

## Nature Site, What's happened over the past year (2016-17): Liz Yeats

### Native plants - why and what it means:

We only plant native plants in the nature site. The definition of this being plants that were growing in Britain BEFORE the voyages of discovery in the 1500's. Such voyages brought many new plants species to Britain, some, such as buddleia, have now become invasive in the wild. These are known as 'naturalised'. We have chosen to stick to Native only plants as wild creatures have, since the last ice age 9,000 years ago, developed and adapted to using these plants for food.



**Pond:** Every session from March to June was spent completing the pond, a major task on such a steep slope. By July we had planted the pond up with a variety of native water plants and built a chalk rock slope behind the pond. Many small plants will grow between the stones and insects & lizards will use the warmed stones to bask on. We planted wildflowers in the areas around the pond to provide insects with nectar and cover when they come to drink or lay eggs. The pond was almost immediately used by Sean's honey bees, damsel flies, blackbirds and dragonflies. A frog settled in immediately, emerging from the water every time we planted something new. We constructed a path up to the pond, and fenced in the whole area to make it safe.

**Bench:** we created a path to the bench above the pond, making it a wonderful place to sit and watch the creatures who visit the pond. Sean made us another bench this Spring, so 4 or 5 people can now sit together overlooking the pond now.

**Constant Maintenance:** Keeping the circular path clear is a fortnightly task. You wouldn't believe the speed that nettles and brambles grow! In addition, we cut down the brambles and hemp agrimony, really invasive plants growing in the areas for wild flowers and wild grasses. We constantly added to the range and quantity of wild plants on the site, scattering collected seed, and transplanting small wild plants from our allotments.

**Constant step-building:** Jim and Haider have become our specialist in this, adding 3 or 4 new steps at each session. Jim and Sally recently added 5 more steps on the western arm of the circular path.

**Annual sheep grazing:** to maintain areas of wildflowers, we have to simulate centuries old practices of winter sheep grazing. This is done in October, cutting all the flowering areas down to an inch or two, and raking off and disposing of the cuttings. This reduces the over lush growth of 'weeds of cultivation' (rye grass, groundsel, nettles, brambles), raking off the cuttings reduces the fertility of the soil, and both aspects allows the tougher, but slower growing chalk

Downland perennial flowers to survive and spread. These are the flowers especially loved by the butterflies, bumble bees and insects struggling to survive in our cultivated landscape.

**Sapling care:** The hedge and individual saplings we planted last February all grew well during the year. They are now 3-5 feet tall, but still need our constant help in cutting back bramble that threatened to swamp them each summer.

**Open Day.** We showed 7 people round the site as part of Allotments Open day event in August, answering their questions, and explaining the different habitat areas and the wildlife we hope they will attract. A frog obligingly popped up in our pond to prove a point!

**What had changed this year?** The wildflower areas looked good for year two. In June and July they were filled with the delicate white flower heads of hedge parsley (this was not there last year, the seeds must have been dormant in the ground). There was an underlay of yellow birds foot trefoil, horseshoe and kidney vetch flowers. The oxeye daisy's flowered well, as did the marjoram. Some yellow rattle flowers appeared from seeds sown the autumn before. Yellow rattle is semi-parasitic on grass, so will help to change the habitat from grasslands to flowers.

**Birds and butterflies:** Bluetits nested in the nesting box below the pond, feeding their young as we worked. We saw gold crests, long tailed tits, great tits, wrens, robins, blackbirds, gold finches and chaffinches, hunting for small insects amongst the trees and brambles. We counted 14 different types of butterfly over the summer, including common and small blue, and orange tips, feeding or basking on the flowers especially the ivy and bramble on the site.

**A plants inventory:** Our annual plant count revealed an increase of 40 species compared to the same time the previous year (73 to 113 species). Some we had introduced by seed or plants, but 15 had appeared of their own accord because the habitat was now more suitable. So, we've definitely increased biodiversity a little this year!

**More tree planting:** This February, we were again given some saplings by Special Branch tree nursery (Stanmer). We cleared a new 15 sq meter patch of brambles, on the west side of the path circle, and planted 7 native trees, birch, alder, spindle and blackthorn. Maude gave us a small oak sapling. Sean additionally 'heaved out' 4 massive 15ft oak saplings from his plot, replanting them in the approach area, just below the car park. They should look magnificent, as well as providing a wind break to the shop and surrounding plots from North winds.

**New signs, information and posters:** Rachel made us a glorious wooden 'Nature Site' sign, Liz keeps the notice board at the top of the site refreshed with new or replacement information posters. Dave continues to produce a set of 'nature notes' after each session, describing what we've done what we've seen, and including photo's. These all go on the MAHS web site and can be read by anyone.

**The group:** Our core work group of Rachel, Jim, Liz, Sally and Dave, is smaller than we'd like for the amount of work to be done, and we are trying to recruit more active members. 5 additional people help occasionally, and support the work by taking part in the email discussions of what should be done. We have another 9 people who have asked to be kept informed by e mail and may join work sessions in future.



#### Comments from visitors (Open Day 14<sup>th</sup> August 2016)

'How nice to be able to put unused land to such a wonderful use'

'You've got a beautiful site here. I can't believe how much you've achieved in such a short time.'