**Allotment competition report to R & L November 2023**

The decision to have an allotment competition seemed like a good idea. At the time. However, as soon as Lucy and I embarked on our first walk round at the beginning of May, we realised that this wasn’t going to be straightforward. The plots are all different sizes, some having only just been taken on, some having been worked conscientiously for years; some are managed by a retired person who spends nearly every day there, while others are managed by one person during the odd day off at the weekend – weather permitting. Also, conditions on the different sites vary: Ashmead 1 is quite windswept while Woodfield is plagued by mare’s tail. Each site has its challenges whether its wind, shade, weeds or stones.

The difference in appearance of the plots during that first visit was clear: some allotment holders had already had a good go at digging over, or had a selection of overwintered vegetables, while others had clearly taken a gardening holiday over the winter and hadn’t quite got going. However, by the time of our next visit in mid-July, many of those plots had been transformed and most had a flourishing selection of fruit, vegetables, herbs and flowers. There was a huge variety of vegetables being grown and the number squeezed into some of the smaller plots was impressive. Overall we saw everything from asparagus to winter cabbage growing across all the sites - more than 20 different varieties on some plots. Some were very neat and manicured while others were more untamed, but we looked for plots that were well looked after and making good use of the ground available. We also wanted to see lots of healthy fruits and vegetable on their way to the table.

On each of these visits the plots were scored on the general condition, environmental aspects, the overall appearance of the plot and the quality and variety of crops, the most importance being given to this last. There should have been a further visit in late September/early October, but due to pressure of work in the office and an accidental injury this proved not to be possible.

The final result was close, the winner being plot 3 on Upthorpe, very closely followed by plot 21 on Woodfield. Several more came hot on their heels, and had we visited on different days, or carried out a further visit, the results might have been different. Although I very much enjoyed visiting all the sites, I found that the nature of the diversity of the plots and their tenants made fair judgement difficult so I wouldn’t recommend holding a competition in this format again.

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