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Last month my colleagues and I at ARC hosted an inspiring two-day Faith in Water Workshop at Sarum College. We chose Sarum partly because of its size and fabulous location, just next to Salisbury Cathedral, but also because it has a strong ecological ethos, with a popular Green Faith module in its MA Course in Christian Spirituality. And although it was the first time the kitchen had cooked to our requirements - vegetarian, mostly organic and mostly locally sourced - the catering was popular and most guests (some of whom, from a huge church in Baltimore, had never knowingly eaten vegetarian food before) went back for second helpings. The college offered an oasis of calm and tranquility, and it was a pleasure waking to the sound of swallows calling as they flew over Sarum's quadrangle.

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However Sarum's Communications Director, Christine Nielsen-Craig told me how they have recently hired the services of not-for-profit consultants, and she was extremely enthusiastic about them. "The Compost Doctors is a new enterprise that would be an excellent resource for the retreat centres you're working with. They offer excellent value for money because they are thorough and, thanks to subsidies, very affordable," she said.

So I made a call to Compost Dr, Kate Robinson and her comments were eye-opening. For most retreat centres, she said, your main underlying problem is not in fact how to get rid of ordinary kitchen food waste, but the question of why there is so much waste in the first place.

"We are often shocked at how much cooked food is wasted – in schools and retreat centres in particular - and the first thing we advise is to cut down portions. Provide two small pieces of chicken rather than a large one."

Perhaps, she speculated, it was a particular problem for retreat centres rather than, say, hotels, because some, at least, started by being places for training young male vicars in the 1950s or earlier, "and that is the culture they have maintained in the kitchen."

She noted that while huge concerns like the Eden project have composting areas as big as a room; and tiny places can manage on family-sized “dalek” bins, until recently one of the few choices for medium sized kitchens was a composting system that came in at around £10,000. Kate’s team at Wiltshire wildlife have invented some alternative solutions which come in at a fifth of that price.

However, she emphasized, the most important thing was not having £2000 to outlay on a composting bin and ways to stir it. “The only really vital element of any organization developing a proper ecological way of composting is for at least one person in the place to believe in composting, and to champion it.”

The Compost Doctors started off by being funded by DEFRA as a pilot scheme, linked to the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust. Now, although have smaller subsidies, they keep fees to the minimum. A small organization with fewer than five employees they would charge around £50 plus travel; for a place with up to 50 employees they would ask around £100; and the fee for larger businesses would be around £200. They would reckon on finding a system for most small and medium sized businesses that would cost around £2000. “Our mission is to get waste out of landfill, and get as much of it composted as possible.”

Christine and her colleagues at Sarum are considering doing a case study about their “food composting journey”. So there could be more news about that in the spring.

The Compost Doctors leaflet is here:

http://www.crn.org.uk/compostdoctors/downloads/CD_leaflet.pdf or you can contact them on 01872 560443 compostdoctors@crn.org.uk or www.compostdoctors.org.uk

Whitchester Retreat

Whitchester Retreat Centre in the Scottish Borders has an extensive range of organic fruit and vegetables and offers locally sourced free range eggs, lamb and game meat. As members of Green Tourism, they have a silver award. The only pesticides Whitchester uses in the garden are slug pellets and they are hoping to expand their use of herbs as pesticides. As you will see from Warden, Evelyn Jackson’s message below, the fruit and vegetables sound very tempting and they have a wonderful array of wildlife to spot!

“Currently we have, in varying quantities and stages of growth; potatoes, cabbage, carrots, sprouts, jerusalem artichokes, runner beans and broad beans, onions, leeks and garlic. In our small poly tunnel we have a good crop of butternut squash coming on, yellow courgettes, cherry tomatoes, french beans, broad beans, spinach and kale.

Our rhubarb, gooseberries, blackcurrants and redcurrants have all been harvested. The crop of tayberries was poorer this year, however we should have a good blackberry crop to come. We also have some apple trees which will give us a small crop later in the year. The fruit we freeze and use throughout the year. The site I found the information about natural pest deterrents was: <http://www.gardenguides.com/pests/tips/herbal.asp>

The herb bed consists of thyme, marjoram, mint, chives, sage, lovage and oregano. We have garlic growing beside the raspberries, but since the canes are new it is difficult to say if any impact possible pest attack. Our cabbage crop, which was planted close to the mint, has subsequently thrived, and although some are showing signs of being attacked by cabbage white we have had a better crop than in other years.

Re our wildlife log here are some of the entries over the past year: Buzzard, owls, roe deer in the grounds, heron ('looked like a sculpture until it took flight'), siskins, yellowhammers, and in the local district; male and female stonechat, kestrels, hare, mountain pansy, common lizards, peacock butterfly, ragged robin and fly agaric toadstool."

As well as having a full recycling policy, and a policy of ecological cleaning products, sale of Fairtrade goods and buying second-hand where possible, Whitchester has also had several other ideas:

- ☺ Room packs include an environment questionnaire, details on public transport and cycle hire, as well as information about our environmental policy with a request for guests to participate with us in our control measures.
- ☺ Use of cistern bottles to minimise water consumption
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Best wishes,

Victoria Finlay and Nicki McHugh

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