



# Speaking up about the true value of allotments

Regular *The Garden* columnist Lia Leendertz sees allotments as far more than patches of land

Some time ago the Government mooted the idea of 'biodiversity offsetting'. In extreme circumstances, even ancient woodlands might be replaced with newly planted woodlands to make way for development. Petitions were signed and outrage vented via social media.

Commentators pointed out the folly of this childishly simplistic approach to beautiful, complex, ancient landscapes. Columnist George Monbiot has written that, under the policy, 'No place is valued as a place: it is broken down into a list of habitats and animals and plants, which could, in theory, be shifted somewhere else.' Garden writer and former environmental consultant Mark Diacono wrote in his Otter Farm blog, 'To accept that ancient woodland can be offset with new planting is to believe that ancient woodland is just a collection of trees. Such thinking allows us to demolish St Paul's Cathedral to be offset with a similarly sized pile of new bricks.'

I wish people would get as upset about allotments. For allotments have always been subject to a most unsophisticated and half-hearted type of offsetting, and the general acceptance of this has done them no favours. The Allotments Act 1925 specifies that a local authority, on appropriating a statutory allotment site, must ensure either that 'adequate provision will be made for allotment holders displaced... or that such provision is unnecessary or not reasonably practicable'. I'm pretty sure this translates as: 'You should probably find them somewhere else to plant stuff. You know, if it's not too much trouble.'

## Pushing for change

An allotment site isn't an ancient woodland, and I do not mean to diminish the righteous call to protect ancient woodland with my own complaint. An allotment is something else, and that is the point. It has its own place in our landscape, a place that has had



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its status worn away by the idea that it can be swapped for a patch of random ground a mile down the road. At no stage of allotment development proceedings is any account taken of the patina age gives a site, the way the paths lose their way over the years, or the depth of a well-worked soil.

No account is ever taken of a site's historic and cultural place in the landscape: this site over which we wish to build, was it created to alleviate urban overcrowding following the Industrial Revolution? Or earlier, to keep farm labourers from the poor-house following parliamentary enclosures? Or later, as one of hundreds of new allotment sites that pulled us back from the brink of starvation during the depths of the First World War? In the eyes of the law, of local authorities, of heritage organisations and of the general public none of this matters. One acre is as good as another, as long as it

falls within a two-mile radius.

Resist offsetting and do it forcefully, but please let's also get angry about the fact that this has long been the law for allotments, and let's push for change. Just as ancient woodlands are not simply collections of trees, allotments are not just blank squares of earth, and yet even the most ardent allotment supporters have become accustomed to the idea that replacements are perfectly acceptable. We'll take what we are given, and gratefully. It's time to reject this thinking, and I wish that heritage organisations and the National Allotment Society would do the same.

Allotments may be living, continually evolving landscapes, but they are just as important as bricks and mortar, and big old trees. Allotments should be valued as places, too, and the first step towards this is to at least start saying it. ●