

Allotment owners fear they will be trampled by the Olympics



Sam Clark and his wife Samantha, the Moro restaurateurs, are fighting to save allotments threatened by the London Olympics CARLOS JASSO

By Louise Jury

As protests go, it was more mellow than militant. Led by the Moro restaurateurs Sam and Samantha Clark yesterday, a group of east London allotment holders welcomed visitors to their plots with guided tours and a taste of their city-grown produce.

Their point, though, is anything but laid back.

While the chefs are newcomers to the Manor Garden Society Allotments, having secured their plot five years ago, the 1.8 hectare site dates back at least 80 years, and was bequeathed for the public good by a local philanthropist, Major Villiers.

Now it is under threat from plans to build a footpath for the 2012 Olympics.

An alternative site has been offered to them by the London Development Agency (LDA), the body charged with securing all the land necessary for the Olympic village. But the allotment holders - from *The Independent's* urban gardening columnist, Cleve West, to people who have had a plot for more than 50 years, claim they are only guaranteed to be able to stay for seven years and held an open day yesterday to explain their plight.

Samantha Clark, one half of Moro, said the allotments were invaluable.

"Being in a big city, being able to travel 10 minutes and feel as if you're right in the countryside takes all the frustrations of the city away," she said.

"After 15 minutes, you feel yourself relaxing and totally focus on the little things, like how much the tomatoes have grown. Just being in touch with nature is lovely.

"And the whole community side is important. They have been going for years and it's extremely friendly. We're more busy than some others so don't spend as much time up here as some, but for lots of people it's their life."

The produce was not intended for professional use, though they did use some marrows in their restaurant when they had a glut.

"It was really satisfying not leaving them sitting around," she said.

But the alternative plot offered by the LDA was not satisfactory. "It's right next to the motorway. If there's a way that the two [the allotments and the Olympics] can live together, that would obviously be the best scenario," she said.

Albert Dickinson, 86, one of the oldest gardeners, has spent 54 years working his plot. Julie Sumner, an NHS antenatal teacher and allotment holder, said a short-term alternative made no sense for gardeners.

"My asparagus bed took

four years to start cropping," she said. "You just can't get going on the basis of seven years. The scheme also threatened a nature reserve next door. She said: "It's crazy to be talking about a green Olympics and to be annihilating the nature.

"The London Development Agency and the Mayor [Ken Livingstone] launched a food strategy and biodiversity strategy to increase access to fresh food, particularly in places like east London, but all they're talking about is deleted [if we lose the allotments]."

The diversity of residents of London, from Greeks and Jamaicans to Africans, is reflected in the range of produce grown there, from vines and fig trees to globe artichokes.

A public inquiry has been proceeding at the ExCel Centre in Docklands since May to decide on which compulsory purchase orders are necessary for Olympic building to go ahead. A London Development Agency spokesman said yesterday: "We have been working with all parties concerned, including the local council, to ensure we negotiate a deal that is best for both sides.

"The LDA is at the public inquiry now, where people's objections are being heard by an independent inspector, and we will listen to the inspector's decision."