



- 1 Cleve takes fresh compost to spread on some of the now-empty allotment beds.
- 2 Piping hot pumpkin soup, a seasonal favourite. See below for Cleve's favourite recipe.
- 3 Salsify roots are delicious cooked simply in butter.
- 4 Blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*) provides a welcome splash of late autumn colour.

PUMPKIN SOUP

INGREDIENTS

- 1 unpeeled medium squash, cut into cubes
- 1 onion, sliced
- 1 large boiling potato, cut into cubes
- 600ml vegetable stock
- sage or parsley

Put squash and potatoes into an oven-proof container and drizzle with olive oil. Bake in a pre-heated oven (gas mark 5) for 20 mins or until the squash has softened and browned slightly. Meanwhile, fry onions in olive oil until translucent. Add the warmed stock and a little salt and pepper; then simmer for a while before adding the roasted squash and potato. Simmer on a low heat for ten minutes or so to let the flavours mix. Liquidise and serve garnished with finely chopped sage or parsley and a dab of double cream if your arteries are up to it.

November: Taking stock

Cleve West deals with some unpredictable late autumn weather, fends off pigeons hungry for his crop of sprouts and starts cleaning up and preparing for the next season. Photographs Howard Sooley

NOVEMBER 2005 WAS A MONTH OF TWO HAIVES: the first warm and wet, the second cold and dry. Statistically though (in terms of rainfall and temperature), the month was somewhat average – as were the autumn colours, which laboured, never reaching their full potential. Garlic, which had been planted at the end of October, responded gratefully, the cold weather kick-starting their tiny engines. ‘Early Wight’ predictably produced the first leaves.

The frost was also a welcome tonic for brassicas reaching maturity. Our cavolo nero had looked good enough to eat back in September, but I’d been reprimanded by an Italian gastronome for even considering picking the kale before the first frost, which is meant to enhance its flavour by taking away some of the bitterness. “Back home they

would consider it sacrilege,” he said, ignoring my suggestion that we may have to wait beyond Christmas. But when the frost came I wondered whether the real reason was not so much for taste but aesthetic reasons. The gangly leaves, gripped solid by ice and looming ghostly through a dawn mist, looked magnificent. The leaves, de-stemmed and shredded, would become a staple for the next few weeks in stir fries, casseroles and occasionally on their own, fried with onions and garlic. And yes, the leaves did taste sweeter.

Beneath the protective canopy of the kale the last few celeriac took refuge. Their taste is one of the best-kept secrets in the vegetable world and I was determined to have at least one left for Christmas lunch. Fortunately, the thick leaves of other brassicas helped protect them from the worst of the weather.

The sudden dip in temperature, coupled with an overall decline in available food for wildlife, meant that pigeons were becoming even more adventurous. They tried to get to the tips of sprouts and broccoli which had been netted from the day they were big enough to fend for themselves against slugs. Now, towering more than 1.5m, the black nylon netting was stretched tight, allowing the birds to gain enough purchase and steal the tender leaves. Their lumbering landing was effective and occasionally one would find its way through the only hole to feast in peace before the inevitable panic in finding a way out.

For many, the prospect of winter is probably the last thing to take comfort from but, while there is a definite slowdown in terms of picking and sowing, there is still enough work to dispel any notion of the end of the season.

With leeks adequately sustaining the sudden demand for soup (often cooked over an open fire at the allotment), broad beans, peas, lettuce and onions were sown. In the past we found that planting broad beans late in November stops them from getting too big too soon and, as a result, less prone to late frost damage. Come the spring they would have set enough root to grow quickly away and toughen up to withstand the first wave of blackfly in early summer. Double lines of ‘Super Aquadulce’ and ‘The Sutton’ (a dwarf cultivar) were sown outside in a raised bed

15cm apart with 40cm between rows. A wire net over the soil surface would keep squirrels and mice at bay while they germinated.

Peas were sown in the greenhouse in paper tubes, again to give them the best of starts come spring. Two cultivars – organic ‘Douce Provence’ and non-organic ‘Meteor’ – were sown, three to a 75mm pot. The greenhouse, unheated, would allow them to develop slowly but keep potentially lethal frost at bay. Likewise, plugs of lettuce were planted direct into the soil of the greenhouse. It seemed a cruel thing, planting something

that carries so much of summer in its leaves in a cold and seemingly lifeless environment, but the plants obliged, showing signs of growth within a week or so. A few lettuces and Chinese salads that had been growing outside, withstanding temperatures of -3°C, thumbed their noses at their sheltered cousins. Seedling onions and plugs of spring greens given by a friend found their way into the ground where the dud raspberry crop had been grubbed out.

One of the longest standing vegetables, rhubarb, quickly succumbs to frost and November is a good time to lift and divide it. This should be done every five years or so to keep the plant vigorous, to propagate for use elsewhere in the garden and to give away to friends. Newcomers to the allotment are often offered a slice of rhubarb root as a welcome gesture. One clump, now four years old, hadn’t produced as much as I had hoped, so it was dug out and split with a sharp spade (actually not as easy as it sounds) before each half was re-planted in its own pit of well-rotted horse manure. With two other healthy clumps of rhubarb on the allotment, we would be able to leave each new root system for a year to establish before harvesting again.





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5 Another of Cleve's warming soups, this one made from leeks, brassica tops and potatoes, bubbles gently in one corner of the allotment.

6 Cleve sows peas indoors in paper tubes, which will allow the roots a good run.

7 The lofty flowers of cardoons (*Cynara cardunculus*) look striking if left to set seed. Alternatively the young stems of the plant may be blanched and eaten.



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For me, though, the beauty of November is the time it affords to take stock of what has been achieved and what must be done before the next season. A slow but thorough clean up was required. Paths between raised beds were cleared, a tricky job as bindweed – with its labyrinth of roots – had been tunneling under the thick bark mulch and now threatened most of the raised beds by finding a way through the tiniest of gaps in the timber.

Like most allotment-holders, we had to be realistic about what we could achieve. To eliminate bindweed completely from our plot would take years of diligent weeding. There simply wasn't the time. Even using chemicals, which of course was out of the question, would be futile unless frequently used over at least two years. We have learned to live with it, pulling up growth above ground during summer (thereby weakening the plant as it relies on its leaves for chloro-

phyll) and digging out as much of the fleshy root as possible over winter. It's particularly rife in the herb bed at the front of the allotment, where a past tenant dumped everything from stones and glass to the national collection of bedsprings.

Each winter I consider digging everything out and starting from scratch. But, even for the sake of this series, I have decided to maintain the status quo. Not only do the herbs thrive in the relatively poor soil, forming a buffer between us and a public footpath, the random nature of herbs is a stark contrast to the order imposed elsewhere on the plot and a marvellous feeding station and habitat for insects. If bindweed temporarily gets the upper hand, and it invariably does, we simply appreciate the purity of the flowers rather than lose sleep over its tenacity. In other words, leaving it be will save one helluva load of work. ■



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CLEVE WEST

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8 Plant broad beans in late November and they should put on enough growth to withstand the first frost, and be robust enough to beat the spring assault by blackfly.

9 The crisp green leaves of the winter-hardy Chinese salad vegetable mizuna bring the fresh flavour of summer to your plate – all year round.

10 Cavolo nero tastes sweeter after the winter's first frosts, according to an Italian friend of Cleve's.

JOBS TO DO

GENERAL

Hoeing and weeding (remember to check under clothes, too); protect tender crops; check stored vegetables, removing any rotten ones, and store any others for winter; begin winter digging and manuring, removing any debris to the compost heap; remove yellowing leaves from brassicas

HARVEST

Brussels sprouts and parsnips (after a frost), early winter cabbage, carrots, celeriac, celery, kale, leeks, beetroots, turnips, swedes

SOW/PLANT OUTSIDE

Overwintering broad beans (may need a little protection), garlic, onion sets and rhubarb

SOW INSIDE

Peas, lettuce

NEXT MONTH

Cleve takes stock of his plantings of fruit trees, looks forward to the festive season and plans for even more organic bounty from next season's crop