



October: Indian summer

As the season draws to a close, Cleve West enjoys the late fruits of a long hot summer on his organic allotment, and starts making preparations for the year ahead. Photographs Howard Sooley

A NEWS REPORT HIGHLIGHTING the increased prospect of global warming, intimating that we were perhaps at the point of no return, was a sobering moment. As a nation of gardeners we have come to know and love the changing seasons, but with melting ice caps, a slowing Gulf Stream and the prospect of much colder winters the chance of serious climate change seems a distinct possibility. What would this autumn and winter bring? As if to confirm scientists' fears, October 2005 turned out to be one of the warmest on record with temperatures of around 20°C late into the month allowing us an extended season, albeit tainted with these wider concerns for the planet.

Our vegetables, knowing nothing of mankind's folly, enjoyed the unexpected benefits. Tender crops, such as French beans

and courgettes ('Black Milan' and 'Jemmer'), spluttered on despite looking gaunt and wizened. More sunshine was also good news for pumpkin and squash, their skins toughening to prepare them for storage. Some had already been picked and used to make creamy soups and delicious risotto, but many were left for as long as possible to take advantage of this curing stage, which would see some through to spring. The most prolific squash was 'Retzer Olkurbis' or 'Lady Godiva' – an Austrian cultivar, the largest weighing as much as a medium-sized pumpkin. This would not keep well unless well cured.

Those whose skins had been slightly damaged or picked too early were quick to perish, while others that had spent long hours soaking up the sun on our shed roof kept well into the New Year. While 'Lady

Godiva' lacked a little in taste ('subtle' was a polite description given to one of our soups) its handsome skin and edible seeds meant it wouldn't be written off next year's seed order. 'Uchi Kuri' was again our favourite and, despite a less than bumper harvest, made some of the most memorable meals from the allotment all year. 'Blue Kuri', on the other hand, sulked in the shade of a rather beefy 'Lady Godiva' and scrambled its way to the shed roof to produce just one chalky blue fruit. 'Lakota Sioux', a Native American Indian cultivar given to us by an American neighbour, also added a refreshing splash of colour to the raised beds.

Toward the end of the month, with frost (in theory at least) more probable, much of what we had picked was set out on the oak table as a comfort blanket to dispel any suggestion of depleted stocks.



1 The abundant squash harvested was 'stored' on the old oak table as a reminder of a successful crop.
2 A paltry harvest of raspberries was a major disappointment of the season.
3 & 4 Blackcurrants were propagated by taking cuttings 22cm in length, which were then planted 15cm apart, with 5cm left showing.

ASSESSING THE SEASON

TRIUMPHS...

Beetroot Picked small, delicious when roasted
Potatoes, beans and squash Reliable as ever
Ruby chard A good-looking substitute for spinach
Cavolo nero Pick after the frost. Perfect with squash in Italian vegetable casseroles
Salsify, scorzonera Newcomers with subtle flavour
Celeriac Grated raw or cooked in butter, a delight

...AND DISASTERS

Soft fruits Another season without raspberries – our hopes now rest with 'Joan J' for next season
Carrots Vulnerable seedlings were again eaten by slugs. We will grow more in containers next year
Garlic This failure was our fault; we should have been more specific about maintenance when we left the plot to be looked after when holidaying

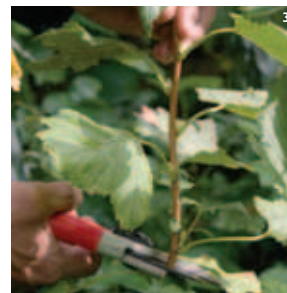
Another morale boosting exercise was to plant garlic, which can be planted any time from October until the end of January, weather permitting. In past years we've always planted it just before Christmas, but with a busy schedule that would keep us away from the allotment for several weeks, I decided to take advantage of having time and good weather to plant most of our cloves in the last week of the month. Several different bulbs were ordered from The Garlic Farm, including two purple-tinted cultivars, 'Albigensian Wight' and 'Early Wight' (which

can be harvested in May) and two white cultivars, 'Tiberian Wight' and 'Solent Wight', the latter said to keep until February. We also planted 'Eschalote Grise', a popular shallot among top French chefs, similar to the native shallots of central Asia. Our soil, being sandy loam, is rarely a problem for garlic, but it's always good to plant it when the ground is relatively dry, minimising the risk of cloves rotting before they've had time to set roots. Planted 20cm apart with 30cm between rows, the cloves need only to be planted just below the soil surface. I like to plant mine a bit

deeper but 'as shallow as possible' is the best rule of thumb on heavier soils.

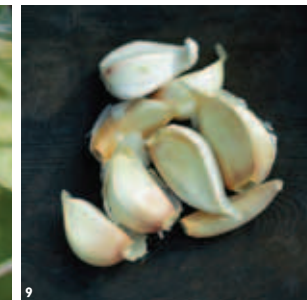
Elsewhere, while much of our work in October entails harvesting the last root crops, our soil offers some leeway, affording us the luxury of leaving crops in the ground longer than we would otherwise. 'Clamping' – storing vegetables on site by covering them with straw and a cone of top soil to keep them from becoming too damp – is one way of keeping crops fresh, without cluttering up space at home. But, always keen to take advantage of the given conditions, we harvested potatoes, turnips and parsnips as needed, despite the increased chance of slug damage during warm weather.

While the characteristics of our soil are, in some respects, advantageous, the demand we place on it to provide the nutrients each year have to be taken into account. If we want a continuous supply of healthy crops it's only reasonable to assume that, unless we leave some areas fallow every few years, there is a need to replenish what has been taken out. Compost that has been made at the allotment from weeds, kitchen waste and grass clippings is used as a blanket over each raised bed as it becomes accessible. Another method





5 'Crawley Beauty' – a bumper crop made up in part for the year's generally poor showing of fruits.
6 Seed from *Chrysanthemum coronarium spatiosum* can be collected for next year's crop of chop suey greens.
7 Late salads including lollo rosso and pak choi – vigilance is still needed to protect against slugs.



we practise is 'green-manuring', where a crop that benefits the soil is grown to help reduce the nutrient depletion. In the past we had used mustard and fenugreek, but this time rye grass was sown in vacant beds. Quick to establish, it would be dug in during late December, early January, to allow time to decompose before spring.

In the meantime, autumn tasks, such as taking cuttings of soft fruit bushes and storing apple and pears, really did bring home a sense of putting the garden to bed. There was no real need to take cuttings except to create reserve stock to replace any

losses from the predicted cold winter. It would be quicker to buy fruit trees, but propagating your own is, without a doubt, more satisfying as it reinforces the whole ethos of self-sufficiency and the reason for having an allotment in the first place.

From our blackcurrants, several 22cm lengths of the season's growth were taken with a cut sloping away from the topmost bud and inserted into the soil 15cm apart, leaving just 5cm showing. On heavier soils this would normally be back-filled with sharp sand to improve drainage. They remain here for a year and are either then transplanted, or

more likely, given away to a newcomer. The same method can be used for gooseberries and redcurrants, but as ours had only been in the ground a year we left them to establish before undertaking any form of pruning.

It's not always good to end on a setback, but a noticeable lack of fruit this year for many allotment holders in our vicinity did take the edge off our overall appreciation of autumn. This failure had to be down to frost, in particular the late frosts we experienced in April and May.

Pears and gages were the most noticeable absentees, but apples, normally abundant, failed to produce the sort of crops we'd hoped for with the trees now in their fourth year. Thankfully, 'Crawley Beauty' was an exception and gave us such a bumper crop we had to thin the fruit in June for fear of exhausting the tree the following season. Stacked unwrapped in a wooden box and stored in a metal cabinet, the apples kept until early in the New Year, offering a blast of pungent aroma each time the door was opened. Needless to say the door was opened often, if only for this small pleasure that would carry anyone back to their childhood where memories of dusty sheds, old tools and granddads was more than sufficient nourishment to keep us going through the winter. ■

Recommended supplier

• The Garlic Farm
Newchurch, Isle of Wight PO36 0NR
Tel 01983 865378
www.thegarlicfarm.co.uk



8 Radish seedheads – edible when young.
9 & 10 Warm, dry autumn weather suited the planting of lots of garlic, including new cultivars from The Garlic Farm on the Isle of Wight. Cloves were planted just below the soil's surface, 20cm apart with 30cm between rows.
11 Nasturtiums were thrown on the compost heap where they flourished in the warm weather.

JOBS TO DO

GENERAL

Store crops for winter use (such as marrows, pumpkins, winter squashes) – make sure none is stored spoiled; protect any tender crops with fleece or cloches, earth up leeks; start clearing debris, hoeing and weeding; begin winter digging and manuring.

HARVEST

Last of runner beans, French beans, beetroot, carrots, pak choi, celeriac, radish

SOW

Outside – broad beans, hardy peas
Inside – winter lettuce, cut-and-come-again salad leaves such as cress and rocket, early summer cauliflower

PLANT

Spring cabbage, garlic, autumn onion sets

NEXT MONTH

Cleve takes stock of what has been achieved and plans what must be done, dealing with first warm and wet, then dry and cold weather