



# LINSCOMBE FARM NEWSLETTER

Thursday 5th July 2012

## An Ode to the Polytunnel



The “slug story” that started with the piece by BBC Spotlight took on a life of its own and soon seemed to span the globe appearing in or on as diverse places as the Daily Mail, Wales Today and Ghanian News – the Gateway to Africa. Each time it appeared it seemed that the damage that the slugs were doing increased until, finally, Bidwell, along with the entire South West of England, was disappearing under some sort of vast, slow motion slug tsunami. Not a pretty picture and, as fast as the horrors built up, so the sights of the great polytunnel crops that we are still producing, and which were included in the original Spotlight piece, faded away under the onslaught. There is no news like bad news!

However, we are still producing some great crops, although thanks to the horrendous run of “summer” weather, these are confined to the polytunnels at the moment. This has never happened to us before as, usually, by this time of year most of the crops are being freshly harvested out of our increasingly bountiful fields. Polytunnels are much maligned by certain people for the supposed “visual damage” that some claim that they inflict on our landscape. Lack of space means that we must leave aside the frivolity of “visual damage” in the light of the ecological disaster that has occurred, and continues to occur, in the wider countryside.

A superb example of the benefits of these simple structures has been presented to us as the consequence of a very unfortunate accident a couple of years ago. Having just finished and planted up all our new polytunnels at Bidwell, one of them was, how shall we say, “impacted” by a tractor. This has resulted in about half the length of the polythene coming off. This tunnel contains our new strawberries and where the polythene remains we have had, considering the weather and the age of the plants, not a bad early crop. Where the strawberries are exposed to the elements, however, there is barely a berry. What there is has either rotted, not ripened or been eaten by pests. Hopefully we will have repaired the tunnel in time for the main crop of strawberries next year.

This benign, albeit artificial, microclimate also allows us to grow reliable crops of such southern exotics as tomatoes, peppers and aubergines as well as the year round production of tender salads and leafy spinach.

The disconnect between inside and outside that allows us to grow tender crops throughout the year can pose its own problems. Pest species, by their very nature, tend to be more mobile, versatile and downright ingenious than those that prey upon them. We have already discussed how slugs take advantage of the one permanently wet part of the polytunnels in a previous newsletter. We also said that we have managed, at least in part through active conservation management on the farm as a whole, to build up great populations of toads and frogs that help us in our efforts to control slug numbers. Birds are also important – but we cannot allow unlimited avian access into the tunnels as, despite our efforts at providing food and shelter for them, not all birds repay us by eating pests. Blackbirds, often helpful and certainly melodic, can do huge damage to crops like tomatoes and strawberries. Chaffinches and sparrows, also at times helpful, can devastate salad seedlings. And as for pheasants....



So we encourage birds outside but cannot allow them in. The main pest control strategy, however, is the one that underpins our entire *raison d'être* here on the farm: healthy soil. If anyone asks what organic farming is all about they usually assume that we will reply “not using pesticides”. Although we don’t use them and, of course, this is very important, the creation of a healthy soil is primary. There are more bacteria in a teaspoon of healthy soil than there are people on the planet and that is before we start counting the myriad other life forms. Managed well, these form fairly stable communities: an over abundance of one organism will lead to the growing success of those that consume it. In practice there are limits to the success of this, but it is a very good fundamental. Our success in creating a good polytunnel habitat, much more difficult to do than outside in the fields, has been shown by our recent discovery of grass snakes living inside in the warmth and shelter provided by the polythene. Although not initially good news as they prey almost exclusively on frogs and toads and so act against our



immediate interests, we still welcome them as we feel that the more complex our habitats are then the better they are. The presence of reptiles confirms to us that we are doing something right with our food production system. Outside, we also have slow worms, another limbless reptile, and these do actively prey on slugs; we have yet to find them in the polytunnels.



Another rarity we have found in the polytunnels is the dormouse, although we have only ever found these hibernating and there is no evidence that they breed in the tunnels.

Underpinning the more glamorous, larger species there are, of course, uncountable numbers of other organisms. Beetles and spiders are very important, as are hoverflies and ladybirds. On the other side are aphids and whiteflies amongst others. Bumblebees and honeybees can be important pollinators and must be allowed access: we experimented with a special polythene previously but found that, although some crops did well, there appeared to be a problem with pollination. Eventually we discovered that the special polythene, created to help control molds and mildews, did this by blocking the penetration of some

of the reds and infra reds in the light spectrum that seemed to encourage the growth of some fungii. Although apparently successful in mold control, an unintended consequence was that this seemed to “blind” the bees and so they did not pollinate the crops like they did in the other tunnels. Every action has a re- action!

When we moved from Linscombe to Bidwell over the last 5 years, we could not work out a way of, reliably, continuing to produce essential polytunnel crops whilst moving them to the new farm. We ended up buying new tunnels and, for a while, continuing to crop the Linscombe tunnels. Having tried to continue to crop the tunnels at Linscombe we quickly found that the intensive management necessary was not easily provided, even over the just 10 miles that separates our original and our current farm. We are now just beginning to move the old tunnels to supplement our new ones. We could desperately do with them now but it is very unlikely we can manage to get even 1 or 2 of them producing before the autumn: a big job. Lets hope the field crops get a chance.....



A special farewell here: Keira, who has been helping produce your vegetables for the last year, come hail or shine, is leaving to return to academia. She has won, in a very competitive environment, a bursary to help her study a Masters in Food Security and Sustainable Agriculture. We are sure that she will do well and wish her all the best. In her place we welcome Julia, who is Spanish and already a qualified agronomist. I don’t suppose we can offer him the climate that he is used to! More about Julia next time.....

Enjoy your vegetables, Helen, Phil, Family and Team