



## December: Festive fare

Garden designer Cleve West enjoys the crisp winter weather on his allotment, nurtures some fine produce for his Christmas table, and reflects on the success of most of his fruit trees this year. Photographs Howard Sooley

A DEFINING MOMENT IN ANY VEGETABLE GARDEN is the planting of fruit trees. Yield from a fruit tree takes years not weeks, so this type of slow gardening says much about your commitment to your space. A selection of apples and pears I planted after a year of owning an allotment was my own way of saying: "I am here to stay." Save for a Bramley at the back of the plot, lack of space forced me to grow all of my trees as espaliers (on semi-dwarf M106 rootstocks), effectively dividing the plot in two. Now, approaching their fifth winter, it was time to add another tier to their structure.

Espaliers are nowhere near as complicated as they look and are an effective growing method where space is limited. The leading stem is grown vertically and each year a pair of lateral shoots are trained as tiers like outstretched arms. But, so as

not to damage the branches, this must be done in stages. Earlier in the year the lateral shoots chosen to be the next tier were bent and tied to an angle of 45°. This reduces the risk of snapping branches when bending them to their horizontal position in early winter. Now they can be tied with string or velcro strips to a basic framework of bamboo canes, while growth from existing laterals is cut back to three buds to encourage the production of fruiting spurs.

While I would always aspire to have a decent-sized orchard, with standard apple and pear trees, there is something satisfying about training espaliers. The knowledge that in time they will provide fruit for winter storage, add character to the allotment and leave an attractive legacy for the next tenant to enjoy is reason enough to grow them.

Meanwhile, as the year draws to a close, it's a good time to take stock. The festive season is always a benchmark for success at the allotment and it doesn't come much better than being able to feed your family with fresh organic food on Christmas Day. This will be our fifth Christmas using our home-grown food, but, for the first time, there are shortages. The few carrots that made it were eaten well before December and only five parsnips were available for Christmas lunch. Next year our strategy will have to be reviewed. I consulted a friend who has been growing vegetables for 36 years and his advice for getting these root vegetables past the vulnerable seedling stage was to refrain from obsessive weeding. Weeds, he maintained, would act as a cover for germinating seeds and act as a decoy for slugs, which are just as likely to eat young weed as young vegetable

foliage. Carrots would doubly benefit from a green cloaking device against carrot fly.

The parsnips that we did manage to salvage had, in desperation, been grown as plugs and consequently fared less well than if they had germinated in situ, their roots forked and misshapen. Personally, from an aesthetic point of view, this doesn't bother me, but there's no doubt that a vegetable that can grow freely in the ground makes for better quality. A small batch of 'King Edward'

potatoes are always kept by for roasting, even though they don't yield such a large crop in our sandy loam, and sprouts fared wonderfully well, having had the best succession of frosts ever. With almost 80 sprouts to a stick, two sticks were ample for our Christmas dinner. Celeriac and salsify were also on the menu, simply cooked in butter to provide a sweet, nutty contrast.

The week after Christmas is always a favourite time to work the allotment, with

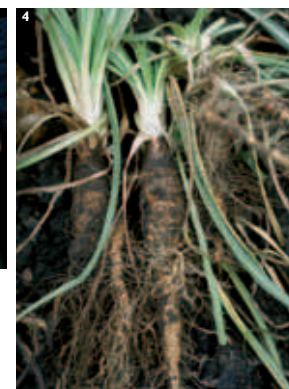


1 It may be nearing midwinter, but the allotment is still producing a fine selection of vegetables.

2 Cleve uses a simple bamboo framework to create an espalier for this 'Williams' pear tree.

3 Branches are attached to the espalier using strips made of velcro, which is long-lasting and reusable.

4 Salsify roots are delicious cooked in butter.



### FRUIT TREES



Apples are stored in a cool, dry place

Cleve has planted the following cultivars of apple, plum and pear on his allotment

#### APPLES

- **'Nettlestone Pippin'** – this dessert apple is a cross between James Grieve and Cox's Orange Pippin, and is red on the sunny side with a crisp white flesh. It stores until late October. Good for juicing.
- **'Crawley Beauty'** – stunning in blossom, this is a reliable cropper with good flavour. Will keep until March if stored well.
- **'Egremont Russet'** – its nutty flavour and distinctive skin make this self-fertile dessert apple a connoisseur's choice. Some days I prefer something juicier, but its good looks warrant a place in the orchard. Apples will keep until Christmas if in a good condition when stored.
- **'Bramley's Seedling'** – this cooker will keep for ages. It needs two pollinators and won't perform too well after heavy pruning, as we recently found to our cost.

#### PEARS

- **'Doyenné du Comice'** – late to ripen, with a light flush on a golden skin, this dessert pear will often keep till spring.
- **'Williams' Bon Chretien'** – probably the best-known and juiciest of pears. To eat this delicious fruit at its best, timing is everything.
- **Joséphine de Malines** – a good long keeper with pink flesh. Ours has been slow to perform (one wizened fruit to be exact). Might need some spoiling.
- **'Conference'** – the long, elegant fruit of this dessert pear ripens between October and November. Partially self-fertile, it shows signs of cropping well.

#### GREENGAGE/PLUM

- **'Laxton's Gage'** – our label-less gage has turned out not to be a greengage but a 'Laxton's Gage', a cross between the old greengage and a 'Victoria' plum. The larger green-yellow fruit is as one would expect from its parentage, deliciously sweet.



5 This year's parsnip crop was disappointing, with many of those that survived being misshapen.  
6 The sweet, earthy flavour of roasted chestnuts provides warming nourishment during a chilly afternoon's work on the allotment.

fresh air and exercise the perfect antidote to festive fug. Rye grass growing in one of the raised beds as green manure was dug in earlier than normal to allow plenty of time for it to break down before early spring sowing of carrots or salads. If left too long its stems can toughen, making it difficult to prepare the sort of tilth necessary for fine seeds. Compost from the heaps is spread wherever a bed is dug over, as this acts as a winter blanket to suppress weeds, prevent soil compaction and stop nutrients from being washed away.

A new raised bed was also constructed to make some sense of the ground where the old raspberry bed was grubbed out. Sawn hardwood (reclaimed Jarra) railway sleepers that

formed a makeshift coldframe were simply dug into the soil in line with other existing raised beds. A durable hardwood, these will last many years whereas the softwood raised beds I made five years ago are already showing signs of decay and will probably need replacing in a year or two. The decision to use raised beds in the first instance was more practical than aesthetic. Weeding a raised bed saw immediate results that, in turn, did wonders for moral. The only downside is that unless well maintained, rotting timber can provide an ideal hiding place and breeding ground for slugs and snails.

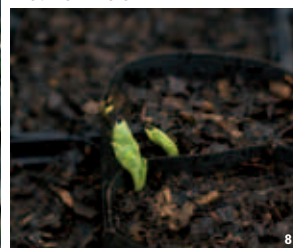
In the greenhouse, lettuce 'Little Gem' is doing its best to prove it can survive the

cold dark days, but you can't say it's happy. Its leaves are tougher than usual, as if they've built up some winter blubber to cope with the cold. With no mains supply at the allotment, heating the greenhouse is not even a consideration as paraffin lamps are expensive to run. The only time we do use them is during cold spring nights to keep the frost off cold-sensitive seedlings such as tomatoes, beans and squash.

For now, though, the only evidence of life is a small number of chilli plants that we hope to keep alive over winter, and pots of peas and broad beans sown last month. These are showing the first signs of life, each with a tiny eruption of soil and a dash of green beneath, and will give us something of a head start in the new year, with enough growth to withstand the early forays of hungry slugs emerging from hibernation. Growing vegetables is fun and immensely rewarding, but keeping one step ahead of the game in terms of protection is vital for success. ■



7 Sprouts and other hardy brassicas are netted to protect them from foraging pigeons.  
8 Broad beans germinating now should be mature enough by spring to withstand the attentions of hungry slugs emerging from hibernation.



9 Cleve digs in rye grass sown in a raised bed. By spring this will have broken down to enrich the soil, in which Cleve plans to grow carrots or salad crops.  
10 A new raised bed, made with sawn hardwood from reclaimed railway sleepers dug straight into the soil, replaces the unproductive raspberry patch.

### JOBS TO DO

#### GENERAL

Continue digging and manuring when weather permits; store any winter crops for use over winter and inspect those already in store for signs of spoilage; tidy and weed where necessary; clean and repair tools; send off for seeds for next season; make plans for next year.

#### HARVEST

Brussels sprouts, winter cabbages, cauliflowers, leeks, parsnips, cavolo nero, celeriac and kale.

#### SOW OUTSIDE

Overwintering garlic and broad beans.

### NEXT MONTH

Catching up with allotment maintenance, taking care of potatoes and enjoying winter produce