

Summary of PACE Field Trip 6 May 2025 – Bennison Farm visit

25 PACE Supporters made their way to Bennison Farm Community Supported Agriculture Scheme in Thorrington, with exemplary car sharing keeping the number of vehicles and CO2 emissions to a minimum! Sadly a few people who had booked were unable to make it on the day for various reasons. Caroline had to apologise for having said that the weather forecast looked ideal, because it was actually very cold. We were given a very warm welcome by Danny, who started the farm 13 years ago, and he began by telling us how it all works.

Bennison Farm is 8.5 acres, on which Danny grows organically all the vegetables for a 'veg share' scheme which supplies up to 200 families in the Colchester area with a delicious and interesting range of vegetables all year round. Nothing that goes into the boxes is grown anywhere else so the food is 100% seasonal. This is really quite a feat, and must be a huge planning challenge, ensuring that there are always at least 7 different vegetables available to harvest every week, even during the 'hungry gap' in April/May when the winter veg are almost finished, and the new season's crops are not ready. A row of large polytunnels and a watering system plus interplanting and relay cropping are very important for managing this, enabling things to start earlier, and extending growing seasons and range of crops. Danny has only one other full time worker, and some volunteers. Soon it was time to keep warm by starting our walk round the farm, with plenty of opportunity for Danny to give us more information and answer our many questions.

Some of the points which interested us:

- Certain 'pests' such as carrot root fly, and slugs, can of course be problematic, but Danny usually finds that good husbandry results in a natural balance with predators and parasites which prevents the pests getting out of control. Biological control such as nematodes is sometimes resorted to. He tried out ferric phosphate pellets (permitted for organic growing) for slug control, but they did more harm than good when rooks found the pellets so tasty that they tore the horticultural fleece to bits to get at them!
- Knowing exactly how many veg shares are being supplied every week minimises waste, and if there are surpluses they supply the Commons Community Café at the Minories in Colchester. Some produce is also sold at the Manningtree Wholefood Store.
- Much of the cultivation is done using a selection of rather antiquated machinery for planting, hoeing, harvesting and mowing. Danny is saving up for a new tractor.

- The inclusion of green manures, especially legumes such as clovers, in the crop rotation, are vital for fertility building when no artificial fertilisers are used. They can also be grown as an understorey with sweetcorn or squashes.

What came across very clearly was the understanding and appreciation of working in harmony with nature, leaving wild areas for pollinators and predators, not leaving bare soil, tolerating some losses to insects and other animals, all with beneficial effects on the productivity and quality of the vegetables.

To find out more about how the veg share scheme works, to join the scheme, or to check out 2025 events, go to bennisonfarm.co.uk. For those in the Manningtree area, there is a collection hub at Peach and Pippin Orchard on Hungerdown Lane.

To scale up and supply vegetables to many more families of Colchester and the Manningtree area would need more people with Danny's commitment and passion.

There was a vote of thanks to Danny, for being so generous with his time. Thank you also to everyone for coming, and for braving the cold.

Next PACE Supporters' meeting will be "The Turtle Doves of Wrabness Nature Reserve" - a walk and talk with Shirley Sampson from the RSPB on Tuesday 3 June.