



## February: Perpetual motion

In the final installment of our series about Cleve West's allotment, the designer is as enthusiastic as ever about the cycle of tending soil and sowing seeds for the season ahead. Photographs Howard Sooley

FOR SOME, FEBRUARY CAN BE A FRUSTRATING MONTH in which winter lingers like an unwelcome guest. For gardeners, though, lengthening days and the first evidence of growth are tantalising enough to dispel any notion of winter blues. By the end of the month all the beds on the allotment will be dug over and ready for the final tickle and rake before planting. The hazel wigwams are taken down and will be repositioned later in the year as part of our four-year crop rotation. Some beds will be covered with black landscape fabric to keep down weeds and help the soil warm a little. Glass cloches might also be used to warm the soil if needed for an early sowing of lettuce.

Along with potatoes 'Belle de Fontenay' (early), 'British Queen' (second early), 'Amour' (main crop) and 'Ambo' (main crop) chitting in a cool room at home,

onions, parsnips and Jerusalem artichokes will get the season under way at the allotment. Like small potatoes with a nutty flavour, Jerusalem artichokes bring an added bonus – a beautiful array of sunflower-like blooms. Richard White, senior gardener at RHS Wisley's vegetable garden, had given me a batch of 'Fuseau' and four tubers of a red-skinned cultivar, 'Smooth Garnet'. These were planted 15cm deep, 30cm apart in rows spaced 45cm. Jerusalem artichokes can reach 3m and are often used as screens but unless you want a permanent display, care must be taken to remove all tubers each spring to stop them from disturbing anything planted.

To increase yield and the size of tubers, rows can be tied to stakes and earthed up to minimise wind-rock. They need free-draining, moisture-retentive soil and benefit from a liquid feed during the summer. They

are then cut down to leave a bare stem and harvested throughout the autumn and winter as needed. Like potatoes, the tubers can be boiled, fried or roasted and make the most delicious soup. However, unlike potatoes the carbohydrate in them (inulin) is starch-free so can't be broken down into sugar and can actually help moderate levels of insulin and glucagons. The only drawback is its laxative and wind-inducing properties, which have a varying degree of effectiveness. With me the effect is almost instant, so I only ever eat this vegetable among friends with a sense of humour.

This year onions will be grown again from sets but we will also sow seed at the end of the month to be harvested in late August. Despite seeming at a disadvantage compared to onion sets that can be planted between January and April, seed-raised onions are less



likely to bolt and are often of better quality. Seedlings raised in the greenhouse or in open ground will be transplanted outside to their permanent position in April, 15cm apart in rows spaced at 30cm. They prefer free-draining soil. Too rich a soil and they will produce fleshy foliage at the expense of the bulb. Too weedy and the competition for nutrients and moisture will stifle them. There is space, too, in the garlic bed. One half will be planted with shallots, the other with more garlic, closely planted, the leaves from which will be harvested early for stir-fries.

After the disappointing crop of parsnips last year, I am keen to make full use of the opportunity to plant this root crop and plan to sow direct into the soil. Seeds of 'White King' will be sown in the last week of the month, with repeat sowing through to April to make certain of germination.

We will also be more careful not to disrupt germination through excessive weeding and hope that the weeds themselves will act as a decoy for slugs.

Elsewhere, despite a reluctance to plant early, I'm tempted to experiment using cloches to get a head start. Lettuce, carrots, turnip and beetroot can potentially be sown together with spring onions, radish, summer cabbage and a second batch of broad beans to make up for those eaten by the mouse last month. Tomatoes, 'Altajsky Urozajnij' (Beefsteak), 'Merveille des Marches' and the ever-reliable 'Gardener's Delight' have been sown in seedtrays and placed in the warmth of a kitchen windowsill at home before being transplanted into pots in the greenhouse and eventually outside where the benefits of exposure to sun, fresh air and untainted soil never fail to deliver in terms of taste.

- 1 Bright shoots of rhubarb are a cheerful sign that one of the new season's earliest crops is on its way.
- 2 Most of the broad beans ('Super Aquadulce' and 'The Sutton') were planted outside in November, except these few in the (unheated) greenhouse.
- 3 Some old waterproofs stuffed with leaves serve as a scarecrow to keep the ever-hungry pigeons at bay.



### USEFUL CONTACTS

If you are interested in renting an allotment yourself, it's best to contact your local council, who can let you know about sites in your neighborhood and how best to apply for a plot. Every council in England and Wales (with the exception of Inner London) has a statutory duty to provide allotments, and the average rent is £25 a year for a 250sq m plot. The growing popularity of allotment gardening means that some sites are experiencing waiting lists that run into years, so be prepared to be patient.

#### The National Allotment and Leisure

**Garden Society** exists to protect, promote and preserve allotments by lobbying government and offering help and advice to its 80,000 members on all aspects of allotment gardening. O'Dell House, Hunters Road, Corby, Northants NN17 5JE.

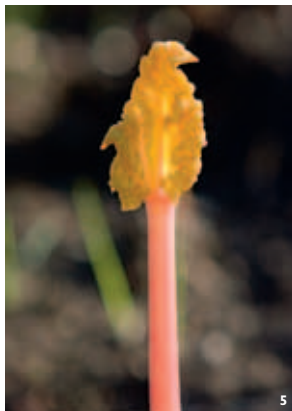
Tel 01536 266576, [www.nsalg.org.uk](http://www.nsalg.org.uk)

#### The Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens (FCFCG)

coordinates community garden schemes to help those who are unable to gain access to their own garden. These range from greenhouses to small urban pockets of green land and exist through the efforts of volunteers. Most run work sessions, workshops and open days. FCFCG, The Greenhouse, Hereford Street, Bristol BS3 4NA.

Tel 0117 923 1800, [www.farmgarden.org.uk](http://www.farmgarden.org.uk)





4 Jerusalem artichokes should provide an abundant crop in late summer and early autumn.  
5 Forced rhubarb grows beneath an upside-down plastic dustbin weighted to prevent wind from toppling it, but requires regular watering for best results.  
6 Pea seedlings need protection from attack after mice ran amok in the greenhouse last month.



It might seem strange to end this series in February just when there is so much to look forward to. The truth is that there is no real beginning or end when it comes to growing vegetables, as there's always something you can do to get you started.

Allotments are making a comeback in a big way. Renting a patch of ground from the local council is valued as much if not more than any time since the Second World War. The perception of having an allotment and growing food has changed drastically within the last decade and they now stand at the vanguard of a movement that could actually shift the goalposts in terms of our approach to food production globally. Growing your own food may not have an immediate effect on the amount of air miles clocked up getting washed, processed and packaged fruit and vegetables to your kitchen table, but the collective

consciousness might influence the way we shop in the future, with wide-ranging consequences. Local farmers' markets are increasingly popular. They can only benefit communities by providing fresh food, helping to preserve the cultivars that are peculiar to a given region and celebrating the spirit of seasonality.

As a landscape designer I started off almost embarrassed and apologetic about owning an allotment. However, we are now into our seventh year and the anticipation of another season is as strong as ever. The tenuous sense of ownership we had initially has strengthened a hundredfold despite the fact we are only tenants. We'll never really

own it, or hand it down to the next generation, and there's always the possibility that it will be damaged by vandalism. And, when we've finished with it, or it finishes us, unless it's taken over by someone who has the time and energy to weed, water and out-manoeuvre all manner of things that want to share the ground with you, within a year a neglected plot will be unrecognisable. Despite this we, like many plot-holders throughout the country, have been seduced by the ephemeral nature of allotments. Take my word for it: fresh air, friendship, exercise and the simple pleasure of growing, sharing and eating fresh organic food is, I'm happy to report, as good as it gets. ■

7 Onion sets planted this year include 'Red Baron', 'Turbo' and 'Snowball'. Cleve will also plant onion seeds towards the end of the month.

8 February is a good time for a tidy-up. Paths are mulched with wood chippings and debris is cleared.



### JOBS TO DO

#### GENERAL

Set out seed potatoes to chit; apply a general fertiliser to asparagus beds; prepare trenches for runner beans by filling with organic matter; force Witloof chicory and rhubarb

#### SOW OUTSIDE

Jerusalem artichokes, spring cabbages, garlic, onion sets, rhubarb, broad beans (in favourable conditions)

#### SOW UNDER COVER

Beetroot, carrots, summer cabbage, leeks, spinach, lettuces, peas, radish

#### HARVEST

Brussels sprouts, leeks, parsnips, sprouting broccoli, Swiss chard

### NEW SERIES

Next month sees the start of our new practical series about pruning, written by expert John Hoyland of Pioneer Nurseries in Hertfordshire.

9 Cleve dismantles the hazel wigwams, which were used for beans and squash last year. They will be reassembled elsewhere as part of the four-year crop rotation that Cleve practises.

10 Garlic sets planted in one of the raised beds show signs of healthy growth.