

A Growing Chorus: Overview of Practice

This overview lays out the practice that unfolded before and during doctoral research as a first-person story, using images, text and sound clips. It shows how informal growing turned into organisation, design and gardening, shared practices I came to see as ‘commoning’. In the context of these activities I developed particular registers of attention: noticing and listening.

Click on the links to hear the clips on Soundcloud. 

Thanks to Jeannine Mansell and Andy Martinez for contributing images, and to Johanna Hällsten, Dan Shepherd and Phil Smith for assistance with audio recordings.

ARRIVING

Croxted Road Estate, a housing estate in South London, built during the 1950s and 1960s, and managed by Southwark Council. In 2011 I moved into a ground floor flat here, happy to have access to outdoor space after living in a densely populated area of West London.



Like some of my neighbours I did a bit of gardening next to my back door balcony. By summer 2012 I had a mixture of vegetables and flowers going, among roses inherited from previous residents. I grew hollyhocks for a neighbour less able to garden, in the earth next to the bin cupboard.



Children were among the first to stop and talk. They loved watering and began learning the names of foxgloves, sunflowers, marigolds. Adults used the shared interest in gardening to start chatting. Hoverflies, bees, bugs and moths began to turn up. My garden patch, only about two metres square, became a small shared space, drawing in passersby.



Then anonymous complaints started to come in, via the council. Along with my neighbours I was told to remove my plants. What happened next was tangled and difficult, but eventually we discovered that members of our own Tenants and Residents Association were pressing to tidy up the estate.

Consider any feedback and have the final decision on any proposal. We received, we are therefore requesting that you remove the plants outside your balcony within the next 14 days. Please note that our Maintenance Team will remove, without notice any plants remaining in this area. We will respect this request and look forward to receiving any further feedback from the TRA regarding the estate's proposals for any areas identified for improvement.

Local councillors stepped in but, in spite of this, over 2013 and 2014 Southwark Council dug out all the resident planting on Glazebrook Close. When it came to my flat, neighbours and workers given the job of digging out our plants helped to transfer them to donated pots.

Out of this first phase of friendship and conflict developed the connections and practices that follow.

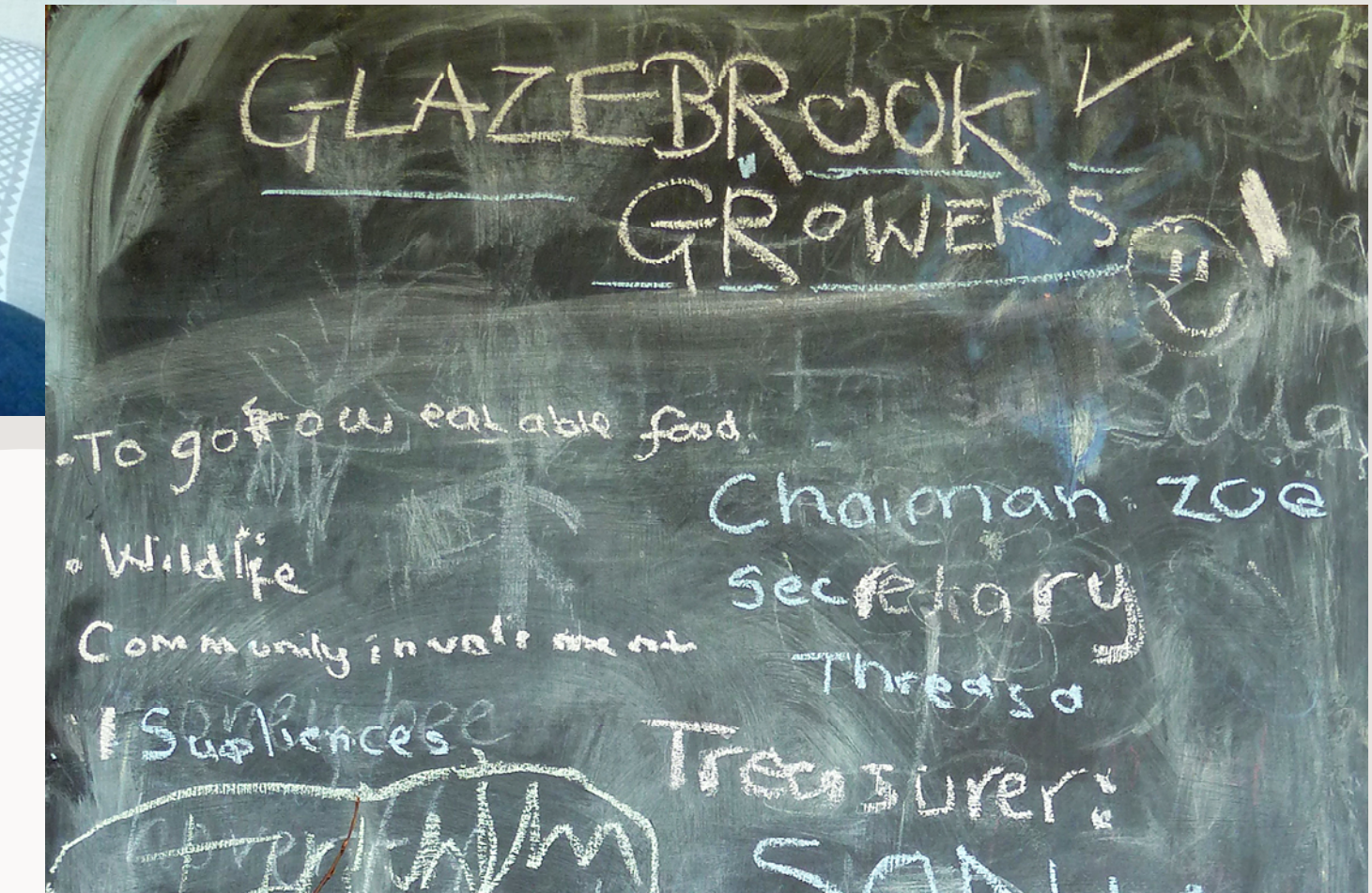


ORGANISING

We lost access to land, but the group of neighbours interested in growing things had started a network of relationships. We met up, organised ourselves as the 'Glazebrook Growers', and decided our aims: to grow food, encourage wildlife and build social connections.



Children joined in meetings and used a chalkboard to record some of our decisions.



I discovered that Streatham Common Community Garden, two miles away, was offering small 'learner plots' to novice gardeners. Over summer 2014 some of the Growers travelled there to gain experience of planning a plot and growing food together.



The following year we grew vegetables in pots outside our Tenants & Residents Hall. A small harvest gave us a tiny salad and much excitement. By this time the Tenants & Residents Association committee had changed, and we had a cooperative relationship that enabled us to start planning a community garden on the estate.



These two years showed that our group was sustained by relationships and shared activities, not one particular plot of ground. I came to value the actions through which connections are performed, and so to see community as something that we do, not something that we are.

In 2015 I started doctoral research, and adopted 'the commons' as a way to look at what our group was doing. Seeing the commons as a set of actions, I preferred the verb: commoning.

DESIGNING & BUILDING

The space that became the Glazebrook Growers' Kitchen Garden was a fenced area at one end of the estate. The design of the garden became a dialogical process, involving conversations, meetings and testing ideas.



**MEETING
TO PLAN OUR GARDEN**

COME ALONG TO THE
TRA HALL
ALL WELCOME
SUNDAY 22ND FEBRUARY
1.30 - 3PM

MEET ENVIRONMENTALIST AND EXPERT
IN URBAN GARDENING
PAUL RICHENS
ALONGSIDE THE TRA COMMITTEE.
TO DISCUSS AND CONTRIBUTE TO PLANS FOR
THE CROXTED ROAD COMMUNITY GARDEN

COME AND GET INVOLVED AND FIND OUT
WHAT THIS GREAT PROJECT CAN MEAN
FOR OUR ESTATE !

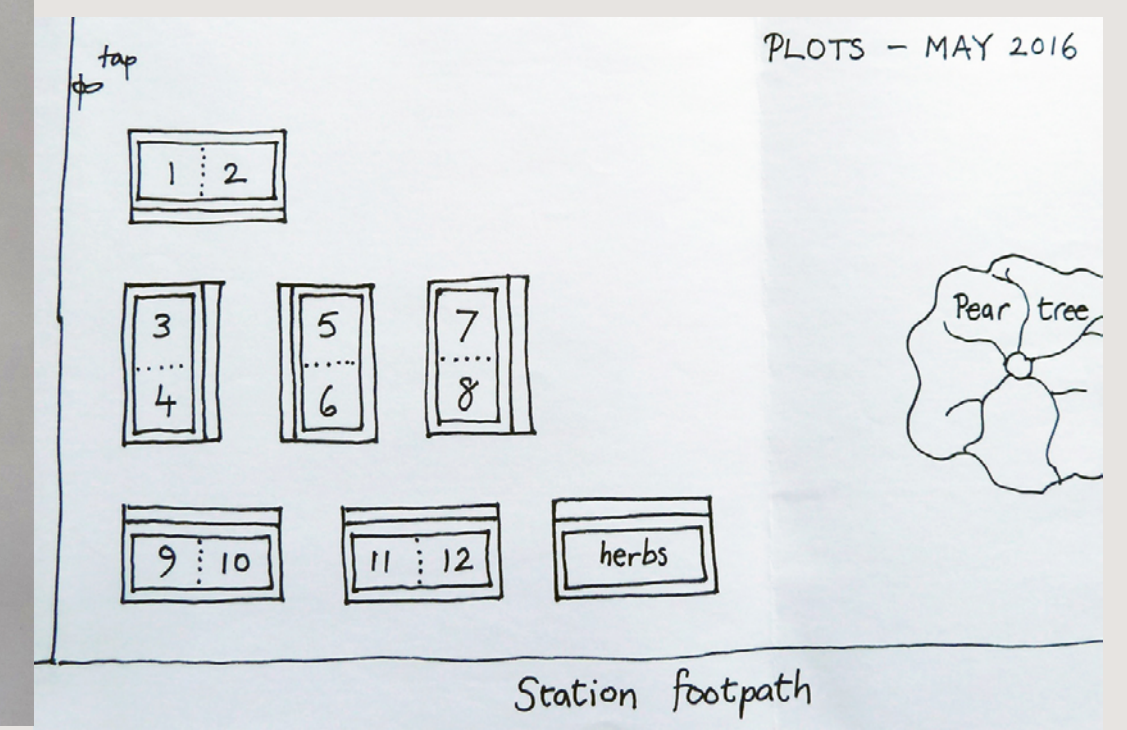
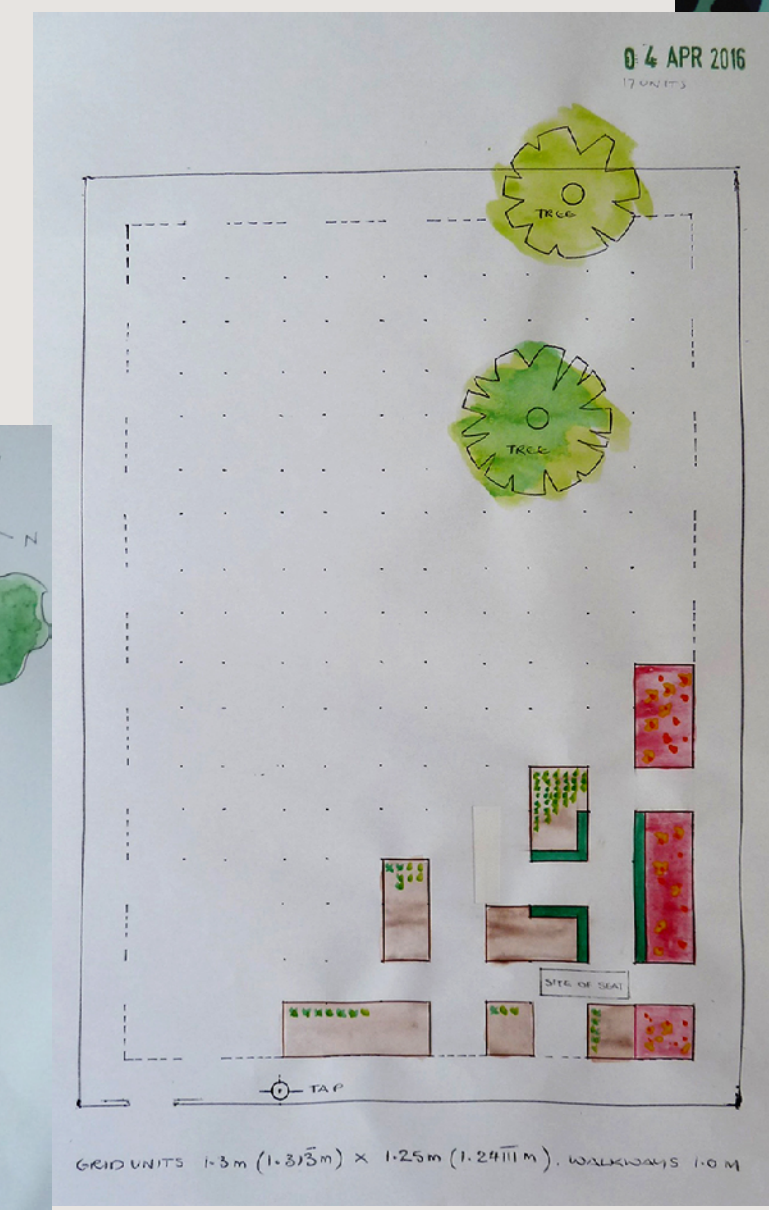
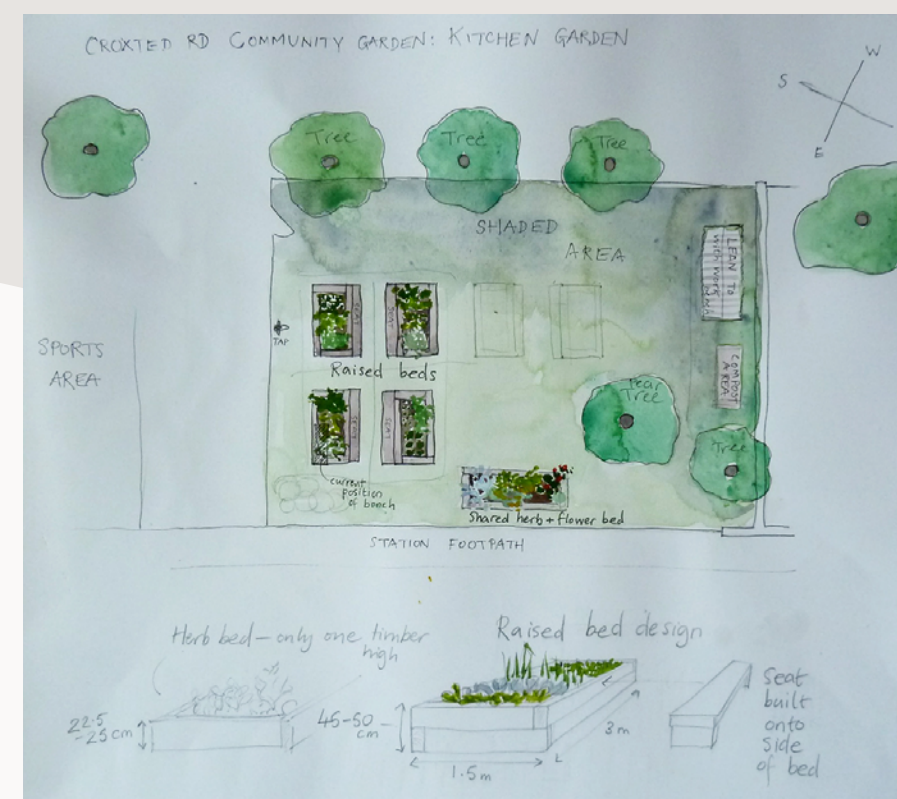
LIGHT REFRESHMENTS SERVED



The orientation of the space, with its sunny and shaded areas, influenced our plans. We laid out dust sheets folded to different sizes to work out the best dimensions for raised beds.



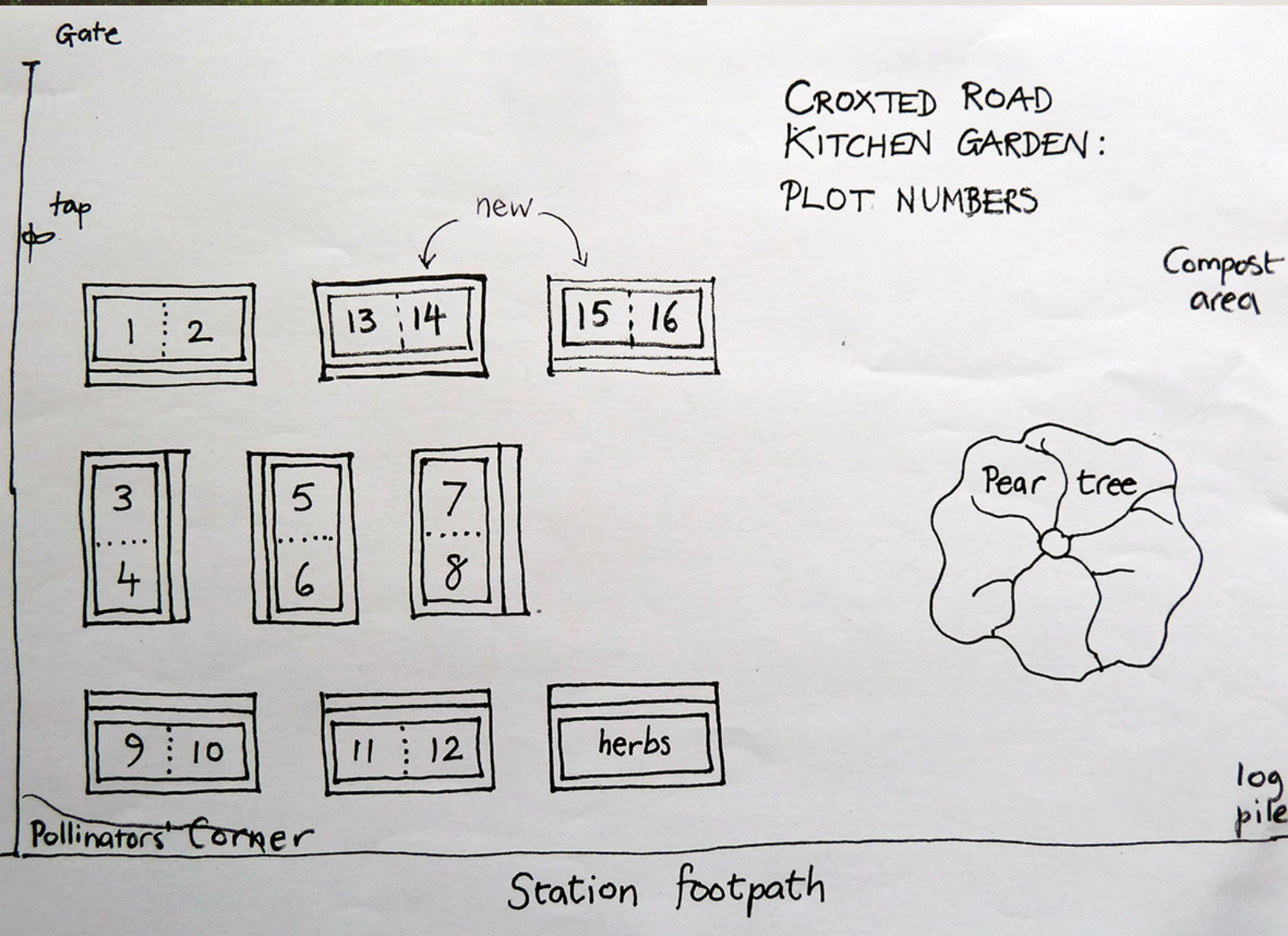
Carpenters who lived on the estate helped to improve an initial design that I drew up. Ideas went backwards and forwards until we had agreed a design that fitted our needs and made economical use of the timber we bought with grant money.



Each stage of the design and build was an opportunity for different people to contribute. Children liked the practical stages, and moved much of the topsoil used to fill the beds.



The finished raised beds were accessible to those who couldn't bend down easily, and had a built-in bench to encourage rest and conversation. When we added more beds in 2017, a natural gathering space was formed, with benches on three sides.



The shared, dialogical process behind the creation of the raised beds gave a wide group of people a stake in the garden. Another local group later adapted our design for their own community garden.

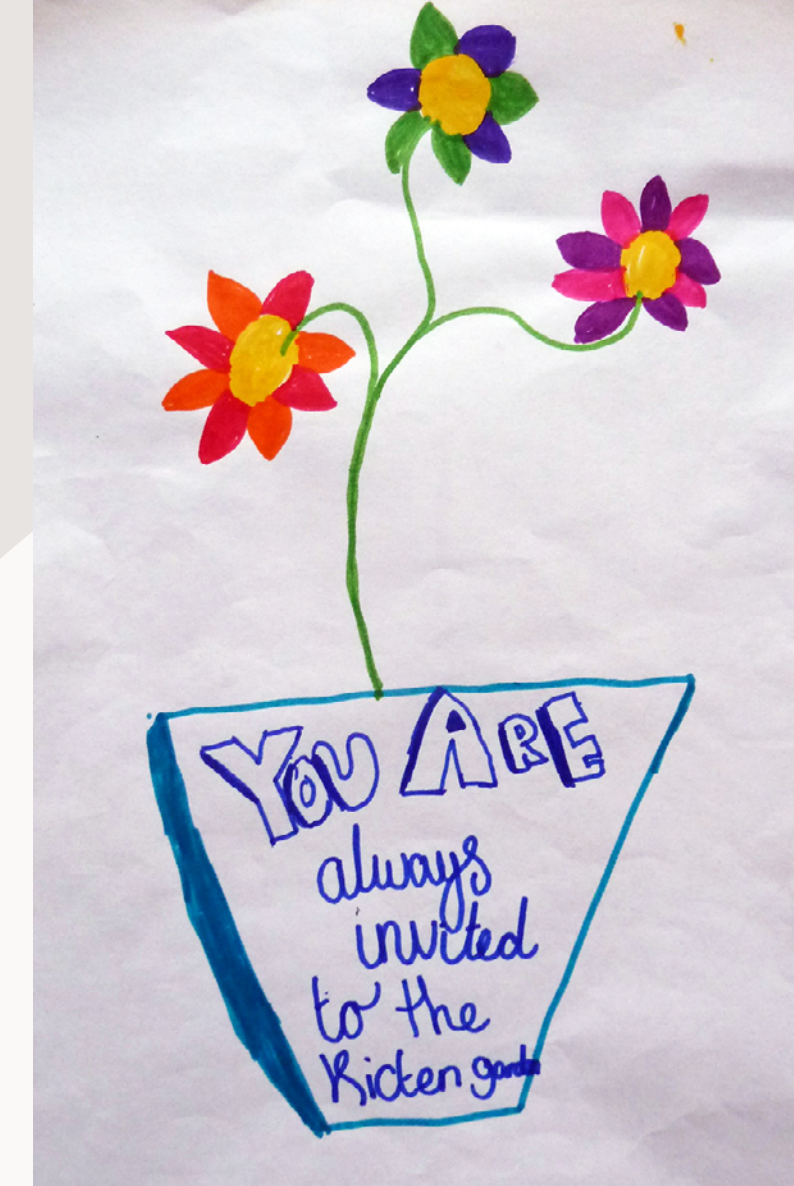


GARDENING

Many more activities were needed to launch and maintain our garden. We applied for grants, bought equipment and organised workshops, since most of us had little experience of growing.

Chalkboards were used to make signs and advertise events, and one young girl decided to make numerous posters to publicise the garden.

We organised ourselves on an allotment system, with each Grower taking half a raised bed to grow what they liked. I crowded too much into mine during the first season, but harvested rocket, beans and lettuce.



Urban gardener Paul Richens was an important support in teaching us the basics of organic gardening, and his workshops brought new people in, since they were free and open to all.



Come to our

GARDEN CELEBRATION

Saturday 12 November
2-5pm in the Kitchen Garden
All welcome

The Glazebrook Growers and Croxsted Road TRA will be celebrating the first season of the Kitchen Garden and thanking the supporters who helped it to happen, including our councillors and Southwark's Cleaner Greener Safer fund

2pm Garden tidy up
3.30pm Marshmallows by the fire

compost making ♦ leaf raking ♦ refreshments ♦ a garden song

Want to grow? Contact glazebrookgrowers@gmail.com or drop us a note at the TRA hall. Blog: glazebrookgrowers.wordpress.com



Meeting regularly ensured that decision making was shared, and we usually combined this with food or a celebration. Just as much as the care of plants, these meetings were a part of sustaining the group and the garden, our commons.

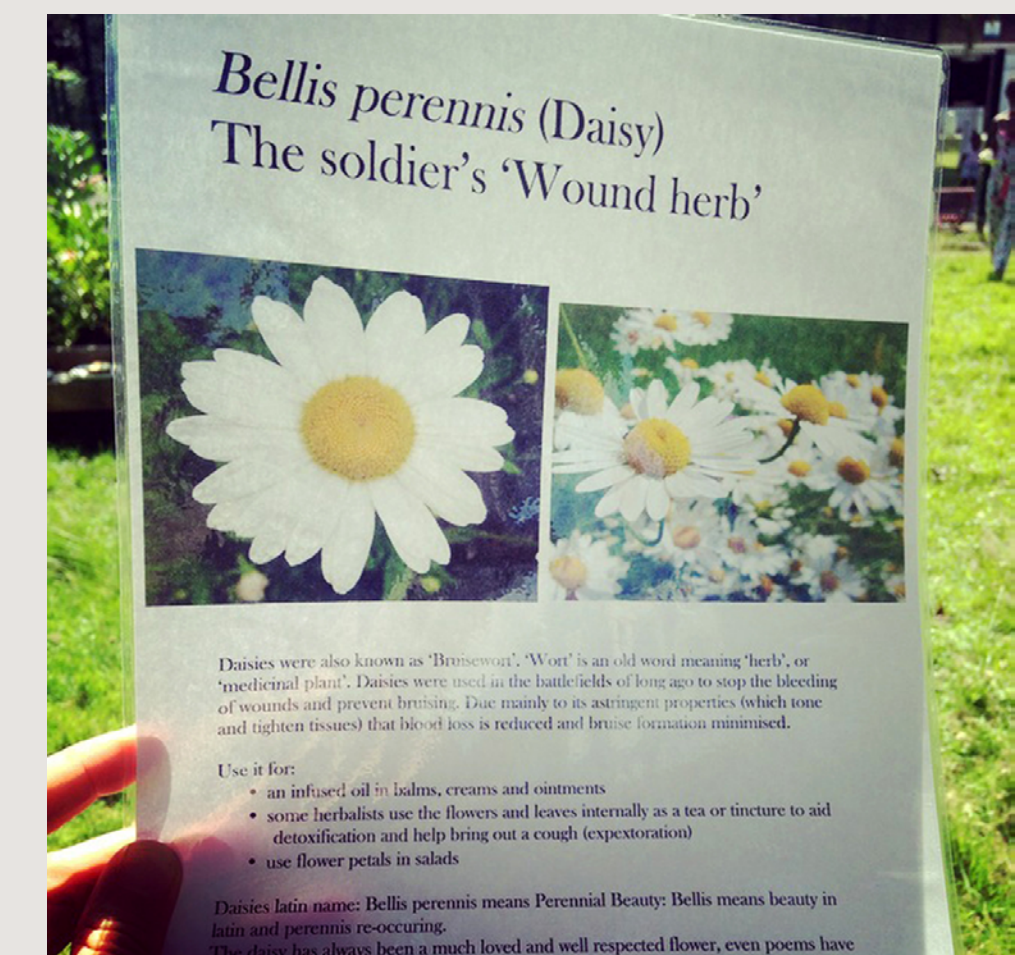
NOTICING

In the garden we encountered plants, insects, molluscs and microbial processes. It gave us opportunities to notice the nonhumans living alongside us, and revealed some of our attitudes towards them.

The compost bins demonstrated our reliance on the actions of bacteria, fungi and invertebrates in producing a fertile growing medium.



Workshops helped us to perceive this world. Paul Richens taught us about the microbial action that occurs in composting. He showed how to aerate garden and kitchen waste to favour bacterial action in the compost bins, keeping temperatures high and speeding decay.

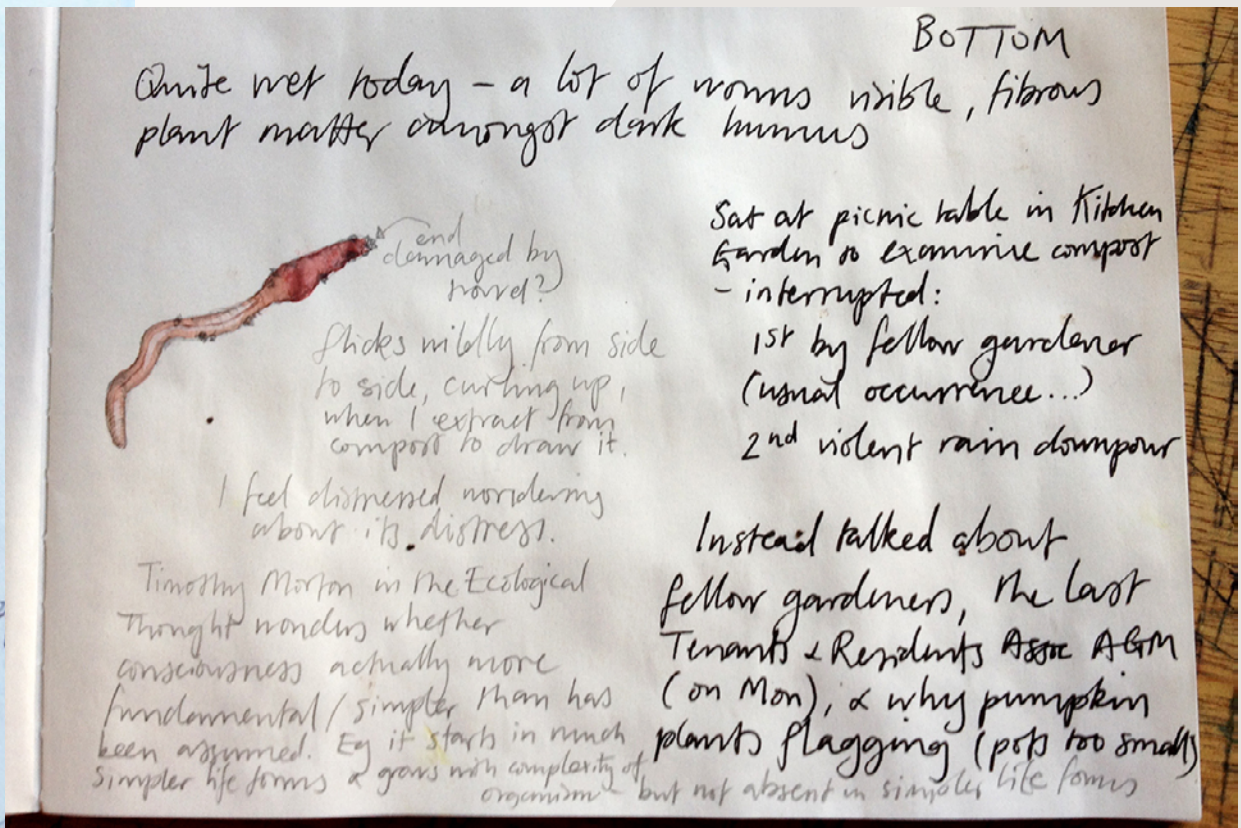
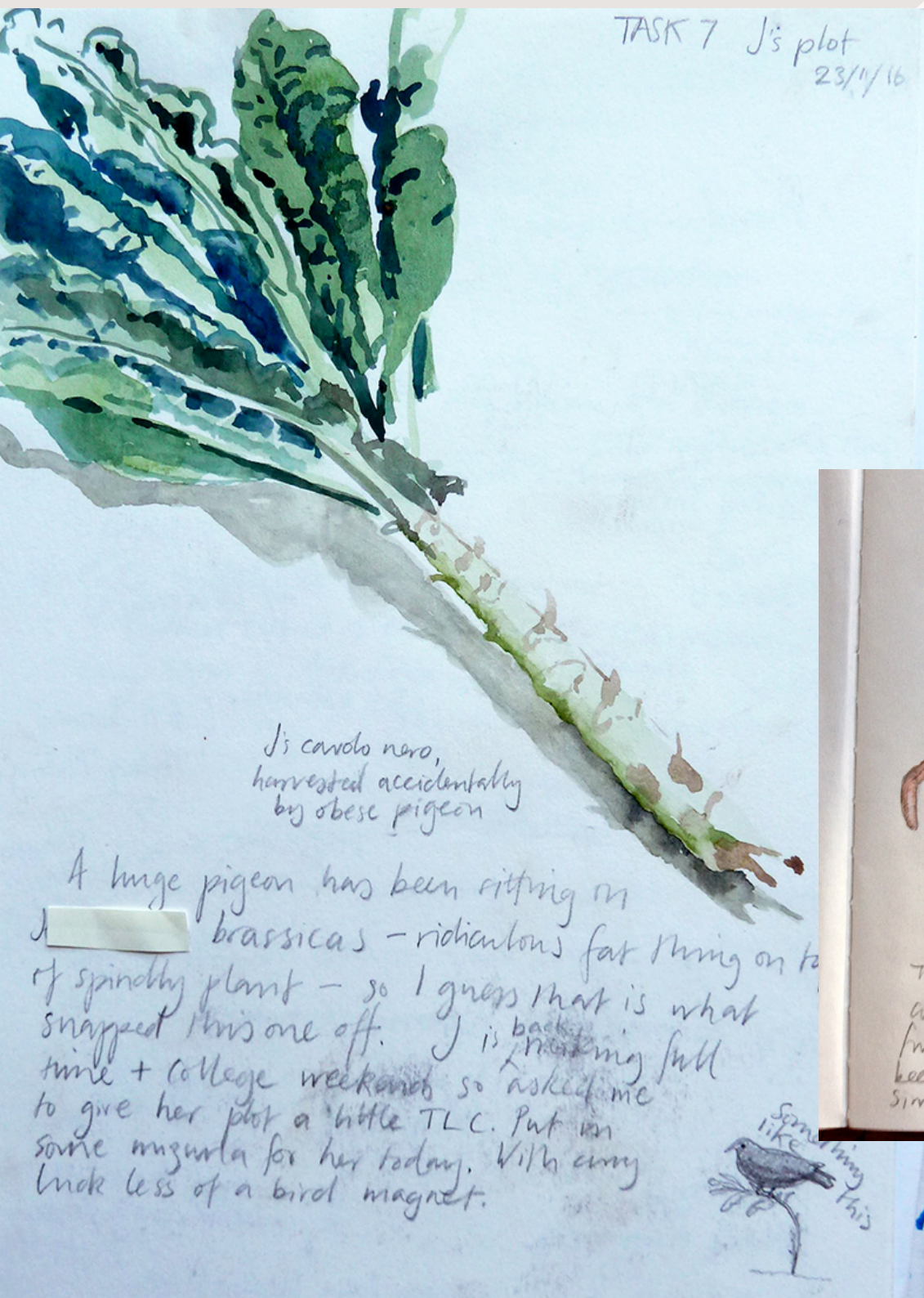


Herbalist Janine Gerhardt visited and revealed colonies of plants that we hadn't cultivated, or noticed, growing in lawns and verges. Wildflowers, or weeds when they appeared in our raised beds.

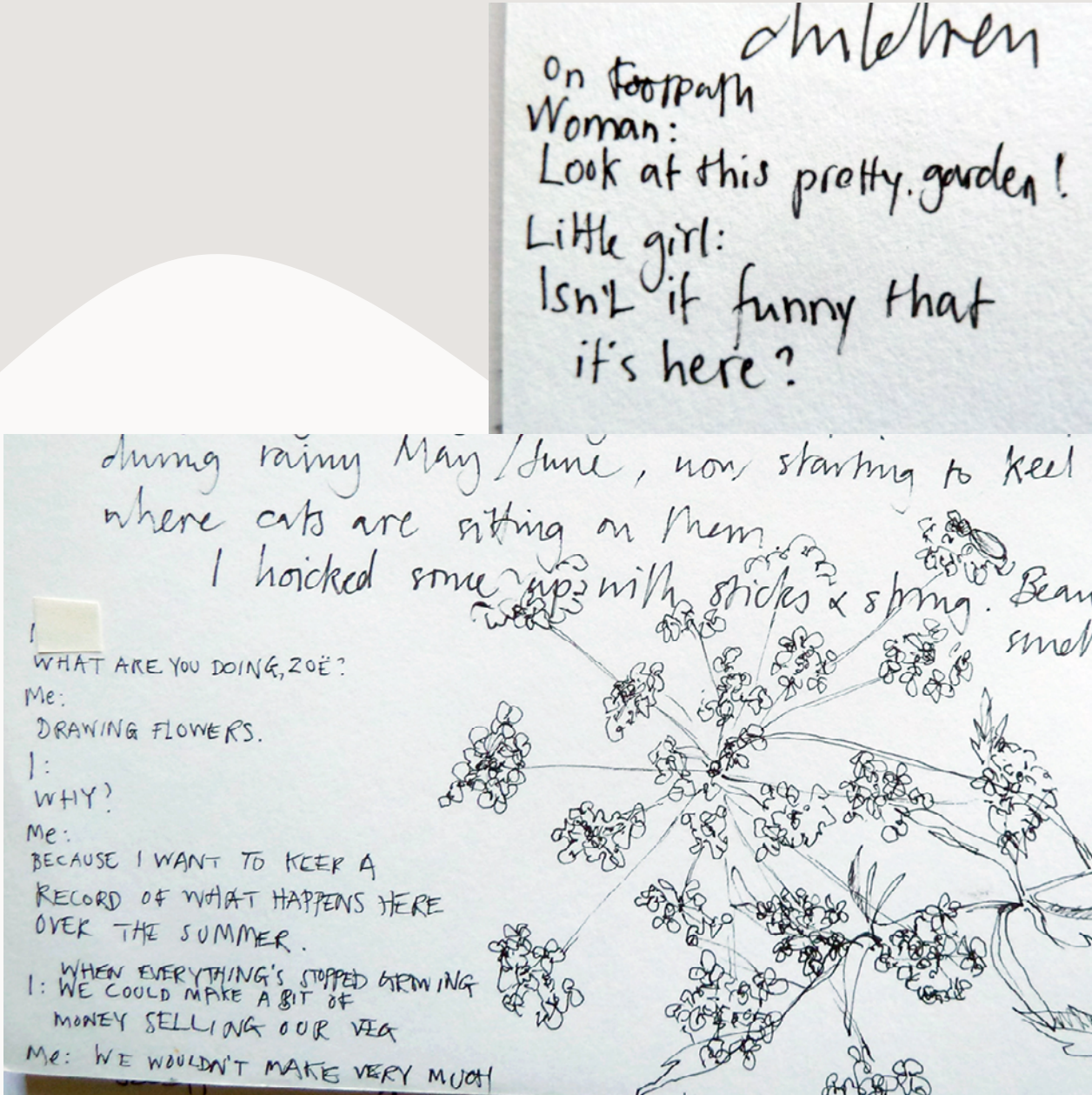
The human-centred nature of gardening came into clear focus with slugs. We used beer traps to drown them, and later discovered green plastic 'slug collars' to keep them off our plants. I started to see the garden as a gathering place where we could notice many layers of connections and relationships, assembling humans and nonhumans. Relationships might take the form of cooperation, communication, killing, eating, care-taking or just being in the same place at the same time.



I used sketching and writing in the garden as a reflective practice. Drawing helped me to slow down and find an attentiveness that was both focused and open.



In attempting to use the garden for quiet reflection, I noticed another of its qualities. Whenever alone, thinking or keeping a journal, I was interrupted and engaged in conversation. Rather than favouring individual meditation, it was a space that insisted on engagement and communication.



LISTENING

As my research unfolded, I came to value sound and listening as ways of noticing relationships in and around the garden. I used several different listening methods, depending on context.



In 2016 I went on a residency where I experienced the ‘Deep Listening’ practices of composer Pauline Oliveros. Quite different from the conversational listening of ‘Tea & Talk’, these encourage a meditative connection to the world through sound.

To gain further perspectives, covering a longer time, I sought out the voices and views of older people and residents who had lived on the estate since the 1960s and 1970s. Four people came to share their experiences of living on the estate over tea and cake in the Tenants and Residents Hall.



Mrs Parry describes moving to the estate from damp accommodation in Peckham, her husband’s allotment growing.



Mrs Kennedy and Mrs Williams give their views of the estate and their Glazebrook flats.



I invited my fellow gardeners to join two Deep Listening sessions in the Kitchen Garden with instructor Beckie Leach. I wanted to see how practices that had made me feel more alive and connected would work here, among the Growers.



First Deep Listening session in the garden:
wind, rhythm between us,
a resonant time to be listening.



Second Deep Listening session in the garden:
trees, play, vulnerability.

Participants did not come from the 'art world' and I was surprised by their openness to the unfamiliar exercises; we made ourselves vulnerable in performing them.

Playfulness, connection and a curiosity about others, both human and nonhuman, seemed to be activated by the sessions.

2/8/17 Listening w. Beckie. first of two workshops
730-845
Din of own thoughts
Noise of physical sensation & emotions
Wind! All around, activating space above
our heads
Joy of sounds - flap of tarpaulin, clasp of
heels. When these pop up against background
of more constant sound they seem playful -
make me want to laugh
Wind & trains accompanying each other,
occupying similar 'sound terrain'
children so far away today! Screams sound
like an

listening meditation - Global/focal

rigged up a tarpaulin between the
trees & fence in the Kitchen Garden
& it created a safe-feeling, cradled
area in one corner, like being under
a green sail. Over the course of the
workshop, 7.30 until just before 9,
darkness started to fall, hastened by cloud.
An unexpected sweetness in the group.
A bit of reserve, particularly in
but more ease than I had expected - there
previously

Finally, Johanna Hällsten and I returned to the garden with contact microphones, to extend the range of sound we could detect. We placed these in the earth, in compost and on trees, and heard layers of sound: human and nonhuman, ants, people, trains, music, worms and things we couldn't identify.



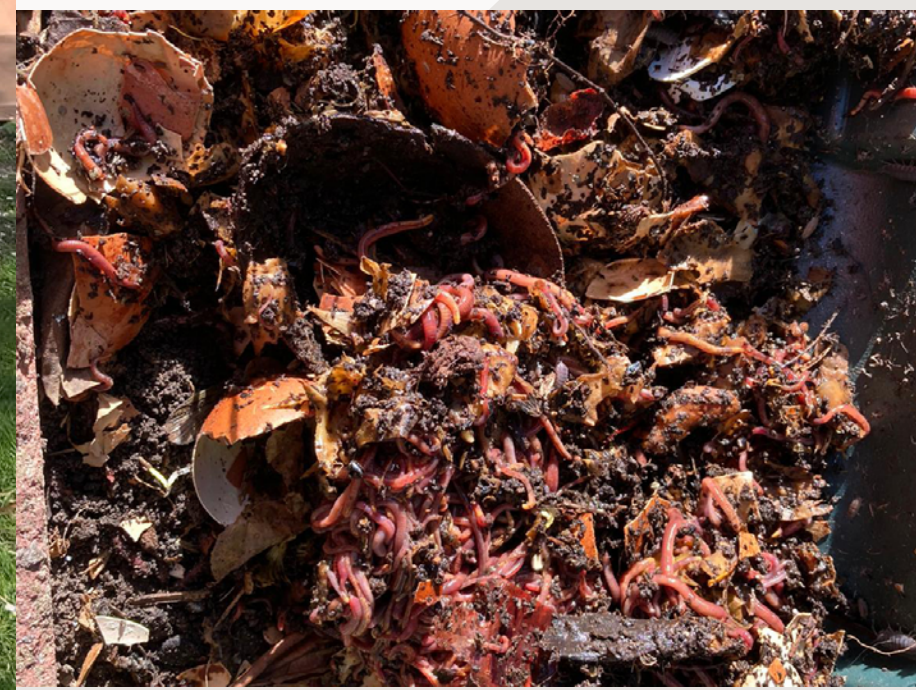
**Contact mic in a Kitchen Garden raised bed:
the frenetic activity of ants.**



**Contact mic on the Kitchen Garden pear tree:
we discover it is transmitting Asian music radio.**



**Contact mic in a wormery: worms, trains,
young people in a shared acoustic space.**



Listening to the space instead of looking at it revealed a polyphony. Human sounds and activities carried on among those of other species, machines and the wind. I came to think of the garden as a 'polyphonic commons'.