



August: The greatest show

Cleve West takes time to appreciate the copious produce from his organic allotment but keeps an eye to preparations for the next season. Photographs Howard Sooley

WHILE THE CYCLE OF SOWING, GROWING AND HARVESTING is, in practice, neverending, the culmination of our efforts is generally measured against what we can pick in August. A holiday at this time of year, therefore, is always questionable. Usually it's time to drift, picking and watering and taking time to enjoy the warm summer evenings, but continued rain at the beginning of the month kept us busier than expected with weeds and slugs.

Every gardener has his or her breaking point and, for the first time in years, I set beer traps near vulnerable brassica seedlings struggling to get a foothold. A few

days later I discovered that the waxed paper cups had rotted and were now both a perfect hiding place and breeding ground for the little critters; there were mixed emotions of alarm and relief. Later, by accident, we found that placing seedlings on top of a chicken wire cage (that had been protecting our strawberries) made life very difficult for slugs and our trays of lettuce, Chinese cabbage and Mizuna (plugs from Delfland) were left well alone.

Other pests, such as whitefly and caterpillars from cabbage white butterflies, also gave cause for concern, but, eventually, enough seedlings pulled

through. Sprouts and broccoli had grown so much that they needed both earthing up and tying in to metal poles to keep them upright, and hidden amid the foliage a purple cauliflower ('Graffiti' F1), which we'd completely forgotten about, appeared from nowhere to feature in a delicious meal.

I'm always a little suspicious of unusual vegetables as, for all their good looks, they can often lack in taste. Our tomato 'Teton de Venus', despite its promise of clear yellow and fine form, produced dry and tasteless fruits. Cavalo Nero is a vegetable that in past years has fallen (somewhat unfairly it



1 A sensational display of summer veg from the plot.
2 Grubbing out weak-looking raspberry canes.
3 Dark green-skinned cucumber, 'Masterpiece'.
4 Plump blackberries from a large thicket kept Cleve in good supply.
5 Beetroot was liquidised to make nutritious drinks.
6 Green tomatoes used to make chutney.



would seem) into this category. I've always admired its gangly fleur-de-lys character more than its taste but have since learned that my enthusiasm to get it into the pot is doing it a disservice as Italians consider it sacrilege to pick this vegetable before the first frost. With climate change always on the horizon I'm left wondering how long I'll have to wait.

At home there was the usual shortage of surface space in the kitchen. With tomatoes, courgettes, cucumbers, beans, potatoes, beetroot, sweet corn and squash

there's far too much for the two of us to eat. We freeze what we can, indulge in liquidising beetroot to make nutritious drinks and still much is given away to friends and family. Photographer Howard Sooley is usually sent home with a cucumber. A meagre offering it would appear for his valiant efforts in capturing the subtleties of each month, but it's the only thing he can squeeze between his camera equipment on his motorbike. We did, however, rustle up the odd stir fry with courgettes, garlic and chopsuey

greens to keep him going during our more marathon photo shoots.

Picking is essential to maintain a continuous supply of crops such as beans, tomatoes, cucumber and courgettes. Beans especially will stop producing flowers if not picked regularly. French beans are a staple for us and we often sow a late batch of seed at the beginning of the month as a back-up to extend the season. A plate of beans and potatoes with a knob of butter may sound uninspiring but, apart from fresh young sweet corn, it's one of our



THE PLOT



7 The turnip 'White Globe' proved a more productive root vegetable than the carrots.
 8 The fruitful Italian plum tomatoes made up for the disappointing crop of yellow 'Teton de Venus'.
 9 A limited aubergine crop made their harvest even more special.

favourite lunchtime treats. Anything cooked within minutes of being picked or dug up carries a taste unlike anything you will taste from the shop, organic or not. Our solitary aubergine was blackened in coals before being scooped out and seasoned with salt, pepper and olive oil for a simple side dish. Dhundi Raj, a Nepali neighbour, used the same technique with green tomatoes before mashing them with chilli, garlic and coriander to make one of the simplest but freshest, tastiest chutneys you could imagine. When there is time to

indulge, onion bhajis and courgette flower fritters are cooked in a khari over an open fire (see issue 115 for recipe).

Due reverence is given to any fruit or vegetable that only just makes it. In our first year we were only able to save one strawberry from the voracious appetite of every creature known to mankind. Ceremoniously cut in half the taste was made all the more memorable by its scarcity. Last year it was figs. Two and a half each to be exact, and sweet as nectar. Other rarities included Russet apples (two

each) and one 'Doyenne du Comice' pear each. With luck, their conserved energy will help produce a better crop next year.

Like any garden the allotment was continually shifting and changing. Self-seeded nasturtiums and marigolds, having taken over the potato bed, distracted us from the fact that there were still spuds to dig. A large thicket of blackberries had sagged and slumped to provide daylight for girder-like new growth eager to set its framework for next season. Cucurbits and nigella had smothered the paths and herbs



JOBSTO DO

GENERAL

Keep on top of general weeding and tidying up as well as harvesting all your crops; maintain a consistent watering regime; watch out for caterpillars; earth and stake up plants where necessary; check potato crop for blight and continue to earth up; cut away old squash and pumpkin leaves; continue to mulch crops

HARVEST

Tomatoes, runner and French beans, garlic, onions, spring onions, shallots, potatoes, perpetual spinach, sweet corn, sweet peppers, aubergines, beetroot

SOW

Spring cabbage, winter lettuce, Swiss chard, winter spinach, overwintering onions, maincrop peas



10 Harvesting the main crop potatoes. Cleve's favourites include 'King Edward' and 'Ratte'.
 11 French beans are a mainstay of the season, including the purple cultivar 'Cosse Violet'.

RECIPE
STIR FRY

INGREDIENTS

- 3 tbs oil (sesame/olive mix)
- 2 ears of sweet corn
- 3 small to medium yellow courgettes
- half a cucumber
- 2 celery stalks
- a few mushrooms
- 6 spring onions
- half a green chilli
- 3cm cube of ginger sliced thinly
- 4 cloves garlic sliced thinly
- 1 tsp sugar
- salt and pepper

a few shakes of tamari soy sauce
mung bean noodles

Heat oil in a large wok. Add the chopped spring onions, chilli and celery and fry for a minute. Add garlic and ginger and fry briefly before adding the rest of the ingredients, sliced, in one go. Keep mixing thoroughly on a high heat for about five minutes. Prevent burning by adding tamari as it cooks. When vegetables are cooked (but still firm) remove from heat and serve with cooked noodles.

12 American land cress, *Barbarea verna*, a quick-growing alternative to watercress.
13 Squash 'Retzer Olkurbis', grown for its edible seeds.
14 Self-seeded evening primrose grows throughout the allotment.



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at the front of the plot were so intermingled it was impossible to imagine the bare raised beds of winter.

Later in the month, not wanting to let go of this notion of 'the good life', autumn jobs are always in the back of our mind. The raspberry beds, now cut back and grubbed out, looked a sorry sight and double digging this bed, infested with bindweed, was the only answer. This, we resolved to do sooner rather than later in order to make space for overwintering onion that would be planted out next month.

It was not the end of the year by any means, but it was difficult not to reflect on our main disappointment of the season: a pathetic harvest of carrots. In fact we've only ever had one good crop of carrots in five years at the allotment, which is particularly galling as our light alluvial soil provides perfect growing conditions.

Any vegetable grower will tell you that the pungency of a fresh carrot the second it's pulled from the ground is enough to cure the blind. The delicate seedlings, however, are one of the most vulnerable

vegetables of the organic garden, being easy prey for slugs and particularly sensitive when grown in plugs. Next year, therefore, we will take the advice of a friend who suggests being less diligent when it comes to weeding around young carrot seedlings. The weeds, he says, will not only provide a decoy (ie slugs and snails eat weeds too) but they will form a natural barrier against root fly. "But we've never had root fly," I said truthfully. "Ah!" he retorted, "but it sounds like you've never had a regular supply of carrots either." ■



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15 The shed – with its *Sedum* acre roof – and seedlings for planting out, including brassicas for over winter.
16 Tender sweet corn, picked at its prime.

NEXT MONTH

Making the most of the last of summer, late sowing, sharing the harvest with neighbours, preserving produce, spreading green manure