

MEETING REPORT - *Life and Times of a Gardener.*

All gardeners are stupid! Well that's the perception. That was how Christine Walkden began her fascinating, amusing and insightful talk. She is a feisty Lancashire lass, and not from a gardening family. Indeed, her parents only came once to visit the allotments that sparked her career. She was not a keen student and found school boring, but when she was given "crocus bulbs" to grow at home and told her teacher they were "corms", earning her the title of precocious little brat, she was off on a lifetime interest. Fascinated by the processes of plant growth and what made them grow well, she started off by doing a neighbour's garden, and ended up with 53 of them. She then spotted an allotment vacant and went to apply for it. Challenging the assertion that she had to be an adult with "where does it say that?" she got her allotment and took her ten bob note to buy tools. Explaining to the ironmonger what she wanted, she was indignant to be told to "come back tomorrow". When she returned she was amazed to find a small wheelbarrow full of child size tools, and was told that the deal was that she would bring them back clean when she gave up. The ironmonger never did get them back, showing her utter determination and single mindedness to succeed despite any setbacks. By the age of 14 she had 5 allotments, and made money by selling produce. She kept profit and loss ledgers and impressed the school officer sent to find out why she was absent. She then applied for agricultural college, and mistaking her age for 18, was called for interview, and browbeat them into accepting her, and her headmaster into permitting her to go.

Realising she would need qualifications to advance, she had to get a City and Guilds certificate and 12 month's experience. Eventually a Parks superintendent gave her a job, but the 12 "old blokes" working there were unimpressed, and after being asked if she "could dig 'oles. Big 'oles" she was set to digging graves. As ever she found positives in this, and dealt swiftly with the blokes who always omitted to make her a cup of coffee by sweeping all the mugs to the floor and telling them she would do it every day until they could count 13! She then applied for a job at a research station, displaying her knowledge and total confidence, if not her paper qualifications, and got in. She travelled, setting up a scheme for young offenders, and giving them the same chances, TLC and encouragement as she lavished on her plants.

She became a lecturer to make ends meet while she studied, and thence went into radio and eventually television. Since then she has become a stalwart on Gardener's Question time; the resident gardening expert on BBC The One Show; sailed over back gardens in a hot air balloon for a daytime show; and asked Dame Judy Dench who she was! Her summing up was that gardeners are passionate, dedicated and enthusiastic, and she is definitely that. And most certainly not stupid!