



June: Up and running

This month the allotment is starting to come in to its own, but plenty of work is still needed and variable weather can hamper progress. Cleve West recounts his experiences for June. Photographs Howard Sooley

WRITING THIS SERIES OF ARTICLES TOOK ITS TOLL when the cold weather of spring 2005, which had delayed much of our planting in May, continued into the first week of June. In any other year I would probably have cursed the late frosts and got on with it, but I was so keen to show how a bare and desolate plot can become abundant and bountiful almost overnight that, for a moment, the eternal optimism that is peculiar to garden writing eluded me and the thought of rushing down to the green-grocer to buy some vegetables for Howard to photograph did actually cross my mind.

The important thing with growing vegetables is not to get too despondent

when things don't go your way. If we've learned nothing else from our plot, we know that no two years are alike, with varying degrees of success and failure hinging not only on the weather but the amount of time spent nurturing. Growing vegetables at home is definitely easier if you have the space. The pay-off for all the inconvenience the allotment causes is a different world, a time warp, if you like, where the frustrations of urban living are forgotten and a completely different set of friends share a virtual Utopian existence.

June did, however, prove to be the most testing month. Not only did the weather reach extraordinary extremes

(frost at the beginning of the month, 30°C a few weeks later) but we did something unheard of for a gardener at that time of year: we took a holiday. Two days away from the plot in June is a concern, but two weeks is a worry as there is no sense of the allotment being able to look after itself. Fortunately, my mother and step-father relished the chance to look after things and with a serious heat wave during the middle of the month, without this arrangement much of what we had planted would almost certainly have perished.

Our work before we went, therefore, was geared towards planting, so that watering and weeding would be the only



1 Cleve finally plants out tomatoes raised under glass.
2 Cucurbits were happy to be taken out of the greenhouse and allowed to bask in the sunshine.
3 Seaweed used as a mulch around newly bedded plants.
4 Fleece is removed from the young beetroot now the risk of frost has passed.
5 Mesh covering the young beetroot to keep marauding rabbits at bay.

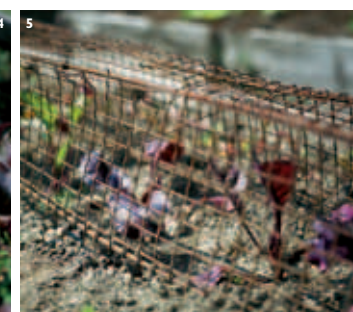


tasks necessary while we took our leave. Squash, pumpkin, courgette and cucumber, looking as feisty as caged animals, breathed a huge sigh of relief when they were released from the greenhouse. Each one, mulched with a thick collar of seaweed (a gift from an allotment neighbour) had been planted alongside French and runner beans in a bed where well-rotted stable compost had been generously applied. Pumpkin 'Dill's Atlantic Giant' had been given pride of place in the centre of the pot where it would benefit from maximum sunshine.

Squash varieties (some I'm ashamed to say unlabelled) were planted wherever there was space, with some planted directly into a brick compost heap where they would be trained up hazel sticks to the roof of the wonky shed. Ordinarily, trailing varieties need to be planted at least 1.2m apart, bush varieties 60cm apart. Where they have been planted closer together, extra watering and feeding is necessary. Trailing varieties will produce bigger gourds if some of the set fruit are pinched out. Left to roam on the soil, the stems will root and pick up extra

water and nutrients. This should be encouraged if you want prize pumpkins. Generally, we leave most of our squash on the stem to produce smaller fruit, which mean less waste for our small family.

The last of the tomatoes were also allowed to breathe fresh air and were given stout canes for support. These tomatoes always seem to taste sweeter where sun, fresh air and more even temperatures let them grow in their own time. We try not to over water them but make sure they receive a generous dose of liquid fertiliser, made





6 Weed parsnip seedlings, then cover with plastic bottles to protect against slugs.
7 Blossom from the espalier apple trees – here 'Crawley Beauty', a favourite cooking apple.
8 Strawberry plants were in their fourth, and final, year and the crop was abundant.

from our comfrey leaves (issue 113, page 87), every ten days. We also pinch out side shoots emerging from between the main stem and laterals, tying them in as they grow.

One of the most memorable images at the end of May and beginning of June was the blossom on our espalier apple trees, accentuating the outstretched forms like huge welcoming arms. Together with pears they were being trained to create a visual divide between the raised beds at the front of the plot and the more informal spaces for sheds, compost and greenhouse at the back. The pears, together with fan-trained gages, had set little fruit, possibly due to frost, so all hope for autumn fruit rested with four cultivars of apple: 'Crawley

Beauty' (cooker), 'Nettlestone Pippin', 'Egremont Russet' and a 'Bramley's Seedling' growing as a bush tree at the back of the plot on MM106 rootstock.

As new crops began to get a foothold, others waned. The last broad beans were harvested and stems cut, leaving nitrogen-fixing roots in the soil to benefit courgettes and swiss chard planted around the wigwams supporting French and runner beans. Strawberries, in their final year, were most generous and, thanks to a framed cage of chicken wire to keep out squirrels, gave us the official confirmation that summer was here at last. They would be grubbed out to make way for winter cabbage the following month.

The raspberries, as expected, were small and tart, confirming our fears that we'd been cultivating a weak strain that we'd originally found growing among some brambles. The decision was made to take them out so the ground could be prepared for more brassicas. It was a disappointment, as we had wasted three years giving the canes the benefit of the doubt, but we also learnt not to trust the promiscuity of raspberries and to always start with a named variety. The young clump of raspberry 'Joan J', given to us by a neighbour, looked raring to go. More would be planted in the pea bed come autumn.

We also managed the first of what we hoped would be many chances to cook and eat *al fresco*. This is when all the work we



JOBS TO DO

GENERAL

Continue weeding, hoeing and mulching crops; plant out seedlings grown indoors such as tomatoes, sweet corn, squash, broccoli; water young seedlings and newly sown seeds; keep potatoes earthed up, stake and support plants; keep an eye out for pests; prune and pinch out shoots on wall-trained fruit; check strawberries for signs of grey mould during wet weather.

HARVEST

Broad beans, summer cabbage, early carrots, lettuce, peas, early potatoes, asparagus.

SOW

Perpetual spinach, Swiss chard, dwarf French beans, beetroot, carrots, parsnip, turnips, chicory, lettuce, rocket, spring onions, last sowings of courgettes, cucumbers, marrows, sweet corn.

9 Cleve harvested the last of the broad beans, catching them while still young and tender.
10 Pot-grown lettuce, grown in the greenhouse, and now ready to be eaten.



GROWING CUCURBITS

Compost heaps can be used to plant cucurbits such as pumpkin, cucumber, squashes and gourds. I planted squash in my brick compost heap, which had been filled with well-rotted horse manure. This was allowed to settle and was then topped up before setting out three plants and training them up hazel sticks. Live compost heaps are useful in terms of the heat they generate, but avoid planting directly into fresh manure as this can damage the roots. Large compost heaps with room for the plants to trail are ideal and can make the heap look attractive.

11 Pumpkins being watered in on the brick compost heap. 12, 13 Onion bhajee batter and courgette flowers ready to fry as fritters, *al fresco*, at the allotment.

put into the plot makes sense. A patch of ground to nurture is a special thing. Even if you don't get everything you need from it by way of produce, it can – by the very nature of tending and nurturing – nourish the soul. These lazy days spent sharing the space with friends are special moments fondly remembered. Onion bhajees, courgette flower fritters and elderflower champagne were followed by a barbecue, broad bean pilaf and salad with fresh strawberries for desert. Rosemary (used on the barbecue) was also used to make a refreshing tisane.

But there was still work to do before our holiday. Weeding revealed just one scant row of parsnips. These were covered with plastic bottles to give some protection

from slugs, and rows of beetroot were covered with mesh to keep rabbits at bay. Elsewhere, having run out of space to plant onions in April, I decided to plant them in between rows of garlic, which were now reaching maturity. I decided that, with the prospect of some fine weather, two extra weeks in the ground wouldn't hurt. How wrong could I be? My final instructions before heading to the airport were, "Water, water, water." On returning, thanks to strict adherence to my list of tasks, everything was flourishing... except, of course, the garlic, three-quarters of which had taken exception to the deluge it had received and simply rotted away. The watering had also kept slugs and snails happy and consequently

all the seedling brassicas I planted (kohlrabi, cavolo nero) had also gone.

The rest of the allotment, however, thanks to the great efforts by our temporary guardians, had changed beyond recognition, with everything growing apace. Courgettes were not only double the size but had produced the first crops, beans had reached the top of the wigwams and spindly tomatoes had developed into great brutes living up to their 'Big Boy' credentials. Paths had been mulched, pots collected and neatly stacked, our furniture scrubbed clean. We couldn't have done half of it if we'd been there ourselves. Going on holiday was probably the best thing we could have done and we resolved to do it more often. ■



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RECIPE ONION BHAJEES

A recipe from Cleve's grandmother, who fed Ava Gardner with it on the set of the film, *Bhowani Junction*, in which she played the great star's mother.

INGREDIENTS

- 4 medium-sized onions, chopped
- 4 cloves garlic, finely sliced
- 2.5cm cube of ginger, finely sliced
- Chillies to taste, finely chopped
- Handful of fresh coriander
- 220g gram flour (also known as chickpea flour)
- 1 tsp turmeric
- Pinch of baking powder
- Salt and pepper

Sift gram flour, turmeric and baking powder into a large mixing bowl. Add garlic, ginger, chillies, salt and

pepper and mix well. Add water a little by little, stirring well to make sure all the gram flour is mixed without lumps. The batter should have a consistency between pancake and cake mix. Stir in chopped coriander.

Heat corn or sunflower oil in a wok, or karahi (pictured left) over a hot stove. Oil is ready when a small drop of batter sinks to the bottom then rises after a few seconds.

Add the onions to the batter at the last minute and begin frying. Work quickly as the onions will release their liquid, eventually making the mix too runny.

Place several spoonfuls of the mix into the hot oil and let them sizzle for three minutes, or until golden brown. Remove from oil with a slotted spoon and let them drain on a plate with kitchen paper. These are best eaten warm but can be eaten cold. You can reheat them in an oven (not microwave) and they will retain an element of crispness. Variations can be made using other vegetables such as courgettes, courgette flowers or aubergines.

14 June is both a rewarding and busy time on the allotment with vegetables racing in to growth.

NEXT MONTH

Transplanting leeks, successional sowing, pumpkin and squash, thinning apples, useful insects, raspberries