

Marston Community Forest Garden

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to log reflections and learning as the Community Forest Garden evolves.

How it started

Richard and Antony met at a permaculture project in West Hill Farm that didn't get off the ground.

Oxford Real Farming Conference and the compunction to do something to help restore the ecology in Oxford provided impetus.

Alistair, active in co-creating Marston Community Gardening, learnt about the 40% unoccupancy rates of [Court Place Farm Allotments](#) in Old Marston and advocated for residents to rent them.

A refresh of the Allotment Committee resulted in energy for change. A proposition to take on a block of 6, co-terminus allotments was well received. Initial concerns about what could be done with the space were addressed and work began.

Within the requirements of the allotment association, plots were leased on an individual basis but with the understanding they would be worked collectively. The intent was to use the space for growing perennial fruit and vegetables as opposed to annuals drawing on permaculture principles such as 'no dig.

In light of a very dry summer in 2018, when the Allotment Association paid significant water bills for piped water supply, the merit of climate adapted approaches became clear. Behind the initiative is the recognition of the value of ecological approaches, climate adaptation approaches, and building community by working in nature together.

Resources we accessed

The positive mindset of the new Allotment Committee to think broadly about the allotment potential and how to work within the historical laws that define allotment activity meant options could be explored openly.

We benefited from the energy, commitment and persistence of people with vision who see possibilities rather than barriers (Alistair, Richard, Antony).

Friends and neighbours concerned about the environment and wanting to do something added to the mix. There was latent energy for action, supported by personal finance, that could be and was tapped. The initial group included those with knowledge (permaculture, ecology, gardening); those willing to do physical labouring work; those with cash and a commitment to invest unconditionally in the project as their way of taking action; those with large-scale coordination and people skills. The mix of capabilities meant everyone had a place in the initiative.

Members of the Oxford Community Payback Team¹ helped break the back of the clearing work.

¹ [Community Payback](#) is the term used to refer to any work done as part of an Unpaid Work requirement within a Community Sentence or Suspended Sentence Order.

The Court Place Farm Allotments has a regular supply of woodchip, extremely useful as a slow release food source for the soil, suppressing weeds and reducing dehydration. Large pieces of cardboard were routinely collected from food and cycle shops and laid beneath the woodchip in the early days.

The evolution of the space

We named the space and connected with it. Those who leased the plots came together to look at the space and imagine its future. A pathway was made through the chest high bramble bushes, Michaelmas Daisies and nettles making the centre of the space visible. A sign was constructed on the apex of the area to explain to passers-by what was happening.

In early October 2019, once nesting birds were no longer occupying the space, work began with the help of Members of the Community Payback Team to cut back the overgrown vegetation. Small chunks of time from group members helped guide the activity and reinforce to the Team that their efforts were worthwhile.

The space had laid vacant for many years. Permaculture wisdom says observe and listen before taking action. Know your space as well as you can. How does the land manage excess water? What is the direction of the sun and which spaces will get protection? The land told us where the pond was needed. The initial proposed position was a few metres out!

A magnificent old Oak Tree (perhaps 30 years old) was identified as the natural gathering place on the periphery of the site. A tall, wide willow could not offer more than it took away given its position and impact on light. As we wanted to create space to plant trees that would generate produce, in December 2019, the willow was heavily pollarded. New shoots would be used for weaving in due course. Finer branches were made into brush bundles to protect newly planted bushes and trees. Thicker limbs were stacked at the edge.

Initial work was to cut back vegetation. No roots were pulled out. By spring, everything would sprout again. Getting the cardboard and wood chip down was another priority. In January 2020, more woodchip was spread. A dead hedge was constructed from the excess brush on the northern boundary as notional protection of the space and a haven for wildlife. Slowly, the place started to take shape.

By 8 February 2020, much of the cleared area had been covered with cardboard and wood chip ready for planting. On a blustery 9 February, nine of us learnt how to plant the alder, damsons, greengage, apple and pear trees. We also planted red, black and white currant bushes and one gooseberry. The nut trees will go in later. Cara impregnated some logs with mushroom spores. Time will tell if they will take off. We wassailed around the first tree to be planted and then at the end, wishing the bushes and trees well and asking for good crops once they are ready. We left them all protected by the brush bundles and hoped the deer would leave them be.

On 8 March, we returned to marvel at the new growth on happy bushes and planted more. Now the Walnut tree, two apple trees, raspberry, gooseberry and other fruit bushes are installed. It looks as though the deer have passed by but perhaps nothing is yet at the tempting stage. All the bushes and trees still looked in good shape. Long may that last!

By 25 March we were in lockdown in the UK due to the CoronaVirus (Covid-19) Pandemic. We were allowed to exercise once a day, shop for essentials once a week and otherwise remain at home. Spending time at the Forest Garden felt like legitimate physical activity! Hearing a Green Finch nearby and seeing a bumble bee and butterfly in the sunshine suggested Spring had sprung!

Antony and Richard marked out the pond as Annie and Rhian picked out the nettles and thistles around the newly planted bushes and trees. We restocked the brushwood around the tender plants and Richard replanted the raspberry plants he inadvertently uprooted in his attempt to take up brambles!

Despite the continued Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, 5 of us made it to the Garden on 8 April, careful to remain physically distant. The warmth of the day was exceptional drawing out sun hats, shorts, shirt sleeves and an Orange Tip butterfly. Whilst Alistair and Richard used the chainsaw to clear paths through the boundary wood, Annie, Isobel and Rhian continued the weeding job. Antony prepared the areas for the unplanted trees with cardboard and woodchip. Near the end of the day, Made arrived and shared his wisdom of forest gardening in Indonesia.

Made's advice was to build up the mulch layer to 30-40cm and top the weeds that emerge. Digging for roots was not what would be done in real forests! Build up the mulch and let nature do the rest. We should keep the mulch away from the plant stems, creating 'a disc' around the stems so they can breathe. He recommended piling up the mulch around each plant, creating a mound effect. This would be part of a water management strategy, to reduce the chance of waterlogging in the clay soil and a way to keep the soil warm so worms and beetles could do their thing.

In real forests, people would not plan to wait for fruits of labour. Made suggested planting beans in the deep mulch (laying them on the soil and covering them), relatively close together to outcompete the weeds. He also recommended planting the wild spinach that grows near coastal paths. 'Act as though you are starving' he said! And keep mulching!

This is what we did. Over a couple of sessions, we (Sue, Cara, and Rhian) weeded around the bushes, enhanced the woodchip layer to make mounds around the bushes, and planted beans and greens (Antony and Rob). Isobel attacked the compost heap, cutting the branches into smaller pieces for faster rotting. With our first good dose of rain for some time, the brambles, nettles, Michaelmas Daisies and thistles will continue their claim on the area. In the meantime, Annie and her daughter planted Wood Anemone and Blue Bells in the wooded area to enjoy next spring.

Turning mistakes into possibilities

Although the Community Payback Team is supervised, sometimes people use their own initiative. In many ways this is to be celebrated and most of the time, it can be accommodated or might be welcomed. Overzealous attack of a Hawthorn Tree 'to increase the airflow' made the base of the tree more exposed to drying out. Spreading of wood chips without a good layering of cardboard resulted in double-handling the resource. Richard's attempt to deal with brambles without realising the raspberries looked similar meant they were uprooted in error! These and more things will happen and will all form part of the Forest's great tapestry! It will survive us!

The impact on wellbeing

There is no doubt that working outside and with others has had a valuable impact. We have been fortunate with dry days each time we meet. As an inexperienced worker, once you know what is required of you and are clear how to do it, you can establish your own rhythm. It is hard for 'completer finishers' as there is so much to do. Setting your own boundaries is important. Sometimes a time deadline works best. For some, it is completing a job. Whatever it is, it helps doing it with others. You can celebrate progress together.

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