



Tom Durkan amid the latest damage. Picture by Ann Bronkhorst.

Fuchsias and foxes

By Ann Bronkhorst

In a corner of St. Pancras and Islington Cemetery is the Horticultural Resource Centre where all Islington's bedding plants are grown and where adults with learning difficulties train as gardeners. One afternoon in early October the Centre's autumn open day was winding down and Tom Durkan, the site supervisor, had time to talk.

During his thirty years at the Centre, Tom has seen many changes. Since becoming supervisor he has promoted sustainable growing methods avoiding the use of chemicals such as weed killers. Now toads and insects (good ones!) thrive and beekeepers have established successful hives. In spite of dense housing to the north and west Tom often sees foxes and feral cats sunbathing on top of the growing tunnels and bird life has increased.

What's the secret?

Most gardeners will approve of the Centre's replacement of peat by coir fibre. Plastic pots are used but recycled after five years; Tom still mourns the old terracotta pots. An iron-rich seaweed foliar feed partly accounts for the healthy plants but the tender loving care they receive

from Tom and his two growers must be a factor. Simply, he loves his work: "I still get a buzz at germination time."

Planting schemes

To see the results, Tom recommends visiting Finsbury and Canonbury squares and St. Mary Magdalen Church, Holloway Road. Using his plants and bold designs Islington won the Bronze medal in last year's London in Bloom competition. This summer he combined black millet, arbutus, ornamental maize and dark purple hibiscus to stunning effect.

Learning horticulture

The training unit, which has a high ratio of staff to students, produced its first 'graduates' in September 2003. It is hoped that the course will expand and enquiries about it are welcomed. The students design and plant

out beds nearby in the cemetery, learn how to build steps and paths and are taught about organic gardening.

"There's something very calming about growing plants," Tom says, but it must be hard to remain calm when precious stock is destroyed by vandals, tunnels slashed and glasshouses broken. About £5,000 worth of damage was done this year, none of it by high winds or animals. Tom hopes that if more local people and school groups visit the Centre fewer children will wish to damage plants and greenhouses in the future. Meanwhile, he and his team clear up the mess and work on with dedication – and the proverbial *green fingers*.

The Horticultural Resource Centre can be contacted on 020 8444 9185.

If you go down to the woods tomorrow...

By Ann Bronkhorst

... you may see encouraging signs of regeneration. In Coldfall Wood, this fragment of ancient forest, with its fascinating traces of Ice Age geology, will soon receive an injection of money from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

On 5 October the Friends of Coldfall Wood and Muswell Hill Playing Field were given the good news by David Bevan, Haringey Council Conservation Officer. He explained that the GLA's biodiversity plan for the whole of London includes a Capital Woodlands Project. Over one million pounds have been allocated to the six 'flagship woods' selected; our little wood's share is likely to be at least £100,000.

By the end of this financial year a detailed bid must be in, specifying a programme to meet the needs of Coldfall Wood.

Repairs to paths, renewal of bridges and solving water pollution are some proposals already made. Others concern coppice management and woodland ecology.

Ancient woodland

David Bevan says that Coldfall Wood is the most natural of the four remnants of ancient woodland in Haringey and has few 'alien' plants and trees. It is dominated by English oaks, most of which are sound, and by hornbeams. Coppicing of the hornbeams, re-started in the 1990s by David, lets in light, allowing wild flowers to germinate.

At a meeting on 19 October attended by Linda Alliston and Mark Kobayashi-Hillary from Friends of Coldfall Wood detailed proposals were discussed. Consultations with local users of the wood are planned; notices of future meetings will be announced in the press and posted in the wood, or visit the website www.coldfallwood.info, or email info@coldfallwood.info.

Coldfall Wood's Ice Age connection featured last month in Alan Titchmarsh's BBC1 programme, British Isles: a Natural History. – Ed

Wildlife diary

By Linda Mitchell

There have been some interesting observations since I last wrote about my garden wildlife back in March.

I was so pleased at the end of March to see two ladybirds on the same day as they are now very infrequent visitors to the garden, but a few more appeared in June, and took great delight in landing on me and biting!

Bees, bats and butterflies

There were many different species of bees this summer; I saw lots of sizes and colours all at one time, buzzing on the *ceanothus*, looking very bright with their great fat saddlebags of pollen.

Butterflies were again plentiful, and I was pleased to spot a few of the Red Admiral type.

I saw one lone frog all summer, but in mid-April quite a few bats were flying about at dusk.

... and birds too

The swifts arrived a little later, and it was lovely to see the blue tits using the nesting box this year for the first time. The resulting little ones kept mum and dad very busy catching their dinner. A robin hatched out three babies, one of which became quite tame, even flying in to have a look around the conservatory.

Although they didn't come into my garden, I saw four herons fly over in one week, two of which were being chased off by a large 'murder' of crows.

I was surprised to see the sparrow hawk back in early July. He tried to take a pigeon, but failed in his gruesome deed. It was upsetting, though, to find a young dead woodpecker. It had no apparent injury. Sadder still to see mum feeding alone.

As I write, spiders are making webs everywhere and autumn is upon us. I shall continue to look out for the wildlife in my garden.

Archer footnote: The southern counties of England have been invaded by the Harlequin ladybird. It is large (6-8mm long), with black and orange or red markings in varying combinations, but always has a W or M mark between its head and wing covers. When stressed, it emits a foul-smelling yellow liquid from its legs, which can trigger allergic reactions.

Aphid expert Dr Michael Majerus warns that it could wipe out half the native species. If you can capture one, it should be sent in a sealed matchbox or film container to Dr Majerus, Dept of Genetics, Cambridge University, CB2 3EH.



Preparing for winter. Photo by John Dearing

All over East Finchley, grey squirrels are busily gathering (and eating or storing away) as much food as possible for the coming winter, and perhaps as a result, they are much tamer than usual. This one was photographed, outside the East Finchley Constitutional Club.

RSPCA news

By Mary Atkinson

The Autumn Fair at the clinic last month was very successful. £175 was raised which goes towards running expenses and subsidising health care for companion animals. The Christmas Fair will again be at the Clinic on 11 December from 11am to 2pm. This time mince pies and soup will be added to the popular jacket potatoes.

The RSPCA Animal Centre has a regular intake of retired greyhounds looking for new homes. Greyhounds are gentle, loving dogs who appreciate a quiet restful life when their racing careers have ended. Despite their performance on the track they do not need a lot of vigorous exercise! Anyone interested should visit Southridge. It

is a short drive into the country at Packhorse Lane, Ridge, Potters Bar. Open to visitors Monday to Saturday from 11am to 4.30pm and Sunday from 1 to 4.30pm. Closed on Wednesdays.

If you would like a home visitor to talk to you about what re-homing companion animals entails ring 020 8444 8366 to arrange an appointment.