Welcome from the Chair of the Trust
Phil Kinnersley

A warm welcome to everyone at Coton Fields to a new gardening year and to this latest edition of the ‘Coton Fielder’; a newsletter that we intend publishing for gardeners twice a year. As Chairman I am always looking at better ways of communicating with gardeners, and this newsletter provides an ideal platform to achieve this. I hope that you find the articles included in this issue interesting and informative.

I draw your attention, in particular, to the social events we have planned for the forthcoming year. These have proven to be very successful in the past, improving the community spirit between gardeners.

The Severn Trent Project
by John Edwards - Trust Scribe

There have been many rumours circulating since the Trustees were approached by Severn Trent about a year ago, so here is a quick résumé of the real facts.

The pumping station in the corner of the site is to be expanded to provide for the increased military presence and new housing in Stafford. A pipeline connecting that installation to Brancote sewage works is required and it will cross the allotments. The Trustees rejected one route, which would have cut across many allotments, and another, which would have destroyed valuable trees. After discussion with Arney, the main contractors, the current route will run from Prospect Road along the old pathway and between the fence and trees along Smallman Street. It will affect some of the longer plots on B-Block and trees along Smallman Street. It will be a big upheaval, but it should not be very successful in the past, improving the community spirit between gardeners.

A Brief History of the Site

When King John gave the Royal Charter to his ‘Burgesses of Stafford’ in 1206, the piece of land known as ‘The Coton Field’ became the property of the Burgesses, (or Freemen), of Stafford. It stretched from Weston Road to beyond Sandon Road and was used for the Burgesses to feed their families. 800 years later the burgesses have lost a great deal of that land, but the part that remains is now the Coton Fields Freemen's Allotments. These are still owned by the current burgesses and run as a charitable trust by twelve trustees. The right to a plot on the allotments is virtually the only privilege remaining to this ancient body, who once ran the town.

To learn more about the Burgesses see www.staffordfreemen.org.uk

Bonfires

Gardeners are reminded that as of the 1st May (until 31st August) it is NOT permitted to light bonfires; and to do so would be a breach of the Bye-Laws.

The Allotment Association

The Allotment Association provides an important and valuable service to allotment gardeners, and is well worth a visit. The Site Shop or the ‘Big Shed’ as it is more commonly known to gardeners is located at the Prospect Road end of the site.

The Shop is staffed by volunteers which, combined with minimal overheads, enables items to be sold at very competitive prices. It stocks a good range of gardening products including garden seeds, composts, fertilisers, canes, netting, weed control fabric, string and twine.

At the start of the year (February) the shop sells an excellent range of potato seed, onion sets and shallots. Towards the end of the year, gardeners can also take advantage of ordering discounted vegetable and flower seeds from a company called King's. These are excellent value for the money.

The Association is also affiliated to the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners (NSALG).

Glass

A skip is being arranged very soon for the collection of any unwanted glass that gardeners may have on their plots. The skip when it arrives will be positioned in the centre of the site; close to the notice board. When this happens you are politely asked not to place anything else other than glass into the skip.

Volunteer Days

From time to time the Trust organises ‘Volunteer Days’. The purpose of these is to bring together a body of willing and able-bodied people who are prepared to donate some of their time in carrying out a task or activity for the betterment of the site. Such activities, in the past, have included litter-picks, the clearance of derelict plots, and the collection of scrap metal. Please keep an eye on the site notice boards for such days; any help would be greatly appreciated.

Allotment Website

The Coton Field Allotment site has its own website which can be found at: www.cotonfieldsallotments.co.uk and is well worth a visit.

You can also find Coton Fields Allotments on both Facebook and Twitter; so why not like or follow us? We also have a forum, so why not join the conversation?
April is a ‘let’s go for it!’ month; hopefully feeling the benefit of the lengthening daylight and warm sunshine. May marks the end of the spring, and the beginning of summer. It is also a month when we can get caught out by mini droughts, heat waves, late frosts, cold winds and heavy rain, so be prepared to take steps to protect plants if it is necessary.

Aim to complete the job of planting out seed potatoes, onion sets, shallots and broad beans by the end of April, and continue making succession sowings of beetroot, carrots, parsnips, lettuce, spinach, spring onions, kohrabi, radish, turnips, early peas, Swiss chard, and maincrop peas. You could try an early sowing of dwarf and climbing French beans towards then of the month. Use the darker seeded varieties they are hardier and more suited to the early sowings.

On a prepared seed bed sow leeks and summer cabbage. Plant out celeriac grown earlier and keep the plants well watered all through the summer. It is now safe to transplant the cold greenhouse tomatoes in to their final positions, but keep some frost protection handy.

In mid-April and May, sow in pots or trays under glass, the seeds of runner beans, dwarf and climbing French beans, sweet corn, courgettes, pumpkins, squashes, outdoor cucumbers - all which can be planted out next month.

In May, Savoy cabbage, winter cabbage, endive, kale and sprouting broccoli can all be sown in the open ground; ready to be transplanted out next month. Continue making direct succession sowings of radish, spinach, turnips, summer beetroot and spring onions. This is also your last opportunity to sow peas and parsnips this year

Now is the time to start ‘thinning’ out the seedlings of beetroot, carrots, lettuce, onions, parsnips, turnips; watering along the row afterwards to settle the disturbed seedlings back in.

Put up poles for runner and climbing French beans. Support peas and broad beans before they become too tall. Start to earth up potatoes, especially if a frost is forecast. Keep hoeing between crops to control weeds. When watering, do so in the cool of the evening using a watering can to direct the water around the root area of the crops. If you can get it, put some straw underneath the developing strawberry fruits to keep them off the soil.

Look out for pests such as blackfly (on broad beans), greenfly, cabbage root fly, carrot fly, and thrip damage on brassicas especially when the plants are small. Spray the affected plants with soapy water (diluted washing up liquid) or squash the flies with your thumb and finger. You can buy insecticides if you prefer, including a fatty acid soap to spray on the plants.