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# May: The plot thickens

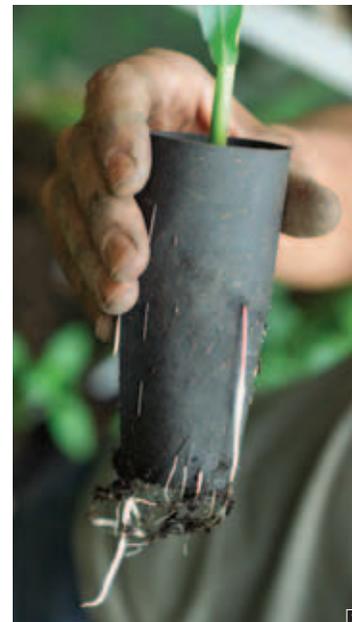
Things are moving ahead on Cleve West's organic vegetable allotment with the first early planted crops to harvest and a range of hopeful seedlings to plant out. Photographs by Howard Sooley

A POTENT MIX OF COW PARSLEY AND HAWTHORN BLOSSOM is enough to lull anyone into a false sense of security. But the saying 'ne'er cast a clout till May is out' rang loud and clear as cold weather continued to hamper our efforts to plant out vegetables raised in the greenhouse. Temperatures during the last week of the May 2005 soared to 30°C, only to plummet again just a few days later. Tomatoes in the greenhouse looked bewildered by the extremes, but we took the risk to plant them out, together with beans that had reached the top of their miniature wigwams and sweet corn, whose roots were now bursting from paper pots.

With work piling up at the office, each trip to the allotment was like bunking off from school, but we had to find time for a multitude of tasks: sowing a whole new selection of vegetables; repeat sowing others that were started in March; keeping a check on slugs; transplanting seedlings that were still too small to be left to their own devices outside; watering during dry spells and keeping on top of weeds. And that's not all. Protecting vegetables from rabbits, pigeons, pheasants and squirrels all adds up to a substantial amount of time in order to guarantee some sort of return. But while there are times when we seriously wonder

about the sanity of taking on four plots before retirement, the process of sowing, nurturing and reaping is our sanctuary from the intensity of urban living.

Our first crops were being picked and this was enough to lift our spirits. Lettuce, coriander, rocket and basil, not to mention an assortment of herbs from mint to marjoram, meant that as long as we keep sowing seed through the season we wouldn't have to buy these salads until autumn. There is a satisfaction too in watching the interaction between plants, insects and mammals, which eventually reaches its own equilibrium after years of organic gardening.



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- 1 Cleve waters his tender vegetables started off under glass and now well established.
- 2 Sweet corn seedling ready to be planted out.
- 3 Pinch out the tops of broad beans to discourage an infestation from blackfly.
- 4 The first of the season's broad beans.
- 5 Potatoes growing successfully in containers.
- 6 Carrot seedlings in a galvanised bath.

Aphids, blackfly in particular, had found their way from the flowering buds of salsify to our broad beans, but not in the large numbers we encountered in our first year. Pinching out the tips of the beans (deliciously nutty in a stir fry) encourages side shoots and more beans, and puts a serious dent in the first wave of these sap-sucking insects. Ladybirds, with more than three square meals a day to cope with, soon began to munch up the aphids, laying eggs where hatching young could also graze, so we weren't too fastidious in getting rid of all of

them. In five years we have never had to resort to a severe control of aphids, apart from the occasional blast of water from the hose when they get a little too cheeky.

Inevitably there is both success and failure when growing vegetables and we are reasonably pragmatic when things don't work out. Potatoes became our first casualty outside with late frosts singeing the tips of our earlies and almost ruining whole crops on neighbouring plots. Ours would recover in time, but were sufficiently weakened to be more susceptible to slugs and

possibly blight later in the season. Carrots too were struggling, except for those growing in an old galvanised bath. But we couldn't hide our disappointment when, for the second year, our parsnips, 'Avonresister', failed to appear. We like to be self-sufficient for Christmas, so it comes as a major blow when this crop fails. Most likely slugs were to blame, or reckless weeding during the three or four weeks they take to germinate. Fortunately, a few I had sown in the greenhouse – a useful signal to start looking out for seed sown directly in the ground – were



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7 Young beetroot protected under fleece.  
 8 Watering newly planted out brassicas helps them to establish more quickly.  
 9 Ladybirds are encouraged as predators of greenfly.  
 10 Cleve transplants climbing beans outside beneath their wigwam support.



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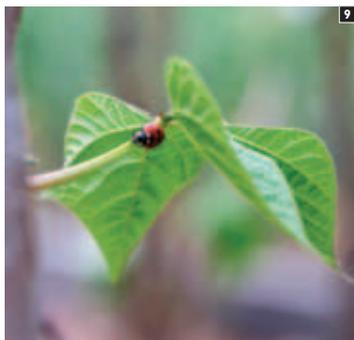
flourishing and were duly planted with great reverence and maximum security by way of cloches/plastic lemonade bottles.

In the same bed of root vegetables beetroot, which had also been sown in plugs, were planted 10cm apart with 30cm between rows and covered with fleece, ensuring a physical protection from both slugs and the variable weather. Green-leaved 'Toad' and 'Boltardy' cultivars were planted alongside the red foliage of 'Bull's Blood'; the young decorative leaves occasionally picked and used in salad or cooked as a spinach substitute. Later in the season more beetroot can be sown direct at intervals (until the end of July) to ensure a constant supply of this, one of our favourite root vegetables.

Conditions exacerbated by the temperature extremes, which played cat and mouse with gardeners throughout the country, were further complicated by low rainfall. In some respects this was a blessing as dry weather inhibits the movement of slugs, but it means extra watering, flouting all advice to conserve water, often during the warmest part of the day as slugs are most active at night. When it did eventually rain, evening forays were essential to collect slugs munching in an uncontrolled frenzy.

Sprouts and broccoli, which had been growing in the protection of a cold frame, were deemed tough enough to withstand the odd nibble and were planted out in the raised beds, 75cm apart. In the past we had

scattered a little lime on our neutral soil for brassicas that prefer more alkaline conditions, but I was interested to see how they'd get on without it. Uprturned timber pilings (used as supports for pontoons and landing stages along the river) in each bed would provide a central support for netting to protect the crop from pigeons. Brassicas, especially the top-heavy sprouts and broccoli, like firm soil, so extra care is taken on our light soil to see that they were well and truly tucked in, planting them up to the first set of leaves and using the heel of our boots to compact the soil around the roots. In theory sprouts are tough enough to withstand being flattened with a lawn roller, but even I think it a little excessive. Purple



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## JOBS TO DO

### GENERAL

Watch out for aphids, slugs and snails; apply fertiliser before sowing; earth up potatoes; water newly established plants and seedlings; stake broad beans, pinch out tops; support beans and peas; protect brassicas from birds; pot on, – or plant out under cloches – tomatoes, aubergines, cucumbers; thin early plantings of lettuce, carrot, beetroot, spinach, parsnip; lift and divide mint; put straw around strawberries, remove long runners.

### HARVESTING

Asparagus, early potatoes, salad leaves, radish, first broad beans, peas.

### SOWING

Plant out beans, celery, leeks, brassicas, maincrop potatoes; direct sow carrots, radish, salad onions, spinach, beans, beetroot, swedes, turnips, fennel.

11 Cleve keeps on top of watering during dry spells.  
 12 Cold frames can be opened up now to allow seedlings to acclimatise.



**13** Pea seedlings growing well – always a popular vegetable plot addition.  
**14** Lettuce grown under glass ready for harvest.  
**15** Brassica seedlings grown under cold frames are now ready for planting out.

cauliflower ‘Graffiti’ F1 and red cabbage ‘Integro’ were planted around the edges of the bed and self-seeders such as fennel and *Verbena bonariensis* allowed to stay. It pays to keep a tidy plot, but we like things to romp and roam a little to attract more beneficial insects to the raised bed areas.

Back in the greenhouse beans, squash, courgette and cucumber were ready to be planted out, but conditions were far from favourable and, for the first time, were still in pots at the end of the month. The previous year our whole crop suffered frost damage and, while they did recover, I was anxious not to push my luck a second time.

Peas that had been stifled by the first wave of slugs eventually broke through to

reach the supporting sticks of birch twigs and soon began to develop pods from the delicate white flowers. For all their trouble, (the requirements of space, support and soil preparation) peas are worth growing just to experience how sweet they are compared to shop-bought, frozen or tinned. Most vegetable growers will agree that one of life’s simple pleasures is eating young peas straight from the pod. Once picked, the sugar in the peas starts turning to starch, so we have them to provide tit-bits while working at the allotment rather than going for maximum yield. Repeat sowings of peas (directly into the soil this time) is a good idea to maximise picking time throughout the season.

Most of the soft fruit looked promising, but all eyes were on the raspberries, which had been small and tasteless the previous year. We were unsure whether they had been neglected by way of food and water, or were simply a bad strain. If the crop failed again we were ready to grub everything out and start again, most likely with ‘Joan J’ – a strong cultivar that had produced a bumper supply of delicious large fruits on a friend’s neighbouring plot from mid-July to October. Come the end of the season I’m sure he’d let us have a few canes – after all, swapping seeds, cuttings and crops is all part of allotment life. Our only problem would be finding something suitable to trade with. ■



**16** The plot in May is beginning to flourish.  
**17** Comfrey leaves left to steep in water produce a useful liquid manure.

### COMFREY LIQUID MANURE

Russian comfrey (*Symphytum x uplandicum*) is a common sight in many allotments. Furry leaves and purple flowers make a substantial clump to a height of 1m. High in potash and nitrogen, it makes a great liquid manure and effective compost activator. See recipe below.

#### GROWING COMFREY

It can easily be grown from root cuttings and divisions during the growing season, but needs a permanent site because of its deep roots. Cuttings should be planted just below the soil surface and left to establish for a season. Start harvesting leaves in its second year, cutting new growth (about 60cm high) before it flowers. It will re-grow and a well-established clump can be cut 4-5 times a season. Feed the plant by mulching each winter with well-rotted stable manure.

#### MAKING THE LIQUID MANURE

Put 3kg comfrey (or nettle leaves) into a sack and leave to steep for four weeks (two weeks for nettles) in 45 litres of water. The resultant brown liquid can be used undiluted (nettles need diluting with 10 parts water) as a foliar feed, or for watering pots and transplants. Keep covered while fermenting as the smell can be a nuisance and will attract mosquitoes.



#### NEXT MONTH

Apple blossom, planting out squash, courgette, cucumbers and tomatoes, harvesting broad-beans, strawberries, raspberries – plus leaving the plot for a two-week holiday.