the growing plants. I crop the potatoes in the middle of August before the slugs have ascended from deep down in the moist clay, where they hide when the soil above them becomes too dry in the middle of summer. Cropped early, my potatoes are not too damaged by slugs. Another tip is to go for red-skinned varieties of potato such as *desirée* – the slugs prefer white-skinned potatoes.

7. **Mice.** Although there are many mice on the allotments the only damage I have suffered has been to broad bean seed - just as they germinate the mice move along the row, digging up every bean. The solution is to soak the seed in paraffin just before sowing. The mice are literally put off the scent. The same solution can be used for peas.
  
8. **Two-legged Pests.** My crops are out in the open for anyone to take, and there is a public footpath running right through the allotments. Since I took on the allotment in 1973 I have suffered hardly any losses through vandalism or theft. I rely on the fact that modern youth would not recognise a vegetable unless it is in a plastic pack with a sell-by date!

So there you have my approach to pests. My main approach is to “live and let live”, but I do have to take action in some cases. Happy gardening!

MIKE MASON