



1 The squash harvest included 'Uchi Kuri' (left) and 'Retzer Olkurbis', which can be stored for use over the winter.  
 2 'Cavolo nero', a dark-leaved Italian cabbage.  
 3 Tending to squash that have roamed up on to the shed roof.  
 4 Collecting seeds of *Digitalis ferruginea* – a plant that is useful for attracting beneficial insects to the allotment.  
 5 The beleaguered salad selection in the raised bed, which struggled to survive.



that leaving weeds on the paths overnight attracts slugs for food and shelter. Of course, this *laissez-faire* way of gardening has its drawbacks. An untidy plot creates more habitat for slugs and snails to lay their eggs, so it's important to clear areas after harvesting a crop and expose clutches of eggs – usually under bricks or nestled in air pockets behind the timber of raised beds – wherever we find them.

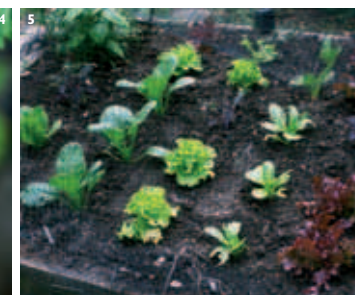
Tomatoes in the greenhouse failed to crop as well as those planted in the raised beds, but spluttered out a succession of

late offerings and escaped the late attack of blight outside, almost certainly caused by the unseasonal damp experienced in August. It put paid to the valiant effort of 'Big Boy' and 'Gardener's Delight', which had to be dug up and burned to avoid the danger of this wind-blown disease affecting crops next year.

In theory, nutrients in our alluvial soil risk being diluted by excess rain in winter. Green manure is therefore sown in any bare soil at this time of year where there are no plans to grow anything until spring.

Roots bind the soil and stems of the green manure, provided they are not left to get too woody, will release nutrients and provide humus for the soil as they break down. We sowed rye where potatoes had been dug up. The seeds germinate within days and will form a thick rug by November, which can then be dug back into the soil before spring.

Ruby chard is a vegetable that we've underrated in the past, but have come to appreciate. Its attractive red foliage can be used in the flower border where it can



# September: The good life

Cleve West extols the virtues of the Utopian existence on the allotment with September offering the ripest of rewards, while musing on the passing of another season. Photographs Howard Sooley

WHILE EACH MONTH IS WELCOMED FOR ITS OWN UNIQUE CHARACTERISTIC, September is especially anticipated for its peculiar play on our senses. Just as the first warmth of spring makes us relish the promise of summer, the first hint of autumn similarly heightens our appreciation as we cling to those Indian summer days while eagerly anticipating Nature's splendour in decay.

Toward the end of the month the first autumn mists, together with the plangent cries from red deer in the neighbouring park, created an eerie atmosphere of an early morning and with it a sense of resignation

that we've seen the best of the summer. Squirrels, busy collecting and burying acorns from our oak was enough of a distraction to keep them away from the last few squash, ripening in the open, and birds were noticeably more active.

I suspect that for vegetable growers there's always a feeling that the year has passed far too quickly, not to mention a hint of concern about diminishing food stocks, but, really, the emphasis has only shifted, and there is still plenty to reap. And while the soil is still warm, it's a good time to take advantage of the conditions to sow some late seed. Parsley, lettuce, angelica

and chervil are sown direct into the open ground where they should gain enough of a foothold to withstand lower temperatures as winter approaches. Plugs of spring greens, lettuce, pak choi and Chinese cabbage were also planted, some close to purple kale that had taken a battering from slugs. Packed tightly together in a small raised bed, the group of salads resembled the crew of a sunken ship huddled together in shark-infested waters, being picked off around the perimeter. Those in the middle (ie the kale) would survive.

There is much to be said for the decoy in organic gardening and I've even found

THE PLOT



6 September croppings with abundant tomatoes, courgettes, aubergines, beetroot and flowers.  
7 Basil from the herb garden, with clusters of little white flowers starting to show.  
8 Cleve trying to keep on top of the weeding.  
9 Chinese cabbage, a favourite salad leaf of the neighbouring Vietnamese plotholders.



look stunning, especially when backlit by a low sun, and it tastes delicious as a spinach substitute and goes particularly well with stir fries. This way of cooking is most convenient at the plot and has been largely inspired by a Vietnamese family, who have shared both their produce and recipes at the open day we hold each September. A large arbour on their plot is festooned with bottleneck gourds, which hang like musical instruments, and in the greenhouse chillies and bitter melons overflow from baskets already loaded with

Chinese mustard and cabbage, each leaf neatly trimmed and stacked by Lu, the family's grandmother.

Every inch of their plot was utilised and, working as a team (four of them), much was accomplished over a weekend. They gave me several mints including *Persicaria odorata* (Vietnamese mint) and purple shiso (*Perilla frutescens* var. *purpurascens*). Each was potted up to take its chances in my unheated greenhouse. The efficiency and joy they showed in their activities was rewarded by winning

the pumpkin competition with two behemoths weighing in at over 45kg each.

My own pumpkin (from the same batch of seed) barely tipped the scales above 23kg, simply because the plant was restricted to the confines of the raised bed. Pumpkins, squash and cucurbits are nomads and set roots wherever their trailing stems come in contact with the soil. Feeding and watering each point encourages more fruit. Restricting the number of fruit on each plant will see a marked increase in growth and this is how



10 Cleve's enormous 23kg pumpkin came a long way short of the 45kg monster grown by his Vietnamese friends.  
11 An exceptional carrot crop – despite the allotment's ideal light alluvial soil.

JOBS TO DO

GENERAL

Keep on top of hoeing and weeding; store pumpkins and squash for winter; make sure greens and brassicas are well supported and watch out for caterpillars; harvest your final onions; cut down tomatoes to store and ripen inside; cover any late-sown dwarf beans, carrots and salad crops with cloches.

HARVEST

Runner and French beans, beetroot, courgettes, spring onions, marrows, spinach, sweet corn, tomatoes, pumpkins

SOW

Outside – spring cabbage, endive, winter lettuce, winter spinach

PLANT

Garlic, autumn onion sets, winter lettuce, spring cabbage

PRESERVING YOUR PRODUCE

DHUNDI'S CHUTNEY

- 500g freshly picked green tomatoes
- 1 large onion      2 green chillies
- 2 cloves garlic      ½ tsp salt
- ½ tsp sugar      Juice ½ lemon/lime
- 3cm cube of ginger crushed
- Handful of freshly picked mint

Place tomatoes on a hot barbecue or griddle and cook until slightly charred. Put to one side. Mix together the remaining ingredients (except mint) in a bowl. Add the barbecued tomatoes and mash. Season as required. Sprinkle with fresh mint. Store the chutney in an airtight jar and keep in the refrigerator.

PUTCHANI

Cleve's mother's spicy tomato relish

- 4 large onions
  - 4-6 tbsp mustard oil
  - 6 tbsp panch pooran\*
  - 2kg ripe tomatoes
  - 3cm cube of ginger
  - 6 cloves garlic
  - Fresh chillies to taste
  - 2 tbsp tomato purée
  - Juice of 1 lemon
  - 1 tbsp vinegar
  - Jaggery (unrefined sugar) or honey
  - Salt & pepper
- In a large, heavy pot fry onions in the mustard oil (this helps preserve the relish).

When translucent add panch pooran and cook for a minute until the seeds pop. Add ginger, garlic and chillies and cook for a few more minutes until the aromas are released. Stir in the tomato purée, lemon juice, vinegar, salt and pepper and the honey or jaggery. Add a little of the water to keep ingredients from sticking. When you have a smooth paste add the chopped tomatoes, the rest of the water and stir thoroughly. Boil down so that there is no liquid left – this is important otherwise the chutney will not keep. When the mixture is cool pour into sterilised jars and seal.  
\* Bengali five spice, a mixture of cumin, fennel, nigella, mustard and fenugreek seeds.

pumpkin enthusiasts produce such enormous sizes. Both squash and pumpkins are left on their stems to ripen for as long as possible. This toughens the skin and helps preserve them well into winter months when soups and casseroles become a staple part of our diet.

Many vegetable growers spend as much time preserving their crops as growing them, which is hardly surprising considering all the trouble they've gone to. Julie, an American neighbour, not only finds time to grow a wide range of

produce, she freezes, pickles and preserves anything that can't be eaten immediately or given away. If we're lucky, jars of chilli-cucumber relish and crabapple jelly will be found just inside the door of our greenhouse before being offered for sale on our Open Day, a special date in the allotment calendar. Plottolders get the chance to show off their harvest, share tips and exchange seed. It's also an ideal chance for newcomers to get to know some of their neighbours and for local residents to see what's being grown on their doorstep.

With over 200 people attending in 2005 it is clear that vegetable growing is fashionable again, and that the communal nature of allotments is being recognised as a means of perpetuating local distinctiveness, not only in terms of varieties of vegetables and the importance of locally grown food, but of the people within the local community, where variety in age, ability, colour and religion provide all the ingredients for a virtual Utopian existence. September was, as always, the perfect epithet for 'The Good Life'. ■



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16



12 'Joan J' raspberry canes heeled in for planting out later in the year.



12

13 A cape gooseberry, Physalis peruviana, a delicious, succulent fruit.



13



17

14 All the hard work planting out the leek seedlings pays off as row upon row flourish.  
15 Snails' eggs uncovered behind timber being used for the raised beds.  
16 A hungry snail, which escaped Cleve's vigilance, snacking on some French beans.  
17 'January King', a hardy cabbage that survives heavy winter frosts.

NEXT MONTH

Enjoying an Indian summer and the continuing crops; starting autumn tasks including taking cuttings from soft fruits; applying compost to beds as they become free