

Garden Group Meeting – Tuesday 6th October

A Talk by Jenny Bussy on Soil Preparation



Unusually for our Garden Group, we had warmth and sunshine for our monthly meeting!

Twenty-seven of us arrived at Jan & John Adams-Bareham's house to hear a talk by Jenny Bussy on soil preparation, followed by a Q&A session, and then a look round Jan & John's beautiful and unique garden.

Jenny Bussy has been gardening in Spain for 30 years and so her knowledge in this area is wide-ranging. She has also been Chairwoman of the Costa Blanca Garden Circle for many years.



The meeting started with a comprehensive talk on providing the best soil possible to produce healthy flowering plants and fruit trees:

In this part of Spain the soil is mainly alkaline, chalky soil, i.e. sticky clay when wet and baked hard when dry! It is, however, more fertile than sandy soil as it holds nutrients. The pH level of the soil is generally over 7, which is relatively high. This soil needs constantly feeding with humus (organic matter which is dug into the top layer), not too deep, or as a mulch. This will promote the movement of worms to

nearer the soil surface (as they are in the UK) since the soil here is generally hard and dry. They are present in the soil but at a much deeper level where it is more damp.

It is always useful to keep a compost heap using waste vegetable matter – kitchen waste, cuttings etc. The decomposed matter needs digging in well.

When buying plant feed, check on the components. There are three main constituents: nitrate, phosphate and potash (N/P/K). The percentage of potash should be higher than that of nitrate in order to help plants to flower and fruit to mature. Nitrate encourages green, leafy plants.

To check that there is good drainage, dig a one-foot deep hole and after heavy rain, or watering, if the water drains away within 20-30 minutes, then drainage is OK. If not, then build the bed up with a good soil mixture, as most annual and shrub plant roots do not go deeper than one foot.

Jenny recommended humus from the Ecopark in Teulada/Benissa. This humus retains moisture much longer than the pre-packed bags from the garden centres, and is considerably cheaper – she recently bought $\frac{3}{4}$ ton for only 27 euros!

The more humus in the soil the better, as it keeps the soil aerated and moist. To prevent drying out of the soil and keep the roots cool it is best to keep the surface covered. There are alternatives - with stones, bark, straw, mulch, ground cover plants or even dried, shredded seaweed (which will also add some useful nutrients).

When trying to water dried out soil in pots/tubs a good tip is to add a little washing up liquid to water which aids in the wetting of the soil.

Jenny interspersed her talk with answering questions that had been forwarded to her, from members, prior to the meeting.

Hibiscus – need good drainage. Usually when bought from a garden centre they are usually pot bound and in light soil which dries out quickly. Remove from the pot and soak to remove most of the soil and ease out the roots. Mix soil and compost 50/50 and re-pot for a month. When planting in the garden, dig a hole and make a pyramid in the centre, put the plant on top and spread the roots round the mound and then cover with soil

Hibiscus should be pruned in March and cut back hard, to about a third, as they flower on new growth.

Datura (trumpet tree) should also be cut back hard in March, and the bougainvillea. The water shoots from the bougainvillea (growing upward, long and straight with a couple of flowers on the end) can be cut off at any time. Likewise with citrus trees – the shoots growing straight up should be cut off, encouraging more horizontal branches.

Plumbago should also be pruned in the Spring, but not too hard.

Roses should be pruned hard in January.

Watering – citrus trees need water all through the summer, whereas olive, almond and vines don't need any water, nor does rosemary.

Plants such as hebe, camellia, azalea, rhododendron, even citrus plants need a more acid soil and a good way to provide this is to mix in pine needles with the soil.

Fruit trees – it's best to buy bare-rooted trees rather than the potted two or three year old ones, which are usually pot-bound and will take a long time to settle, whereas the bare-rooted trees, although much smaller, will quickly settle and grow quickly. This applies to all deciduous plants, e.g. cherry, apricot, apple, etc.

The roots of citrus plants are very sensitive and, as with all evergreens, it is best to buy small plants so that the roots don't need to be disturbed.

Don't allow plants to grow too big as the roots won't be able to find enough water and the plant will not thrive.

It's normal for fruit to drop off citrus trees when the fruit is very small. But if all the fruit drops off it may be the result of a microscopic mite and therefore the tree should be sprayed with Anacaro.

If a citrus tree has too much foliage and small fruit, it must be pruned hard.

Blanket weed in a fish pond: this thrives in sunlight and therefore the majority of the pond surface should be covered with water lilies. Also use plenty of oxygenating plants and it is important to reduce the pH level. One possibility is oak bark in a bag, which releases tannin, which lowers pH. If the pond water is green with algae, then it should be treated with ferrous sulphate, which will turn the water brown for a couple of days (but won't harm any fish) and then the water will become clear.

Jenny recommended "Sunset Western Garden Book", published in California, which has a very similar climate to the Costa Blanca, and similar soil types and plants. It contains a mine of information on most of the plants we have in this area, with detailed instructions on soil requirements, watering, feeding, propagation, pruning etc on each plant – a gardener's bible!

We were extremely grateful to Jenny for providing us with a huge amount of information as well as answering a variety of questions from members of our group.



We then had a short meeting to plan future events, and Jan gave a brief talk on the development of her garden, with photos of it in its raw state, and a progression of the development of each area.



We then had refreshments and a wander round the garden, which is on two levels, to admire the plants, Jan's sculpture:



and John's pergola:



as well as the various flower beds.





Of course, it gave our members more opportunity to talk with Jenny and discuss further topics and ask her advice.



Again, another completely unique garden, full of interest and colour.

Thanks to Jenny for such an informative talk and thanks to Jan and John for allowing us into their lovely and interesting garden.



Chris & John Parsons Oct 2009