

## WINTER GROWING TIPS

### WINTER – DECEMBER, JANUARY, FEBRUARY



From a gardening perspective the three wonderful things about Winter are ..... Firstly, if the weather is kind and is dry and sunny, no matter how cold – it just makes for a great time outside whether gardening or just tidying the shed ! Secondly, after December 21st the days begin to lengthen and finally Winter is just a great time for planning and getting ready for next years growing season. Hopefully you will have taken advantage of the DDAGS Seed Ordering Scheme and having got your order in for the end of November, you can eagerly await the arrival of seeds, spuds and other exotics you will have selected from the catalogues. Those pictures look so good .....you feel like you just have to give it a try !

DECEMBER can be a bit of a non month in the gardening calendar and getting ready for the Xmas festivities tends to dominate the beginning of the Winter season. If you've planned well beforehand there are still crops for harvesting, and winter salads can be grown under cloches or in the greenhouse – particularly if heated or at least kept frost free. Traditionally December was a month when allotment holders would 'sweeten the soil' – which is essentially adding lime to the soil to increase alkalinity. You should of course check the acidity/alkalinity of the soil anyway, but if your soil is on the acidic side – below a pH of 7 - then a spreading of garden lime (calcium carbonate) 2 – 3 months before planting is ideal. The timing will allow for the lime to break down and not cause damage to young growth. Manure spreading is also an option at this time of year, which can be spread on the top of the soil and either left to be worked in by the worms or alternatively dug in.

Once into the New Year, whilst the garden or allotment may not be ready to do that much as yet, JANUARY is none the less a brilliant month for planning. The seeds that were ordered may well have arrived, and the garden centres having cleared away the Xmas decorations begin to line the shelves with seeds, bulbs and other bits and bobs for the garden. If you're new to growing vegetables its probably best to

start with a selection of traditional varieties that are tried and tested – as you are more likely to get good results. Its also not a bad idea to grow things that you like to eat – unless you have got loads of room and like to grow things for their ornamental value. Experienced growers do like to have a bit of a new challenge and can try new things to grow to add to their regular list of favourites. Now is a god time to start planning where to plant your crops and to plan out the rotation of different crops, so as to get the most from your soil and reduce the risk of disease.

Seed potatoes are about in January, and at the end of this month you can start 'chitting' them in preparation for planting in early March. Lay them out in a cool but light room and just wait for the little shoots to appear. If you haven't already planted onion varieties for overwintering, then January is also a good time to buy onion and shallot sets and garlic bulbs.

By the time FEBRUARY arrives whilst the weather and ground conditions may not be much better than they have been for the last two months, there is an opportunity to speed up nature to some degree by covering seed beds with old carpet, cardboard or polythene to begin to warm the soil. Its often advantageous to dig over and incorporate any compost or manure before covering. Giving the garden or allotment compost heap a turn over is also a good job for this month and now is also the time to finish any pruning of fruit trees and bushes as they emerge from winter dormancy and will begin to put on new growth as the weather warms up. Autumn varieties of raspberries and established currant bushes will benefit from a really hard prune at this time of year, as they produce fruit on the new stems that will grow over the Spring and Summer. Whilst on the subject of fruit, if you have any fruit cages now is the time to check them over for stability and intact netting, and to make any repairs before the busy time of sowing and planting takes over.

February can present a real dilemma to gardeners – offering the temptation to plant early to get ahead, but also risking seeds failing to germinate because it is too cold. To play safe it is a good idea to do a bit of both – sow some seeds now and leave the remainder till later. There are numerous varieties that are good for early sowing – some better if they are started off indoors or under cloches or in cold frames. It may be trial and error .....on the other hand it could be a roaring success.

Some things such as rhubarb and chicory can be covered and forced ready for early Spring and Jerusalem Artichokes, which are lovely roasted or for soup, are available as tubers for planting out. Finally, in amongst all the planning for the coming season February is also a good time to check over any stored fruit and vegetables and remove anything that is damaged or diseased.



## WINTER TIP – 1



An old wives tale ? ..... February 14th is not just Valentines Day, it is also believed to be the day that garden snails and slugs begin to wake up and think about mating and populating the garden. The common slug has the potential over five years to produce 90,000 new slugs .....so, If you are ready to engage in the battle with this RHS top garden pest then control measures need to be in place. Hunting them out by torchlight is rewarding and slug pellets, coarse ground coverings and barriers are all proven methods of control. Whatever your preferred method of battle, just remember that if you want to get to your young Spring plants before they do, then don't leave anything to chance. What might look fresh and green one day, could very easily be razed to the ground overnight !