

The Allotment Journey

An idea takes root...

The idea of having an allotment was one of several thoughts after a CAFOD presentation in the autumn 2017. Following further exploratory discussions between representatives of the parish and the school we agreed to have a joint Holy Innocents' Parish/School project with the clear objectives of establishing an allotment, equipping children with the knowledge of growing a few simple crops and at the same time raising awareness of food waste, not to mention packaging, and the harm it does to the environment.

Did you know that over one-third of all global food produced is wasted mostly in developed countries like ours and finds its way into land-fill sites? By reducing food waste will help go some way to help cut Green House Gas (GHG) emissions as producing food (agriculture) is a major contributor

A promising start...

We spoke to everyone that could provide advice gardeners, allotment growers, plant nurseries including Coolings at Knockholt, who deserve a special mention as they were extremely helpful, and gave us some great advice. Part-way through our exploratory discussions, which seemed at first a little daunting, finding the right site, constructing raised beds, importing top soil, let alone choosing which plants to grow? We discovered to our amazement that in the school grounds there was a disused allotment with four raised beds and a large statue of Our Lady within sight. A promising start!

Admittedly overgrown and neglected but a ready-made site and while the soil analysis was poor, described by our various experts as 'friable', 'dead' and unlikely to be able to support growing anything let alone simple crops! But that was before we put 'into the deep' for volunteers.

Call for help

We asked at weekend Masses and in the Newsletter for help with the project to help prep the site (phase 1) and also for volunteers to work with the children on the allotment to grow the crops, and help with the other elements of the project to reuse, recycle and raise awareness of the need to reduce food waste (phase 2). The response for help from HI parishioners was simply overwhelming, from hands on support to prayers, sharing knowledge, great enthusiasm and encouragement!

Site Prep

To begin, we must mention the heroic efforts of Keith and Roni Brand who were the first on site when temperatures were blistering! Keith's tiller had to visit the workshop after one visit-But inspired by their great efforts our enthusiastic group, especially, Chris Brand, Kim Warner, Kathy Ring, Sr. Lucy, Tony, Agi and Sofia Corkery, Nick Peel, Ian Wilson and others who set to work in July 2018 and by the end of that month all four raised beds had been dug, weeds removed and roots of old trees hacked. The remaining soil was vigorously tilled (in the absence of Keith's tiller), Clifford Longley stepped in to supply his tiller, and the soil was improved but we recognised it would still need enriching with good quality top soil-over 1.5 metric tonnes, plus a good dose of nutrients donated by Coolings.

Challenges...

However, new soil could not be added to the beds as the sleepers around each raised bed were, to coin a phrase 'a bit flippy/floppy' unable to sustain the addition of further top-soil and unsafe for volunteers/children who would be working in and around the beds.

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Solutions and hurdles

Luckily for us, Michael, Conrad and Phalim Davey, came to the rescue with huge screws and brackets and the raised beds were expertly repaired, then covered with protective sheeting. This took place during August/September.2018.

But obtaining the top soil took a little longer than anticipated and it arrived in November! However, the 40 bags containing the soil were delivered to the school car park, a considerable distance from the allotment. This would require loading the bags into car boots to be driven close to the allotment, unloaded into wheelbarrows to access the site, a truly uphill task! But when Michael, Phalim and Conrad answered the call for help we all breathed a sigh of relief! Using one vehicle, they loaded/transported/unloaded the 40 bags of soil, quicker than we could open our car boots-at last the soil was finally on site! But with the weather turning perceptibly cooler, it was agreed the soil should be added to the raised beds in the spring of 2019.

Digging-in the soil

The volunteer group met on Saturday 16 February 2019, to uncover the raised beds and following a little weeding of stray roots, we applied almost all of the 40 bags of top soil. The raised beds were then re-dug, raked, tilled and nutrients applied; so the quality of the soil was greatly enriched in comparison to the 'friable' soil we had inherited. Remarkably this was all done in the crack time of 1.5 hours. Phew!!! The beds were then re-covered with black sheets to warm-up ready for planting in the spring.

Sowing seeds

We were delighted to hear from Ian and Ryan that all years including Reception were expecting to take part in sowing seeds in the classroom. With all the talk of egg box suitability or not for seeds, Kathy Ring generously offered to buy the fibre pots that were needed for each class. Roni, Coolings, Sutton Gardens and others kindly produced various lists of seeds identified as possible candidates:

Herbs: Mustard & cress (sown on damp cloth/newspaper, chives, basil, coriander, marjoram, oregano, tarragon, parsley, thyme, mint, sage-possibly buy small plug plants to speed things up

Veg: French/dwarf beans (green/yellow/purple), runner beans, courgettes, lettuce, radish, tomato and squash

Nick suggested growing courgettes, French beans and runner beans, leeks, onions etc. Kim and Maria remembered the spare tyres piled up at the back of the allotment and thought about using them as containers for sunflowers and potatoes (Kim remembered it being a Bob Flowerdew recommendation). The tyres could also be used for the more rampant herbs like mints and sage; while beetroot, peppers, potatoes and flowers, possibly nasturtiums, daffodils and tulips, we thought should also be included in the list.

Planting strawberries and raspberries

With seedlings underway in several classrooms, Ian Wilson donated some very healthy raspberry canes, which were planted in early April along the fence; Keith and Roni were very fortunate to receive a number of super strawberry plants from Andy Clare for the allotment-so it was decided to do a recce to check the raised beds; Bed 1 was in good shape but needed a quick overhaul to remove stray roots before planting the strawberry plants on Saturday April 13; while others dug a better trench and re-planted the raspberry canes that were desperate for water! Thankfully, Ryan had provided access to a hose-pipe and with a much needed dose of water and nutrients, the raspberry canes looked a lot happier!

Planting-out seedlings

Ryan confirmed that the pupils had been busy growing their seedlings over the Easter holidays and much of it would need to be planted out-while the peas looked reasonably healthy the beetroot seedlings looked a little fragile. They had started planting Bed 2 with runner beans and carrot seedlings and would plant out the other seedlings later. A surprise donation of £100 had been given to the school so Ryan took the pupils to the store to buy gardening tools and equipment.

At that time, we also touched on other issues, including having a simple irrigation system with a timer, which would help during the summer and through the school holidays; also to increase the number of dug-in compostable bins within the allotment. Ryan confirmed that after half term the school would be running a programme every Thursday afternoon and that one of the groups would involve working at the allotment on the raised beds; this was great news and would help augment our weekly sessions. The volunteer group also spoke about the need to have a forward plan in place, to take us through autumn, if it was decided to continue.

All going to plan, but ...

We moved seamlessly to phase 2 in mid-May, having identified at the start of the project, the group of volunteers who had agreed to work with the pupils from Year 6 (aka 'The Environmental Prefects') who, were a delightful group of children. They were full of good ideas and enthusiastic. But the seedlings they and others had planted were struggling a little-the pupils observed that without regular watering, the crops would, and did, shrivel. To their credit their response was decisive. They drew up a rota for watering the crops twice a day, but with half term looming, it was likely to be tricky, should hot and dry conditions persist!

Our group of volunteers thought about how to cover watering the crops over half term; and as the school were thinking of sowing more beans and peas to replace those that were lost, we decided to increase the variety of plantings by donating, radishes, lettuce, beetroot, potatoes, peppers, tomatoes, onions, spring onions, herbs and sunflowers-so that the Year 6 pupils would have the opportunity to see the crops develop. We also thought it would be helpful to take images of the crops to record growth and to serve as a reminder of what happens when crops are exposed to hot, dry conditions with little or no rainfall; we also noted there needed to be more method/order when planting-out seedlings.

The Game Changer

We agreed that the way forward to overcome water shortages would be to introduce a crude irrigation system as soon as possible to combat periods of no rainfall and also to cover the School's holiday periods. Thankfully, Tony spent several hours trying to locate a simple irrigation system during the May Bank Holiday and having done so, Tony, Agi, Sofia (who was superb at scattering/planting seeds) and Maria set-up and donated the irrigation system to the project. Confidence was high with the new system in place and with a few modifications, in a short time, we and the pupils could see the crops beginning to develop and flourish.

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

The School's Year 6 Environmental Prefects gave an excellent presentation at all Masses about what they had been doing in school to reduce, reuse, recycle and they also produced a brochure with some handy tips of how to care for the environment.

Allotment blessing

Fr. Victor came to visit and bless the allotment; this took place on Wednesday 18 June and after weeks of praying for rain, there was a deluge on that day!

Things begin to flourish...





Sharing some thoughts...

The volunteer group had some thoughts about the project as it had progressed and wanted to share them with the school before meeting at the end of the summer term recognising that 2018/19 represented a very preliminary start to the project, but most importantly we wanted to hear from Ryan and his staff how they were thinking.

We had recognised that there were so many opportunities to observe and record elements of growth including weighing produce to compare yield year-on-year. Graphs and charts could document plant growth, effects of light, warmth, rainfall and wind plus positioning of the plants for crop rotation; helping the children to develop their observation skills and learn the scientific discipline of recording data in order to present their findings. While the project work relating to food waste will show true comparisons with baseline data followed by an awareness programme and follow-up survey.

So what's next?

At our meeting with the school we were pleased to learn that we were all thinking along similar lines in respect to the project. We were delighted to hear from Ryan and Ian that the joint HI parish/school project is to become integrated into the curriculum-starting in September 2019 with the whole class Year 5 pupils participating; they would be split into two groups on a Tuesday and Wednesday during the lunchtime break. The school will also call for parent volunteers to add to the existing pool, the aim is to have a combined group of c.16-20 volunteers in total. That way we will be able to alternate the weeks so that the commitment will be less for those involved in the project.

We will also need to think more carefully about the selection of crops, so that children can see the crop growth and be able to harvest the produce, as the school is keen for them to cook (domestic science) what they harvest so we have got our thinking caps on!!!

**If you are interested in the allotment and would like to get involved
by joining the group of volunteers to work with the children,
by praying for us, contributing ideas, giving advice or anything else,
please contact Maria Nethercot or Ian Wilson**

Grateful thanks to all those who contributed and helped in any way

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