Dunchurch Allotment Association





Apples trees laden with fruit this autumn

By Paul Sanders

It's been all about the fruit this year, a bumper crop of almost everything. Apple trees groaning with the strain, soft fruits giving bountiful harvests, tomato vines drooping with copious red spheres. It's not been the same with vegetables.

For most gardeners, the very dry and exceptionally hot weather this year produced very mixed results. Crops like courgettes, runner beans and potatoes were disappointingly small or low in yield. The high temperatures impacted on a few of the usual staples; my celeriac suffered from dry and desiccated leaf tips and squash failed to develop. It was obvious that the farmer's potato harvest in the field next to the allotment plots was low, as many small potatoes lay on the ground failing to make the grade through the crop harvesting screens.

Gardeners ask themselves how to respond to the likely recurrence of hot and dry weather in future years. The mantra, 'mulch, mulch, mulch' is one of the answers suggested by experts. Biodegradable mulches like grass cuttings, leaf-mold and garden compost help retain soil moisture, reduce watering and protect plant roots from the extremes of high temperatures. In addition, they reduce weed germination, encourage beneficial soil organisms and on breaking down improve the soil's organic matter together with associated nutrients. It is interesting to see a number of allotment holders using straw and hay mulches as a ground cover, and some are collecting grass clippings which are spread on the soil in thick layers. As this trend grows, we may find that our members will start to compete over who cuts the tracks and paths, the reward being bountiful supplies of a rich grass mulch.

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