



Grow Your Own Newsletter - June 2012

The main topic of conversation on the site the last month has been the lack of growth and poor germination of so many crops. The low temperatures and light levels combined with the soggy ground has held everything back this year.....except the weeds of course.

Eat your weeds

Ground elder is one of the worst weeds to eliminate so why not give in and treat it as a crop instead? The plant was introduced here by the Romans to provide their soldiers with fresh vegetables along the roadside. One of the best ways to cook it is to take young, green shoots and steam them till warm, no more than a minute. Toss them in melted butter and serve immediately.

A lot of common weeds make a good mix with a salad. To add a tang to lettuce try mixing in chickweed, clover, daisy (flowers and leaves), dandelion, fat hen, garden orache, ground elder or young goosegrass. Or for a bigger kick try sorrel, wild garlic, lady's smock and hairy bittercress.

Time to get out your tender plants

Now that the frosts are gone it is the time to get out your tender plants but do harden them off a bit first. With the winds we get on the site soft young runners etc can be damaged if they are planted straight from the greenhouse and strong sun can scorch soft plants. Although we are otherwise "green" we always put slug pellets around the young plants but if you object to their use then try other deterrents to keep the slugs and snails away from the tender shoots.

It's not too late to sow

Runner beans – there are many varieties to choose from but 'Polestar' is recommended as being reliably stringless. Another to try is 'Moonlight' which is self-pollinating so copes well with varied weather conditions and is also stringless. **French Beans** - try the climbing bean 'Cobra' as they get less splashed by watering. **Tomatoes** – 'Sungold' are a lovely little orange tomato and will grow over the ground. **Courgettes** – after a poor crop last year where pollination was a problem we are trying 'Parthenon' – a self-pollinating variety. **Squash** – all shapes and sizes to try. **Sweet Corn** – plant out in a block to ensure pollination.

Short of space? Try the "Three Sisters" method

This was developed by Sioux Indians and you need a circular plot about 8 feet in diameter. Dig in some compost and then mound the soil (6-12 inches) in the centre. Plant about 8 to 10 sweetcorn in a ring pattern in the centre spacing them about 6 inches apart. Once these are about 10 inches high mound the soil up around then covering about half the stem which will give them more stability. Sow about 12 runner bean seeds in a ring about 6 inches outside the sweetcorn then a week after the beans sprout sow 6 or 7 squash seeds in a ring about 12-15 inches outside the beans

As the corn grows the beans will climb around the corn stalks and the squash can be trained across the mound so that the ground will be covered by the leaves. The corn supports the beans, the beans add nitrogen to the soil to feed the corn and squash and the squash suppresses weed growth and conserves moisture in the soil.

An exotic crop to try

Last year we tried lemon grass from seed which grew well but didn't produce useable stems. This year we tried a different approach and bought a pack of lemon grass from Sainsbury's. After a few weeks in a jar of water they started to produce roots and are now extremely large healthy plants starting to send up new shoots so we are hopeful of a good crop.

Revenge of the parsnip

If you have had good germination then you will be thinking about thinning out the seedlings but a word of warning. The sap within the leaves and stems of parsnip contains a chemical compound which when combined with sunlight causes dermal burning similar to sunburn. This might just create a small blister but there have been cases of severe and painful burns recorded. Be on the safe side and thin them out on a cloudy day. Wear gloves and long sleeves and make sure no sap touches your skin.

I had a similar problem from milkweed where I touched my face after weeding in the garden and then sitting in strong sunshine. The result was a very painful stripe across my cheek which quickly blistered and peeled just like sunburn and took about 6 weeks to fade.

Blackfly on your broad beans

The blackfly have arrived! They prefer the tender shoots at the top of the plant so to save your plants being too badly eaten you can try taking the tops off your plants. Cut the main stem above the highest flower. You know that once the flowers on the broad bean plants have been fertilised, the plant will not produce any more flowers, so taking the tops off your broad bean plants will not affect the yield.

Collar your brassicas

Cabbage root fly can decimate any brassica crop. Your plants are growing away beautifully when suddenly they start to wilt a bit then keel over and die as the roots are eaten away by the maggots. Some years you will have no problem at all but other years you can lose all your plants. Play it safe and put collars around the stems. These can be bought from garden centres or they can be made from circles or squares, about 8-15cm (3¼-6in) across, using carpet underlay, roofing felt or cardboard. The collar prevents the female fly placing eggs in the soil surface close to the plant. Eggs laid on the collar often dry up and fail to hatch.

If you are planting brassicas in a newly dug bed then tread on the soil to remove any air pockets and make the surface very firm. Brassicas thrive in firm ground and the "old timers" would tramp the ground down so hard that they needed to use a crowbar to make a planting hole! Even though the soil on the site is alkaline you will find that the plants do better with the addition of some garden lime.

Extend the leek season

Most of you are probably planting out your leeks now but try sowing some more this month to extend the harvest through to April next year. They are easiest sown in a tall pot then planted out once they get to pencil size. Try planting them close (3 to 4 inches apart) then harvesting alternate plants as baby leeks allowing the rest to grow to full size.

Leek moth has been a problem on the site in recent years arriving in late summer. The only defence is to cover the crop with insect proof mesh (fleece is too hot) or check over that plants and remove any caterpillars. Leeks can survive quite a lot of damage (provided the caterpillars don't burrow into the lower part of the plant) and generally most of our leeks recover although a few will rot.

Harvest garlic wet

No, not in the pouring rain but before the stems dry out. Garlic is best harvested as soon as the leaves start to yellow. If they are left in the ground to dry out there is a risk of the bulbs starting to re-grow and a far greater risk of the bulbs being ruined by white rot. Lay them in a warm dry place for a couple of weeks to dry out completely before storing them somewhere dark, cool & dry.



Some garlic looks like it is going to seed. If you planted hardneck varieties these are called scapes and, if left, will produce tiny little bulbils that can be planted to grow new plants although it will take a few years for them to develop into large bulbs. They are best removed as they divert strength away from the bulb. Rather than putting them on the compost try eating them. Both the scapes

and the bulbils are delicious and you can find recipes etc. at <http://www.garlicfarmct.com/recipes.htm>

The gooseberry thieves

Last year there were reports of gooseberries being stolen right across the site. Rather than a human thief the likely culprits were probably ninja pigeons, magpies and blackbirds who will strip even the unripe fruit from a bush. Now that the fruits are well developed get a net over all the plants preferably raised up on a frame so that the birds can't reach through the netting with their beaks.

Crop rotation

This is good in theory but often hard to do in practice on a small plot. Even if you don't follow the rules completely do try to at least move the planting around each year and leave a couple of years before the same ground is used again for that crop. This will reduce a lot of disease and thwart pests like carrot and cabbage root fly that overwinter as pupae in the soil.

The final word

If a man is alone in the allotment and speaks, and there is no woman to hear him, is he still wrong?