



New Year News

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www.StroudCommunityAgriculture.org

New Year's Resolution

In my last article back in September I wrote of the difficult dry season and the lack of growth of many of our winter crops. Well the very mild autumn has answered our prayers and most of those crops have recovered very well and grown to useable size. In fact we have had a very productive end of year with many crops such as spinach and broccoli continuing to grow when in any normal year they would have died back with the cold.

In the summer we converted an old dairy room at Brookthorpe into a veg store, with thick insulated and rat proof walls. The intention is that this would keep the room above freezing and protect our stored produce from the cold. However, so far our experience has been of the room being too warm and some of the vegetables have begun to sprout. The room is now well stocked with many winter root vegetables and squash for use throughout the winter and feels like a great safe store should the weather turn very cold.

It's always interesting to me how differently crops can grow from year to year. This year we have struggled with the sweetcorn, for instance, whereas last year it grew very well. One of the unexpected successes this year has been with that unusual plant, the kohlrabi. The edible part of the kohlrabi is a

swollen stem. It is a member of the cabbage family (the name literally translates as 'cabbage turnip') but it is sweeter and milder than both a cabbage and a turnip. I know that it isn't the most popular of vegetables but it is very winter hardy and provides some variety at this time of year. We grow two varieties, a quick growing small purple variety called *Azur Star* which did very badly this year, and a large white variety called *Supersmeltz*. Now Ute tells me that *Supersmeltz* roughly translates as 'large-but-still-melts-in-your-mouth'.



Ute has many years experience of growing this variety in Belgium, and she has always snorted with derision at our puny kohlrabi plants. She thinks that unless you need a crane to lift out each individual plant at harvest, and a chainsaw to cut off the root, then they aren't worth bothering with. Well finally this year we have grown a crop that would be worthy of any German horticultural show. We weighed one at

4kg (9lbs). Now that is a lot of food in one plant, and we will have to cut them into portions for the share, but what looks like a green alien medicine ball does actually contain sweet crisp tender flesh. You can use it as you would turnip, stir-fried, steamed, added to stews, roasted, or grated raw for a salad. But don't worry, we don't have too many of them! (*And the photo is of beetroot.*)

This is the time of year when I sit down with the seed catalogues and dream about the perfect year ahead, when everything grows vigorously and matures according to plan. We don't have any immediate plans to change anything so the cropping plan will be very similar to last season's. We will plant up the new land at Brookthorpe again - known as Telegraph Field. This is the field that was (still is?) infested with wireworm. The pest will still be present but should be much depleted - we hope it won't be as destructive as last season.

Finally I would like to welcome our new apprentice Arek to the farm. Arek started in November and will be working four days a week with us. He has fitted in with the farm team so well that it seems that he has been here all year.

I wish everyone all the best for the coming year.

Mark

Farm Days - Now Saturday Afternoons

Farm days are held monthly, alternating between the two farms. They are a time for everyone to come together and help out with some jobs on the farm and enjoy a social time. Traditionally we have held them on a Saturday morning (on the fourth Saturday of the month) but because many people are busy at that time we are going to try holding them on Saturday afternoons. (We did try Sunday mornings, but Mark complained that it spoilt his late Sunday morning breakfast).

So the next one will be held on **Saturday 28th January from 1 to 4pm at Hawkwood**, when we will continue with the hedge planting. There will be cakes and tea for an afternoon break. Everyone is welcome to come along, for as long as suits, to work, play or cheer on the troops.

The following ones will be on Saturday 25th Feb at Brookthorpe and then Saturday 24th March at Hawkwood. Look out for more events - such as Candlemas - on email alerts.



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Winter on the Farm

I would like to start by wishing you all a very happy New Year.

What a contrast to last year. The weather has been so mild, the second warmest winter on record! By this time last year we had already had a week of sub zero temperatures and a low of minus 12 in Brookthorpe. With this unseasonably warm weather the grass is actually growing, albeit very slowly. Tree buds are swelling and we had a rose blooming in the walled garden over Christmas.

On Christmas Eve we sang to the animals in the barns. It was a beautiful occasion, helped by a great turn out with lots of new faces. Everyone enjoyed themselves, even the cows. Thank you all for coming.

The animals have settled in well to their winter housing, with pigs and cows sharing the barns. We would still welcome volunteers to help feed either mornings or evenings especially at Brookthorpe. If you would like to know more please get in touch either via

phone 07531270206 or email samueljhardiman@hotmail.com

The hedge planting days at Hawkwood went very well. I would like to thank all those that took part and made it such an enjoyable and productive two days.



If you would like to still get involved and missed the last days, don't panic: we will be doing one more hedge planting day this winter and would love your help. We will be working this time in conjunction with Stroud Valleys Project. They have received some trees and would like to contribute them to our hedge. They will be bringing some volunteers but we will still need members' help

because we are looking to plant close to 400 trees. The date is not yet finalised but I will send an email around as soon as we know.

Finally I would like to warmly welcome Arek to SCA. Arek is our new apprentice, he only started in November but is already a integral part of the farm team.

Sam



Badgers and TB

For this article, please copy & paste the following link:

[https://skydrive.live.com/view.aspx/.Documents/badgers and TB/Badgers and TB.docx?cid=e7a9acfc27c8ad24&Bsrc=SkyMail&Bpub=SDX.Sky Drive&app=Word](https://skydrive.live.com/view.aspx/.Documents/badgers%20and%20TB/Badgers%20and%20TB.docx?cid=e7a9acfc27c8ad24&Bsrc=SkyMail&Bpub=SDX.SkyDrive&app=Word)

Meat and Community

Following the burglaries at Hawkwood in October, a lively discussion developed in the comments book about the production of meat and type of community that exists around the SCA. The comments that started this discussion were that maybe we shouldn't be producing



meat anyway, and that the only reason that we do have animals is because we are biodynamic. There then followed comments both agreeing and disagreeing with this. I thought that I would write a short article and respond to those comments.

The debate about whether to rear animals for meat at SCA comes around from time to time. One misconception that I would like to dispel is that we only have animals because we are biodynamic. We decided to have animals when we decided to take on the land at Hawkwood back in 2003, before deciding to become biodynamic. Hawkwood has always been farmed with livestock and it was natural for us to continue with that as a lot of the land there is really only suitable for growing grass and grazing animals. (You could of course grow trees on the land but that would be a very long-term commitment for SCA to take, and our landlords may not allow it anyway).

We farm biodynamically because our first farmer, Laurence, was very committed to biodynamic farming and would only agree to work with us if we did so. At the time (2003) the core group consisted of some people who were very keen for SCA to farm in this way and others who would have preferred to continue as an organic farm (certified by the Soil Association). I think that this spectrum of beliefs is reflected in the wider

membership and also within the farm team. Anyway, we liked Laurence and wanted him to come and it was an easy decision to agree with his condition. It is not in our constitution, nor in either of our farm tenancy agreements, that SCA has to farm biodynamically. It is in our constitution though that we farm organically.

Of course rearing livestock on the farm is an important part of farming biodynamically, but it is not essential. It is possible to be certified with Demeter (the biodynamic certifying body) and farm a stock-free system, but we choose not to be for a number of reasons. We rear animals because they do make very good use of land that is too steep or poor to cultivate, they provide some of the fertility for the land and vegetable crops, they bring another type of life and heart to the farm, they make good use of waste vegetables, and they produce some of the healthiest and best quality meat that you can get. We are constantly trying to improve our farming techniques by using clovers and grasses (often called green manures) to improve the fertility and biology of the soil, and so reduce the need for using animal based fertility, but we have no plans to change our farming methods significantly.



The community of people who form SCA come from many backgrounds and have many different reasons for wanting to support the farms. For me though, SCA first and foremost is a CSA project (community supported agriculture): a community farm set up to produce good organic food for our own locality, whether it be organic or biodynamic.

Mark

Sun – Seasons – Vegetables

The sun enables life on earth because it gives light and warmth. And the sun creates the basic rhythm of day and night and the rhythm of the seasons within a year. Almost all living beings on earth need light and a varying amount of warmth to keep alive.

Light and warmth is not distributed evenly round the globe, it varies for every place on earth throughout the year and creates therefore the full range of different climate and weather conditions. The most extreme conditions we find at the poles. There we have half a year day without night, and the other half night without



day. During the polar day the sun is very low over the horizon and doesn't create enough warmth to defrost the soil. The other extreme is the equator region.

There we don't

find seasons but only times with more or less rain. The sun goes very high over the sky, it is hot and damp. Here we find the belt of rain forest. The most modulated climate we find between 45° and 55° north or south. Here we can experience four seasons more or less the way we find them in the UK.

Our seasons are in line with the sun's path over the heaven (or the earth path around the sun if we would look from the sun), and they are defined by the astronomical relationship between sun and earth.

Spring equinox is the 21st March, which is the beginning of spring. Day and night have exactly the same length. In spring, we see an enormous growth, the trees are coming into leaves, the grass has its fastest growth in the year, everything is germinating, vegetables as well as weeds are growing very fast. Towards the summer the increase of day length slows down and comes almost to stand still at the solstice.

Spring ends at the summer solstice the 21st June. The solstice marks the longest day and shortest night and is the beginning of summer. Now we



have the warmest days of the year. Growth is slowing down; plants are blossoming or start already to develop seeds, which normally ends their growth. Spinach and lettuce have the same tendency, which means they are most likely to bolt.

The summer ends at autumn equinox on 23rd September. From the midsummer standstill, the days start to shorten again until day and night have the same length again at the equinox. The autumn equinox marks

the beginning of autumn. Growth comes slowly to an end, fruits and vegetables mature and provide us usually with abundance of which we can store a lot for the winter. It is the time of apples, squashes, potatoes, winter roots and



cabbages. The trees turn into beautiful colours, before they finally drop their leaves. The lawn mower can be put away in the shed until April next year. The days shorten even more and it gets cold.

The shortest day we have at winter solstice on the 21st December. This is the beginning of winter. Here again we have a kind of standstill in day length until we observe them becoming longer again round the 6th January. The coldest time of the year with the likelihood of permanent frost is between mid-January and mid-February. No growth can be observed except for early bulbs

like snowdrops. The swelling of buds takes place, but is a most subtle process and therefore mainly unobserved.

Towards the spring equinox we see the grass getting green again but there is still no significant growth. It is getting warmer again, and the growers amongst us can't wait until it is time to put the seeds in the ground. This can be difficult: there is this huge amount of work ahead, the sun shines nicely and creates some warmth already, but there is no warmth in the soil yet and seeds struggle to germinate (but some weeds already do).

What does this mean for us in terms of growing vegetables? Obviously there are not very many

fresh vegetables in spring. There are still cabbages which have grown over winter such as purple sprouts, kale and all the winter roots. The first thing to grow is spinach or plants, which have over wintered with their roots.

Next we get the lettuces, broccoli, and some salads going. But as the winter crops run out and the over-wintered cabbages start to bolt, we are facing the hungry gap with little of our own home-grown produce. Summer arrives with broad beans, then beans, early roots, onions, spinach, cucumbers and courgettes and ongoing lettuces.

As the days start to shorten again, we get potatoes, squash, sweetcorn, main crop roots, and cabbages, while some of the summer vegetables are still in production. Throughout the winter, we live off the vegetables we have grown in summer: either those that remain in the field like leeks, some cabbages and parsnips, or those put in storage like onions, squash, potatoes.

Under normal circumstances there would be neither a salad pack throughout the winter nor tomatoes and peppers in summer, because our climate doesn't allow them to grow. Therefore we have our three polytunnels, which provide the plants with additional warmth and keep them sheltered from wind and rain.

There is a slow growth in winter that allows us to pick the winter salads for the salad packs. In spring it allows us to grow radishes and spring cabbage and have early beans and carrots. In summer we get our cucumbers, tomatoes, and peppers from the polytunnel before, in September, we plant the salads for the winter again. The polytunnels help us to extend the seasons.

That can cause some problems particularly in winter. The limiting factor for growth in winter is light and warmth. In the tunnels we increase warmth while the light is at its lowest point. That provokes certain plants like spinach to take up more nitrogen than usual, which can easily be spotted at their dark green leaves. This high amount of nitrogen is not the best for human consumption and would become a problem if a

baby were fed with this spinach. But as a single leaf mixed into a salad pack it doesn't cause a problem, but adds to the variety. This and the fact that the sunlight is filtered by the plastic cover of the tunnels have raised questions amongst some members whether polytunnels produce the same quality than outdoors. But the benefit of having fresh salads in mainly good quality outweighs the problems. We extend the seasons and we grow plants that wouldn't grow here naturally, which increases the variety of our vegetables.

Nowadays we are used to the fact that we have access to vegetables from all over the world. That means we are not reliant on climate and seasons. Apples in summer come via aeroplane from Argentina, South Africa or other countries of the southern hemisphere. Tomatoes are available all the year through, because there is always a place where they are in season. Or they are grown in the Mediterranean under glass with artificial light and a lot of energy input. To use global supply means we have the variety every day. To use our own vegetable and as much local supply as possible means to have the variety throughout the year. If cucumbers are in season there will be cucumbers every week for three months and none for the rest of the year.

That is something many people struggle with, because we are used to having cucumbers and tomatoes and apples all year round.

Working on our land, we live with the seasons and our harvest comes out of this deep connection with nature's rhythms. To have a weekly share of what nature provides us with enables us to reconnect directly with the cycle of the year. At times we miss certain things, at other times we are looking forward to certain items going into the share, like purple sprouting broccoli in March, broad beans at the end of May, lettuces, squashes... And missing something because it is not in season reminds us again of the cycle of the year. And then I am always free to choose: either to amend this cycle and go to the shops to buy what I am lacking, or to create something from what I have got in the share.

Ute



A Shelter at Hawkwood?

For a long time now it has been felt that the Hawkwood site could benefit from some sort of shelter at its heart. This could be a place for the farm members to gather and socialise, and for the farmers to warm themselves on the cold winter days - or shelter from the rains in the summer (or even the blazing sun!).

We have of course got the barn or the poly tunnels but they are for plants and animals! So what about us humans? Is there anybody



out there who would be interested in getting together to discuss what would be appropriate, regarding placement in the landscape, size, construction methods, membership involvement (workdays), costs? Is there anyone with any skills they might think useful in this worthy endeavour?

Please contact Andy Jones at metamorph@onetel.com or 07740428590 if you want to develop this proposal.

Would you like to join the core group?

The core group oversees SCA and the farm, and is made up of eight SCA members and one farmer. It meets once a month for a two-hour evening meeting, when issues concerning the farms and SCA are discussed, when events are organised, and when decisions are made. This year two people are stepping down and we are looking for two or three people to take their places.

Ideally members join for a three-year period (but it could be less) and are able to carry out a small amount of work in between meetings. You do not need any special skills or knowledge to join the core group, only a willingness to be involved in the development and management of the farm. If you think that you might be interested, then please let someone on the core group know (contact details are on the back page of this newsletter) and you can come along to a meeting to observe before finally deciding.



Plant another hedge at Hawkwood on Sat 28 January 1-4pm!

Stroud Community Agriculture

Everyone is welcome to join in and enjoy the farm, including non-members.

We are looking for new members for the farm. Please tell everyone you know about us. If you know of an event or somewhere that you think would be good for us to promote the farm, please let the core group know. We work to the following principles:

- *To support organic and biodynamic agriculture.*
- *To pioneer a new economic model based on mutual benefit and shared risk and ensure that the farmers have a decent livelihood.*
- *To be fully inclusive. Low income shall not exclude anyone.*
- *To be transparent in all our affairs. To make decisions on the basis of consensus wherever possible. To strive towards social justice.*
- *To encourage practical involvement on all levels.*
- *To offer opportunities for learning, therapy and re-connecting with the life of the earth.*
- *To network with others to promote community supported agriculture to other communities and farms and share our learning (both economic and farming).*
- *To encourage Stroud Community Agriculture members, in co-operation with the farmers, to use the farm for their individual and social activities and celebrations.*
- *To develop a non-exclusive sense of community around the farm.*

Core Group

The core group meets one evening a month. For dates, venues & times, contact Sue Dance.

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