

VILLAGE DIARY

It seems that today our prayers for rain have been heard. Those of us who treasure our gardens have watched with dismay as long-established shrubs and cottage garden plants have turned brown; one day appearing to be coping with the drought and the next past the crash point. Gawsworth's sandy soils have always dried out quickly as the water-table dropped. Conventional wisdom is not to water established plants in a dry spell as it draws the roots up towards the surface and makes them more vulnerable but this year is breaking all the rules. One friend tells me that when she went to harvest her pea crop, she found that, although the pods were well developed, the peas inside were tiny.

John Lea writes about the havoc the lack of rain is having on our farms. Most stock farmers plan to have a surplus of silage each year but this spring the ground was quite wet and the cattle had to be kept longer in their sheds to prevent them from damaging the grass roots with their hooves. There is an old saying, 'When the ground treads up, cows have five mouths'. Because the cows stayed inside longer, the surplus silage was eaten when this drought started. Now they are consuming what should be next year's food supply.

Cereal farmers are also feeling the pressure, particularly with early ripening barley. The hot sun is burning it dry before the grain is fully formed, which means that yields will be quite low. It is inevitable that the large scale vegetable growers on the eastern side of our country will also be suffering. Without irrigation later sown crops have poor germination and slow growth.

Wild life too is suffering. John's wild flower meadow was burnt so dry that he has had it mowed. Bumblebee numbers are down and the variety of species seems very poor, although early white butterflies have increased dramatically in number. Knapweed also is surviving the drought but has flowered a month early, which will help the late June and July batch of meadow-brown butterflies. The white butterflies prefer the pond-side purple loosestrife on which John has never seen any species of coloured butterfly feed.

I was pleased to hear that one of our readers had 'phoned John to say how much his interesting and well-informed notes are enjoyed. I too would like to thank John who never leaves me short of copy from which to compile the Village Diary. It is a privilege and a pleasure to read this thoughts and observations; we are fortunate to have him on our patch.

Barbara Wilson