



**OPPOSITE PAGE:** the last of the leeks. **CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:** deter hungry slugs from eating seedlings by using rhubarb leaves; Purple sprouting broccoli needs protecting from pigeons; Cleve prepares wigwams for supporting beans.



**THE VEGETABLE PLOT**



# APRIL: EARLY JOBS

IN PART TWO OF OUR NEW SERIES, GARDEN DESIGNER CLEVE WEST SHARES HIS EXPERIENCES ON THE ALLOTMENT DURING THE MONTH OF APRIL. PHOTOGRAPHS BY HOWARD SOOLEY

April, with all its promise for a new gardening season, can be a lean month when it comes to putting food on the table. On the allotment, the last leeks have been pulled and, despite broccoli continuing to offer fresh florets each day, an energetic bout of weeding left the raised beds looking even more threadbare than they looked in March. This, of course, is normal and of little concern to us at a time when there is much to do and an ever-present risk of frost ambushing our attempts to get ahead and plants things out.

There is a particular knock-on effects for the organic gardener unwilling to resort to slug pellets, as anything planted outside will face a growth check from changes in temperature leaving them even more vulnerable to attack. For this reason there are few seeds that we sow directly outside before the end of the month. However, it's impossible to resist planting anything at all, so seeds of lettuce, radish and turnip were sown between slower germinating

parsnips, more to placate a basic instinct than any hope of actually being able to harvest anything. As expected, few seedlings survived more than a couple of days as we just didn't have the time to police the plot day and night.

Protecting crops, however, does need to be high on the agenda and never more so than in spring when armies of ravenous slugs emerge from hibernation. We handpick them, often by torchlight on a damp evening, and re-locate them to the other side of a convenient stream at the back of the plot. It's time consuming, (400 assorted slugs and snails per hour – filling a 2-litre pot to the brim), but if done on a regular basis probably more effective than any chemical or parasitic deterrent. Grapefruit halves work well, apart from looking slightly incongruous, but we'd have to eat crates of them to get the numbers we need. Instead, rhubarb leaves, dotted in between seedlings, act as an effective decoy covering a much bigger surface area while providing the food and shelter slugs need. We've also experimented with

garlic spray and granules being marketed as an effective, organic deterrent. In an initial trial, I loosely scattered the granules around seedlings and, although the slugs recoiled, it hasn't really been effective. Perhaps I should have made a thicker barrier, or maybe their potency was weakened by the effect of the weather?

Our hopes for the season, therefore, lie under cover. In the greenhouse, lettuce sown last month have been transplanted between tomatoes, the remainder left in their trays to be cut and used as soon as they are big enough. Herbs such as basil and coriander have been sown in 2-litre pots on a two-weekly basis to ensure a continuous supply throughout the season. Sprouts and broccoli are also making good headway in coldframes, but need protection from pigeons, which have a healthy appetite for brassicas.

The greenhouse allows us to gain a few weeks with beans and squash, which can only be

planted outside when all danger of frost has past. Preferring the flavour and stringless texture of climbing French beans, we have chosen 'Cosse Violet' (or 'Purple Podded') and 'Nun's Belly Button' together with a back-up of runner beans, 'Best of All'. Three to five seeds sown in 3-litre pots have been given miniature wigwams of bamboo canes for support, ready for planting into open ground. Squash

('Marina di Chioggia', 'Retzer Olkurbis', also called 'Lady Godiva', 'Uchi Kuri' and 'Blue Kuri') and courgette ('Black Milan' – or 'Nero di Milano' – and 'Jemmer') are sown toward the end of the month together with pumpkin, ('Dills Atlantic Giant') and an outdoor cucumber, ('Masterpiece'). Sow two seeds per 9cm pot, then thin to one healthy plant in a 3-litre pot. This will be sufficient to keep the seedlings happy till June should the weather be unfavourable.

In the meantime, raised beds allocated to beans and squash are treated to a

## JOBS FOR APRIL\*

### GENERAL

Keep on top of weeding; preparing ground for sowing; earth up early potatoes; support peas; harden off seedlings started under glass; watch out for pests; prepare ground for tomatoes; clear brassica stumps; begin mulching soil if warm

### HARVESTING

Spring cabbage, spring onions, early radish, early turnips

### SOWING

OUTSIDE – early beetroot, broccoli, broad beans, French and runner beans, Brussels sprouts, carrots, autumn and winter cabbage, kale, peas, spinach, leeks, lettuce, parsnips, rocket  
UNDER GLASS – broccoli, summer cabbage, cauliflower, courgettes, outdoor cucumber; dwarf French beans, marrows, outdoor tomatoes, pumpkins, runner beans, squashes, sweet corn

\*These listings are just a selection of possible jobs for the month



**OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** good growth on brassicas started off under cover; Strawberry runners planted now will fruit next season; Cleve clears the final weeds; 'Jemmer' courgette seedlings emerge; The various raised beds of Cleve's plot with a metal-tipped jetty pile as a feature in the foreground. **THIS PAGE:** bind weed needs to be kept in constant check; *Camassia* flowering through a mass of nettles.

generous helping of well-rotted stable manure and wigwam-cum-tripods of coppiced hazel sticks made ready. Bound together with a chain, the tripods provide a useful vertical accent while taking on a sort of arachnid character both comical and threatening when seen through a morning mist. Fresh and supple, the hazel sticks are strong enough to support both heavy chains and crops, but must be renewed each year as they eventually become brittle.

The increased workload in terms of sowing, transplanting and weeding is usually enough to distract us from this lean period and the occasional harvest from a large clump of nettles is enough to keep us happy. The young leaves make a nutritious soup packed with the zest of early summer and are a good alternative for spinach. We also make an early liquid manure by soaking the nettle leaves and stems in

Raised beds allocated to beans and squash are treated to a generous helping of well-rotted stable manure

water for a couple of weeks and using the diluted, nitrogen-rich solution on transplanted seedlings and newly planted tomatoes in the greenhouse. The stench from this is more potent than a whale with halitosis.

This lean period accentuates the seasonal availability of each vegetable, so favourites are difficult to choose. Root vegetables, however, do figure high on our list of those that seem to taste better for being fresh and organic, in particular beetroot and carrots. 'Bull's Blood' and 'Rough Skinned' beetroot sown in plugs last month have been planted outside 10cm apart under a protective fleece. 'Boltardy' is sown a little later. These have always been reliable vegetables, and can also be used decoratively with their red-purple foliage as a useful contrast in the flower border or eaten in salad. Our success with carrots, however, has been sporadic

over the years. In theory our alluvial soil should be perfect, despite carrot's tendency to 'fork' in the stony ground. 'Spanish Black' and 'Juwarot' were our trials. Two stubby varieties 'Parmex' and 'Pariser Markt 4' have been planted in pots using sieved soil from one of the raised beds.

We didn't have any particular plan at the outset for the front of our plot. Here, the soil is so full of stones it would take an age to clear and bindweed was rampant. We started a routine of pulling up bindweed as it emerged and it seems to have eventually weakened its hold. Only herbs put up with such poor soil conditions and we've planted rosemary as a token gesture toward some sort of structure while allowing a mix of the toughest herbs such as sage, thyme and marjoram to ebb and flow, with lovage, dill and fennel providing useful vertical accents. Clumps of molinia grass help form a barrier from the adjacent footpath while alliums and self-seeding annuals provide a little seasonal colour and an ever-changing display from year to year.

## CLEVE'S FAVOURITES

### RUNNER BEANS

'SCARLET EMPEROR' (ORGANIC) – a benchmark for all runner beans. An old cultivar (1906) with long, straight beans and good flavour. Best picked young. 'RED KNIGHT' – another red flowering cultivar with good flavour. Stringless and suitable for freezing. 'WHITE EMERGO' – good taste. Long smooth pods, among the highest yielding of runner beans.

### FRENCH BEANS

'PURPLE TEEPEE' OR 'PURPLE QUEEN' – Both high yielding and delicious. The beans lose their colour and turn dark green when cooked.

### SPROUTING BROCCOLI AND CALABRESE

'PURPLE SPROUTING' – a long wait but worth it. Continuous picking is essential. 'RED ARROW' is another purple cultivar with claims of higher yields. 'ROMANESCO' – looking like a cross between cauliflower and broccoli, is a late-cropping cultivar popular for its soft spears and delicious flavour when steamed. 'CORVET' – an F1 hybrid. Large head with a good nutty flavour. A flush of secondary spears give a reasonable yield.

### CHRISTINE'S NETTLE SOUP RECIPE (SERVES 4)

One plastic shopping bag loosely filled with young nettle leaves (about 170g); 1 medium onion, diced; 80g butter; 1 potato, sliced thinly (or mashed potato leftovers); 1 large clove of garlic (optional), sliced thinly; 1 litre of Marigold Bouillon vegetable stock; half pint of milk; salt and black pepper; 4tbsp cream.

(NOTE Use rubber gloves to pick the tops of young nettles.)

Rinse and shake nettle shoots. Melt butter in a heavy pan and cook onions gently until translucent. Add potato slices (and garlic if preferred) and cook for a minute until the potato is covered with the melted butter. Add nettle leaves and sweat until wilted. Heat stock and milk together and add to the pan while stirring and bring to the boil. Simmer gently for 15 mins.

Remove from heat, season to taste then liquidise the soup to a smooth consistency. Serve hot or cold with an artistic swirl of cream. The recipe can be adjusted according to taste by adding more or less nettle leaves.

Even our paths, originally mulched with charcoal finings and later with chipped bark, take on a different appearance depending on what plant has the upper hand. A platoon of strawberries that had quietly infiltrated an area beneath an espaliered apple, not only invaded the path but also seemed tough enough to withstand a certain amount of foot traffic.

Ideally, rooted runners from strawberries should be re-located at the end of the previous season but with our footpaths in danger of being taken over, we have dug up enough to create a new strawberry bed for next year. Flowers on the new plants will be pinched out so that they plough all their energy into a substantial root system that will carry the demand placed on them the following season.

Nearby, a new generation of soft fruit including red-currants, blackcurrants, blueberries and gooseberries are beginning to flower, and a dome of blackberries are gearing up to forge a new framework of thick muscular stems. So much promise for the coming summer. ■