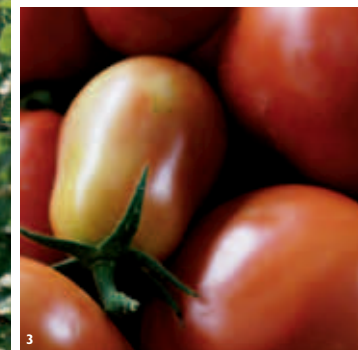




1 Fresh pickings include chard, courgettes, beetroot, radish, potatoes, broad beans, courgette and nasturtium flowers.

2 Patrolling regularly for slugs will keep them in check.

3 A varied selection of sun-ripened tomatoes.



July: Reaping the reward

July sees Cleve West's organic allotment bursting with the rewards of abundant fruit and veg – just as long as he keeps an eye on proceedings. Photographs Howard Sooley

WHILE JUNE FEEDS THE HUNGRY EYES OF THE FLORIST, July brings sustenance to the vegetable grower in every sense of the word. The transformation enters another phase and, as the plot literally thickens before our eyes, at last, it's time to reap. Beetroot, beans, potatoes and courgettes begin to fill our baskets and an enormous sense of achievement and satisfaction (not to mention a touch of relief) is tempered only by continued drought and the threat of hosepipe bans.

Seasoned vegetable growers know that the apparent abundance can lead to a false sense of security and that successional

sowings of salads, beetroot and carrots are necessary to ensure that there will be something to harvest come autumn. This was easier said than done. Such jobs seem tedious when there's an opportunity to relax a little and, besides, watering during the dry spell had concentrated the local slug population in our immediate vicinity, and some vegetables were struggling to get past seedling stage. Carrots, in particular, found it hard to develop more than their first set of leaves, our only real success being those planted in a galvanised metal bath.

At the start of the month we caught up on some of the tasks that had been put on

the back-burner while we were on holiday. Tomatoes, that hadn't been trained and pinched out during our break, had taken on a tortured look under the imbalance of developing trusses, but were so far advanced we decided to leave them be. The ever-reliable 'Gardener's Delight' looked set to produce a bumper crop, as did 'Big Boy', a delicious beefsteak hybrid from America. Sprouts and broccoli needed earthing up (some even requiring staking) to stop their roots losing their grip on our light soil, and the first cabbage, despite being riddled with more holes than Bonnie and Clyde's getaway car

THE PLOT



4 Golden yellow courgettes of 'Jemmer F1'.
5 Tomato 'Gardener's Delight' is a long-standing favourite in the vegetable garden.
6 Squash 'Retzer Olkurbis' beginning to swell.

(its organic seal of approval), was picked, chopped and mixed with mint, chilli and wine vinegar to make a lively salad.

Another task that couldn't be ignored was to plant out leek seedlings (see below opposite). I tend to trim both the roots and the leaves, which is meant to ensure that all the roots get well covered in soil and that the stems don't collapse and rot. Some say this is unnecessary, but I like the ritual and, besides, it has always proved successful in the past.

The trailing stems of squash were eating up ground and side shoots had to

be trimmed back where they had started to smother other plants in the raised beds. Those planted in the compost heap fairly legged it up the supports to the shed roof. A little encouragement was needed by tying in stems that would ordinarily like to layer themselves on the ground, and extra attention was lavished by feeding them with liquid comfrey and pelleted chicken manure to make up for any deficiency. 'Retzer Olkurbis' and 'Uchi Kuri' on the ground had already produced fruit and these were cut off

and stored in the greenhouse where sunshine would toughen the skin and improve their storing ability often well into spring the following year.

Our attempt at growing the largest pumpkin in West London, however, fared less well. Three had to be discarded because of slug damage. A fourth was eventually selected to be our contestant for a pumpkin competition later in the year, but valuable time had been lost. Subsequent fruit was removed so that all the energy was diverted to our potential



PLANTING OUT LEEK SEEDLINGS

This can be done from June to mid-July, and while it takes a little time is worth the effort to ensure a vigorous and plentiful harvest. We grow our leeks in pots up to the thickness of a pencil, but they can be grown in open ground and then thinned.

- 1 Plants are removed from the pots, separated out and the roots disentangled.
- 2 The leaves are trimmed by about a one-third to help prevent the collapse and rot of the stem. Roots can also be trimmed at the same time.
- 3 Using a bulb planter, prepare as many rows of holes as you require, 15cm apart and 30cm between rows.
- 4 Drop the leek seedlings into the holes individually.
- 5 Water the seedlings well, ensuring soil from around the hole washes down to cover the roots.



7 The allotment in July – all guns blazing – is a very different scene to the bare plot of just a few months earlier.

- 8 Digging up the last crop of early potatoes.
- 9 Sweet-tasting carrot 'Pariser Markt 4'.
- 10 A ready supply of fresh rosemary is perfect for *al fresco* dining at the plot.
- 11 Onions left to dry on top of the caging.
- 12 Runner beans were pinched out once they had reached the top of their support.



JOBS TO DO

GENERAL

Keep up with weeding, mulching and hoeing; earth-up potatoes and Brussels sprouts; stake and support plants as necessary; keep an eye out for cabbage caterpillars and other pests; remove side shoots from tomatoes; water and feed celeriac, celery, cucumber, leeks, marrows; water French and runner beans; pinch out cucumber and climbing bean tops when they reach the top of their supports.

HARVEST

Spring onions, carrots, shallots, runner beans, beetroot, garlic, kohlrabi.

SOW

Dwarf French beans, beetroot, spring cabbage, kale, spinach, carrots, endive, spring onion, oriental vegetables, Swiss chard, turnip.

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

champion and extra care was taken to water regularly and feed it with liquid fertiliser. This optimism, however, was dashed when a walk around a neighbouring plot revealed one already twice as big as mine. Jocular reminders to its owner that this was going to be a marathon and not a sprint were half-hearted as it was obvious that, barring an accident or sabotage (that probably does take place where pumpkin competitions are taken all too seriously), this monster had 'best in show' written all over it.

Towards the end of the month, just when hose bans looked inevitable, a sustained bout of rain was welcomed

with open arms. The allotment, in its gratitude, visibly swelled overnight. For the fruit trees, which tend to get overlooked when watering the plot by hand, it was perfect timing. Apples, 'Nettlestone Pippin' and 'Crawley Beauty' in particular, were so laden with fruit they had to be thinned even more after the June drop. A large thicket of blackberries would also benefit from this soaking and, by the end of the month, stood bejewelled with a succession of rich, plump, purple fruit.

Having come to terms with the disappointing raspberry harvest, we held our resolve to grub out the old stock near the end of the month. The roots produce a

13 After a disappointing crop, Cleve grubbed out the rogue hybrid raspberry.
14 Laterals on the fruit trees were bent to 45° and tied in.



mass of runners (usually a useful way to propagate the fruit), so it's important to dig up as much as possible in order to save work pulling them up again the following season. Ordinarily we'd be cutting out fruiting stems of summer fruiting varieties and tying in the new growth with its juvenile bloom of chalky blue, but the rogue hybrid – which had never produced a decent crop in three years – was destined for the bonfire.

Elsewhere, side shoots of gooseberries and redcurrants were pruned back [after

fruiting] to three buds; so too were the laterals on espalier apples and pears. Leaders and lateral shoots at the top of each espalier were bent to 45° to prepare them for being tied in horizontally during winter. Bending them without this preparation runs the risk of breaking the stems as they become more brittle.

With rain having relieved the pressure of watering there was, between the showers, time to soak up the plot's unique sense of retreat and recharge our batteries. Growing vegetables is

absorbing in any garden but at an allotment it takes on a heightened potency and the social aspects of allotment culture can be every bit as nourishing as the food we grow there. An organised picnic or a spontaneous lunch with friends, using the freshest ingredients possible, is a fine way to spend one's time. And, if we can ignore the moments when it seems that we are losing the battle against weeds and slugs, these bare necessities are a sobering reminder of life's simple pleasures. ■



ATTRACTING BENEFICIAL INSECTS

The herb bed at the front of the plot, and flower-beds near the crooked shed, have been neglected over the years and I've often thought they could be used for vegetables. They have, however, continued to draw in a useful battalion of insects. *Verbena bonariensis*, in particular, is an essential food station for bees, hoverflies, butterflies and moths. *Allium*, *borage*, *fennel* and *Digitalis ferruginea* proved invaluable in galvanising my resolve to keep them, although I made a mental note to refresh the herb

bed come winter. These beds help to maintain the balance we strive for as organic gardeners and was borne out by the fact that, aside from some blackfly on our broad beans efficiently dealt with by ladybirds, aphids never got the upper hand. Some flowers that had self-seeded in the raised beds were kept to draw insects to the heart of the plot. Borage, while it tends to be a bit tuggish in this respect, is especially useful as bees seem to be attracted to their blue flowers than anything else.



Fennel



Digitalis ferruginea



Verbena bonariensis

15 Entertaining family and friends to lunch on the allotment is a particular summer pleasure.

16 From plot to plate – courgettes and beans make the perfect lunchtime treat.
17 A bouquet of plot-picked herbs and flowers.

NEXT MONTH

Abundant harvests and precious tastings, fresh flavours, carrot crops, thinking ahead to autumn.