



# January: Restoring order

With the allotment in the icy grip of bleak midwinter, Cleve West bags an intruder and catches up on some jobs he didn't have time for during the summer and autumn months. Photographs Howard Sooley

MY PROMPT LAST MONTH to keep one step ahead of the game turned out to be an appropriate reminder to keep my own house in order. Arriving early in the new year to find the greenhouse door wide open I knew there would be a price to pay. Sure enough the peas that had shown the first signs of life last month had been ransacked. A hungry mouse had sneaked in through the gaping door. Fortunately, our broad beans were advanced enough to survive. The mouse responsible for the pillage was lured into a humane trap baited with peanut butter and released to run the gauntlet with our resident owls and kestrels.

As much as I enjoy summer on our plot, January provides a wonderful breathing space to catch up on all the jobs there just isn't time for during the rest of the year. Tasks such as cleaning tools,

clearing paths, rearranging compost heaps and painting sheds all fuel hope and anticipation for another season. Clearing ground of rubbish and debris where slugs and snails like to hide can save much heartache later in the year when they emerge, hungry, from hibernation. Care should be taken, though, to look out for toads, frogs and newts, which like to hibernate in dry crevices beneath rubble or logs.

Fruit cages and makeshift frames for strawberries can also be built while there is relatively little to do. The raspberries that we had been given, 'Joan J', were planted in a small raised bed of their own, which could easily be covered with netting during their long fruiting season.

This lull before the frantic months ahead is as rewarding as any other time of year. Notes are referred to, seed catalogues

poured over and the strategy for the coming season planned well in advance.

I generally order seeds ahead of time from a reputable source that can be relied upon to supply them fresh. Old or badly stored seed has a less successful germination rate. The amount of seed per packet varies greatly from each supplier and it's very easy to spend £50 each year on seed alone.

Rare seed is always going to be more expensive. If you are a beginner, try and resist growing anything labelled as 'unusual'. Stick to the more common varieties that have been tried and tested. Not only will these varieties be more reliable, they will generally taste better and save you money. Stalwart vegetable growers often grow a range of the most popular varieties simply because they perform better. On an allotment it's worth asking about people's



favourites as local conditions may suit one variety better than another. If you don't have an allotment you might be able to pay a nominal fee to join a local allotment association and get seeds at a discount along with useful tips on how to get started.

Another way to save money is to share seeds with someone you know. You half the cost and are more likely to use up all the seed in one season and have the benefit of sowing fresh seed each year rather than

taking a chance on saved seed, which could end up being a waste of time. Above all, grow what you like to eat. Cavolo nero may look good but unless you're planning to use its fleur-de-lys form as an aesthetic accent there's no point in growing it if you don't particularly like the taste.

Provided the ground is not frozen, fruit trees can still be planted in January. The allotment next door had been developed as a garden for disabled and elderly people and

## VEGETABLE NOTEBOOK

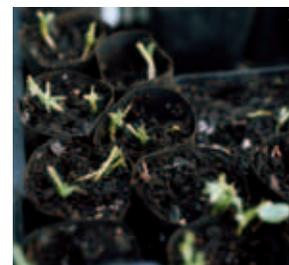


Cleve discusses the choice of potatoes he will grow next year

Potatoes are an easy crop to sow and are useful in clearing the ground. By the time you've harvested your first crop the ground will have been dug over twice and starved of light, helping to keep down weeds.

Seed potatoes can be bought in January and kept in a cool light place to 'chit' – a way of encouraging small buds to form on the potato to get them off to a good start. How much this benefits might be questionable, but it does carry a sense of ritual that, despite the gloom of winter, carries all the hopes of the coming season. In the past I have always bought too many potatoes, so this time I would limit myself to two early crops ('Belle de Fontenay' and 'British Queen') and three main crops ('Amour', 'Armo' and 'King Edward').

It seems a waste planting 'King Edward' when they are so readily available. Our alluvial soil is not ideal either as they have a high moisture requirement, but they do taste good. The organiser of the London Potato Fair told me that he planted each of the 90 cultivars he had on offer and still found 'King Edward' best, especially for roasting.

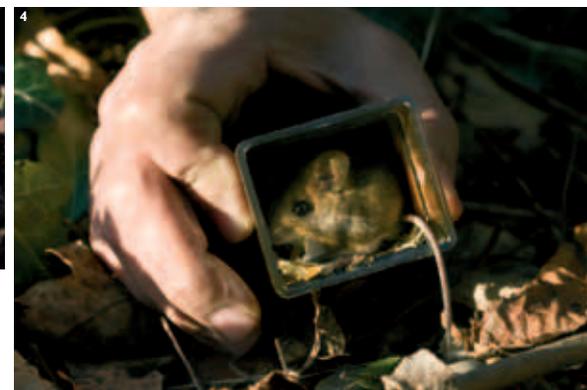


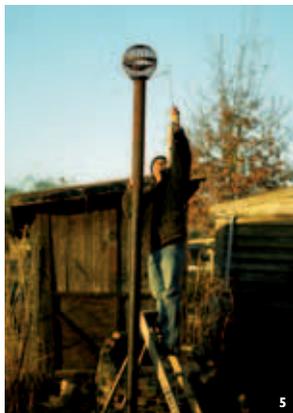
1 Cleve tackles the *Molinia caerulea* 'Karl Foerster', which had collapsed in the herb bed.

2 Ensure the greenhouse door is kept shut to retain heat and deter opportunistic rodents.

3 A hungry mouse will quickly destroy young pea seedlings if given the opportunity.

4 Trap mice humanely and release elsewhere.





5 Cleve hangs bird seed at the top of a pole that has been greased to keep squirrels away.  
6 Cavolo nero, a favourite winter vegetable, unfortunately fell victim to hungry pigeons.  
7 Fruit trees were planted as part of a community orchard being developed on a neighbouring plot – the perfect opportunity to keep local cultivars alive.



a lawn area at the back has given us the chance to plant a small orchard. M106 (semi-dwarfing) trees were chosen for our sandy soil. They probably won't reach their full height of 4-5m and will therefore be more accessible to those using it.

Orchards carry a rich sense of nostalgia and are undergoing a renaissance among communities flying the flag for local distinctiveness and sustainable, bio-diverse agriculture. Choosing trees local to the area helps preserve old cultivars and, in turn, the history that goes with them. In practice it is not always possible to obtain all the cultivars you want from one nursery so give yourself plenty of time to source what you need.

While planting the trees on the allotment it became clear that we needed more rain. Last January turned out to be worryingly dry. Hose pipe bans would almost certainly be in place by midsummer, if not sooner, so we resolved to buy more water butts and collect as much rainwater from our three sheds and greenhouse as possible.

Elsewhere there was still plenty to do even though most of the plot was essentially dormant. The herb bed was cleared, cloches prepared and birds were fed well during the colder periods. As far as food goes January is still reasonably productive. Cavolo nero, leeks, sprouts and broccoli are still plentiful, as is cabbage,

which, despite looking ugly from the outside, is clean, crisp and edible within, proving that you should never judge organic vegetables by their looks.

This is something many first-time vegetable growers find fascinating. We, as consumers, have created a demand for uniform, clean, blemish-free fruit and vegetables from our local shops and supermarkets. Taste is generally a secondary consideration. Obviously freshness is most important when it comes to taste, but there's a saying at our allotment that most plot-holders are aware of within a season of growing their own food: "If it's not been nibbled, it's not organic." ■



8 Preparing to plant 'Joan J', the raspberry cultivar donated by a neighbour. It suffered this year but Cleve hopes it will flourish in the coming season.



9 The nets protecting the raised beds of brassicas, including cavolo nero and cabbage 'Castello' F1 are laid back to allow for weeding.



10 The nibbled outer leaves of a cabbage prove its home-grown, organic status and can be removed to reveal a pristine and tasty heart.  
11 Cleve takes time during the the midwinter lull to study seed catalogues and order tomatoes for sowing next month.

### JOBS TO DO

#### GENERAL

Cover rhubarb if you want to force stems; take advantage of frozen ground to tidy and cover beds with manure; keep a look out for any hibernating toads, frogs and newts while tidying; build raised beds, cold frames and other structures for beans and other crops; tidy shed, wash pots and clean greenhouses.

#### PLANT

Garlic, onion sets, peas, broad beans. Plant fruit trees and bushes when the ground isn't frozen.

#### PRUNE

Winter-prune apples and pears.

#### HARVEST

Cabbage, leeks, parsnips, sprouts and celeriac.

### NEXT MONTH

In the last of the series, Cleve West anticipates the year ahead, plants his onion sets and sorts his potatoes and root artichokes.