

What to do on the Allotment and when...



By Pete Leadbeater

March/April

Soil conditions can change rapidly in the early part of the year and gardeners must work with the weather and conditions. A common mistake (and I still do it) is to sow small seeds too early and too much at one time. The weeds will probably grow faster than the crops and everything will require hand weeding at the same time. This slow backbreaking job always seems to occur when I am extra busy and so gets neglected which results in partial failure of one or two items. However, generally speaking there is time to set (sow) again.

Things to do:

- Sow parsnips. The soil should not have been freshly manured as this can cause the roots to fork. Take out a seed drill and sow a few seeds every 4 inches and eventually thin to leave the strongest seedling. Parsnips are slow to germinate and this spacing allows a small hoe to be used when all the planting stations are visible.
- Brassica seeds, particularly Brussel Sprouts can be set. Use a sprinkling of lime along the drill to reduce the risk of club root. Watch out for flea beetle.
- Lettuce, quick maturing. Sow a few seeds at intervals along a prepared seed drill. Space at about 9 inches for butterhead and crisphead types and 6 inches for Little Gem. Thin to one per station when about 1 inch high. You can transplant some of the thinning which will mature slightly later than those left in their original positions.
- Other vegetables that may be put in now include carrots, onions and spring onions, leeks, beetroot, early peas and broad beans.
- Plant potatoes; all varieties can be planted by the end of April. This year I planted 1 row of 'Swift' and 1 row of 'Rocket' on 13th February, I will let you know how each performs. I have risked a few for 10 years now and never lost them yet... but there is always a first time! Obviously start with earlies and be prepared to pull some soil over them when they first start showing. In 2007, I planted 2 rows of 'Rocket' on 17th February, dug the first on 11th May and regularly from the 16th May.
- Spring cabbage beds require cleaning up and a good pinch of sulphate of ammonia sprinkled around each plant. This is very high in nitrogen so do not use too much, otherwise they will be all leaf and not heart up (less than ½ a teaspoon per plant is plenty). Apply before rain and work into the soil.
- Harvest leeks, parsnips, sprouting broccoli, winter cabbage and cauliflowers as they mature.
- Make sure you protect crops from deer, rabbits, pigeons and small birds. Birds will be nesting and have young to feed – just as your seedlings appear.
- Asparagus is a good, long term crop. For anyone thinking of growing asparagus the planting time for crowns is late March to late April. 1 or 2 year old crowns can be obtained from specialist growers and may have to be purchased by mail order. Modern all male varieties such as 'Gijnim' will give the best results. Well

prepared, clean ground is required as Asparagus needs a permanent bed. Allow 15 inches between crowns, planting in a trench spreading the roots with the crown about 2 inches below the surface. Do not cut any spears during the first year and only a small number in the second. Cutting should stop by mid June even on an established bed to allow the fern to grow and build up the plant. A top dressing of well rotted manure should be applied each year and now is the time to do it if you have an established bed.

May/June

- Keep crops free of weeds by regular hoeing. I find a draw hoe the best tool for this work as there is more control of the blade and I can work much closer to the crop. Looking around garden centres, the dutch hoe is more common, especially those with stainless steel blades. Although stainless steel looks nice, they do not keep a sharp edge as well as those with carbon steel blades.
- Earth up potatoes as required, again, a draw hoe is ideal for this.
- Plant out and protect Brussels
- Erect supports for runner beans; 8 foot bamboo canes are perfect – either in rows or wig-wam form. Cable ties are a strong method of fixing as it is important that the structure can withstand a strong wind when covered with wet foliage.
- Set runner beans, French beans and peas. When climbing beans fail to grow around their support, twist the leader around anti-clockwise – it will unwind again if clockwise.
- Sow sweet corn seed; these require more depth of compost than you usually get in a standard seed tray. (Root trainers are ideal).
- When the danger of frost is over (approx. Late May/early June), it is safe to plant out marrows, courgettes, pumpkins, cucumbers and suitable varieties of tomatoes. When planting out marrows etc... it is better to slightly raise the soil at the planting positions as they suffer from stem rot if water lies around the stem during a wet spell of weather. When you sow the seeds direct or into pots, place them on edge.
- As May progresses, more varieties of brassicas can be sown; autumn cabbage, sprouting broccoli, cauliflower etc... Cauliflower 'Clapton' is one I am trying which is claimed to be club root resistant, but expensive, they are from Kings Seeds (the supplier we use for our seed purchase scheme).
- Soft fruit will start to ripen in June – protect from birds.
- If your early planting of potatoes survived, you may start digging them at around the end of May and if you sowed Broad beans in the autumn, they should be ready then to.
- Cut asparagus spears when they are about 6 inches (15cm) high. Use a sharp knife and cut just below ground level. Do not take spears after mid-June but allow the fern to develop and feed the plant for next season.

June/July

- Continue to keep crops free of weeds with regular hoeing. Weeds compete with crops for light, water and nutrients.
- Plant out brussels sprouts and other brassicas.
- Remove the tips from broad beans – above the flowers to minimise the risk of blackfly.
- Plant out marrows, courgettes, butternut squash, outdoor cucumbers and pumpkins.
- Plant outdoor tomatoes and put a cane or stake alongside for support.
- Even when planting bush tomatoes, I find it advisable to tie the plant just once, to a small cane to prevent wind damage. The same applies to peppers.
- Plant out leeks. These should be 1/8" (3mm) to 1/4" (6mm) in diameter at the base of the stem. Carefully remove them from the seedbed with a fork, trim the roots to approx 3/4" (20mm) and also remove some of the leaf growth so the plant is approx 8" (20cm) high. Using a good dibber (one made from an old

spade/fork handle is ideal), make planting holes around 5" (125mm) deep, 8" (20cm) apart in moist soil. Drop one plant into each hole orienting the leaves so they point along the row – this makes hoeing easier. Leave the holes open but half fill with water. Job done! No need to water again. Leeks are an easy and useful winter crop to grow.

- Plant out sweet corn. Always plant in a 'block' 16" (400mm) apart both ways, rather than in single rows. Sweet corn is wind pollinated, the pollen falling/blowing from the flower at the top to the tassels of the future corn cobs. It is important not to mix varieties, especially of the supersweet strains, as cross-pollination may spoil the flavour.
- Sow or plant out more runner beans, French beans, beetroot, cabbages, lettuce and carrots for a succession of crops.
- Harvest early potatoes, broad beans, peas, cabbages, carrots, beetroot, lettuce etc... as they become available.
- Stop cutting asparagus by mid June and leave rhubarb to recover by late June.
- Protect and pick soft fruit as it ripens.
- Watch for signs of pest damage, particularly on brassica crops and treat if necessary.
- Firm in and water all plants when they have been transplanted to settle the soil around the roots. Water seed drills prior to sowing the seed in hot, dry conditions. I water once and never again and the plants done die – The roots go down in search of moisture instead of remaining near the surface waiting for the man (or woman) whose arms are getting longer to come along with the watering can. On our sandy soil watering pans the surface and when it dries it quickly forms a crust which can restrict good germination. An exception to this is runner beans, which, when cropping, I do water regularly as shortage of moisture produces short curly beans.
- As I mentioned in February, I planted a row of 'Swift' and a row of 'Rocket' on 13th February. Both were coming up and I pulled the soil over them before the Easter snow. Both varieties had a few open flowers when I dug one root of each on the 17th May – not a good result; both were about the size of a 50p piece. I left them for another week or so. Everything is later than 2007 due to the cold April we experienced this year.

July/August

- Remember to make a note of the variety of plants you grow. It will help you make an assessment of their final performance as it may pay you to grow another variety next time. New varieties are regularly available and can be worth a try. F1 varieties are designed to give consistent results. This means they are ready to harvest at one time and so setting small quantities for succession sowing is possibly the best plan.
- Check for pest damage on your plot.
- Tie tomatoes to their supports and remove the side shoots of the indeterminate (cordon) varieties. Check for blight. Last year it wiped out most of the outdoor tomato crop. Treat if necessary with an approved fungicide / Bordeaux mixture. Lack of moisture at a critical time in fruit development can cause a lack of calcium within the fruit which leads to a brown patch opposite the stalk. This is known as blossom end rot and is often seen in tomatoes planted in grow bags. Prevent this by seeing that the soil is never allowed to dry out completely.
- Harvest shallots and later onions and garlic, drying them well before storage. Do not bend or force the stalks over and when harvesting, if dry, leave on the soil surface for a day or two.
- Inspect potatoes for blight; a disease which affects the leaves initially as brown patches but can travel down the stems to the tubers. Treat them as you would tomatoes (to which they are related). Towards the end of the growing season cut off the tops just above ground level. This stops tuber growth and, if carried out a few days before digging, allows the skins to harden which is good for storage.
- Harvest runner beans, cauliflowers, carrots, beetroot, fruit etc... as it all becomes available.

September

- Keep crops free of pests; caterpillars are a real problem at this time.
- Harvest onions, dry them well and store. Any that have bolted (sent up a seed head) should be used first as they will not keep. Some onions are showing signs of white rot which shows as a white powdery fungus around the roots and base of the bulb. These onions should not be composted but taken away and burnt. White rot is almost impossible to eradicate and can remain an issue for more than 10 years. So, it is advisable to avoid using this area again for any related crop (shallots, onions, garlic, leeks). Keep tools clean and avoid transferring soil from this area to the rest of the plot in order to minimise its' spread.
- Cauliflowers have done well this year due to the cool damp conditions. As it forms, bend an outer leaf or two over the curd (head) as it forms to protect it from both the sun and adverse weather. Variety 'Clapton' which is club root resistant has performed well.
- Harvest runner beans and water them regularly during any dry periods.
- Gather all vegetables as they become available.
- Sow spring onions eg. Winter hardy 'White Lisbon' and sow over wintering onions. You can also sow winter lettuces such as 'Winter Density' and 'Valdor'.
- Plant a new strawberry bed. Allow 30" (75cm) between rows, 20" (50cm) between plants. Plants should be removed and replaced after 3 years and a new bed created. Pot up runners as they appear to give you new plants. Doing a few each year will ensure you have a continuous supply and rotation of 1,2 and 3 year old plants.
- Pick autumn fruiting raspberries as they ripen. Remove the canes from summer fruiting varieties which have provided fruit this year, cutting them off at ground level. This years new growth will fruit next year.
- Pick plums and other tree fruit as they ripen.
- Dig potatoes. Check to see if the skin rubs off. If it does, cut off the tops and leave in the ground for a week or so before digging. Allow them to dry and then store in cool, dark conditions. Use any damaged tubers first and regularly check to make sure there are none going off as they will ruin the whole crop.
- Compost all green waste material eg. Brassica leaves, but not the roots or potato tops as this can cause blight to be carried over to following years.
- Clear ground as it becomes vacant and keep it free of weeds ready for winter digging. This is best done from the beginning of November onwards, otherwise if the weather is mild, weeds will grow. Alternatively, sow a green manure crop such as phacelia, mustard or field beans which can be dug in in the spring to improve the soil and protect nutrients from being leached over the winter.
- Now is the time to be buying broad bean seeds eg. 'Aquadulce' & 'The Sutton' and onion sets for autumn planting such as 'Senshyu Yellow' (see the Seed Scheme).
- I use a tool called the '*Wolf Terrex Autospade*' for digging. Mine is many years old and was, until recently, out of production. It is now being produced again and is now known as the 'Backsaver'. It is expensive at around £100 but it does cut down on the back-breaking work you have to do when digging.
- Continue picking any remaining runner beans. When the crop has finished, take down the supports and store them to prevent any winter damage such as broken canes caused by autumn winds.

October

- Dig the last of the main crop potatoes on a fine day and store in a dark frost free place. Use any damaged tubers immediately.
- Harvest cabbages, cauliflowers, beetroot, carrots, early leeks etc... as required.
- Gather tree fruits as they ripen.

- Due to the wet weather there has been lots of weed growth, so, as any ground becomes available, clear it for winter digging, or sow a green manure.
- Plant out spring cabbage, these need protection from pigeons and other vermin over the winter.
- Plant onion sets and garlic to overwinter. Set each garlic clove 3" (75mm) deep. Autumn sown garlic generally provides a better crop than those set in the spring. If you have suffered from white rot, avoid planting in those areas.
- Remember to remove and burn any material that is not suitable for composting, particularly that which can carry over disease eg. Onions with white rot, broad beans, runner beans, brassica roots, potato haulms and tomatoes which have again this year suffered with blight due to the prolonged wet conditions.
- Start planning for next year. Order seeds (remember the seed scheme from Kings Seeds), potatoes and manure. When doing this, consider the performance of the varieties you grew. Obviously the conditions will affect your crop to some degree, a change in variety may improve things. Compare what other allotmenters have grown and see if they did anything different. By doing this and listening to advice from others will provide you