

Allotment Gardening, just gardening or promoting wildlife too?

I am a member of Greenfields Allotments, a site in the north of the town where members garden away, producing fruit, vegetables and flowers for home consumption. But noting both the anecdotal and scientific evidence of the dire situation of wildlife in the UK and the potential wildlife losses due to the pending construction of the North West Relief Road, as a minor mitigation I have developed a wildflower meadow and sited a wildlife pond.

Some members commented 'What about Health and Safety with that pond?' 'Its only about fruit and veg here...' and 'What's all this then?' referring to the wildflower hay meadow. That sent me on the hunt to enquire where I stood with the Greenfields Association and with the site owners, Shrewsbury Town Council.

I checked out the 'Constitution of Greenfields Allotment Holders Association' most recent copy in my possession dated 23 September 2007. Its three sides of A4, the only mention of wildlife is as an activity that must not take up more than 15% of the area of the plot in rule 3:

'Plots must be kept in a tidy, safe, productive and cultivated state. While it is accepted that cultivation activity varies during the year, in general no more than 15% of a plot should be left uncultivated. Uncultivated areas might include lawns, paths, sheds, greenhouses, fallow areas or wildlife areas.'

This seems to be more about mitigating wildlife rather than enhancing it.

Allotments Legal Status:

The **Small Holdings & Allotment Act of 1908** stipulates that the local council of any borough, district or parish has a legal obligation to provide allotments, provided at least six tax payers from that region make such a request in writing. The Act's been updated a couple of times since then, but as long as a site is not deemed to be temporary or on private land, the act still applies. Clearly this legislation stems from an era when the key objective of allotment tenants was seen to be the production of food.

Scroll forward 110 years or so and the legislation still stands, hence its perhaps not surprising that the overwhelming emphasis on management of allotments is still with the production of food.

Current position in Shrewsbury:

Sites mentioned on the Shrewsbury Town Council web site run to a total of 37.41 acres and 495 plots. This is a substantial land holding, all within the town boundary and with the potential for the enhancement of conservation and the protection of wildlife. Commonly allotment members subscribe for one half or even one quarter of a plot, hence it appears that around 1000 or more individuals might be encouraged to participate in wildlife friendly gardening.

The Town Council website accessed on 18 July 2021 states:

Remember, your allotment is primarily for the growing of fruit and vegetables for you and your family.

Although there is a nod towards the environment:

Allotments can benefit the environment in a number of ways. They provide valuable green space within our towns and cities, making them more environmentally friendly, sustainable and attractive places to live. They can also provide a varied and valued habitat for wild plants and animals. Locally grown food does not have to be transported long distances, which all helps reduce pollution and road traffic.

So it appears that there is scope within existing provisions to enhance wildlife on the town's allotments, but in my experience the interest in this and the provision by Allotment Associations and individuals is at best modest.

Society has changed considerably since 1908 when the Allotments Act was passed. Should not the rationale for allotmenting move away from the production of food towards wildlife enhancement, or perhaps the twin objectives of food and wildlife enhancement?

Draft Action Plan:

A survey of the current status of the Town's allotment sites for habitat diversity and the attitudes of occupiers to conservation.

Application for grant funding towards agreed plans.

Changes to websites, tenancy agreements and Allotment Association constitutions to further promote wildlife alongside food production.

A project of education, training and provision of wildlife friendly habitats on allotment sites, should conservation potential be found.

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