

ADDISCOMBE, WOODSIDE & SHIRLEY LEISURE GARDENS LTD
GLENTHORNE AVENUE, CROYDON. CR0 7EZ.
www.awslg.org.uk

Janet Macdonald's tips for getting the best out of your allotment
March/April 2020

In case you have trouble remembering what the weather does each month, here is a little 'rhyme' to help you:

Snowy, flowy, blowy

Showery, flowery, bowery

Hoppy, croppy, droppy

Breezy, sneezy, freezy.

Amongst the first plants to appear are green weeds, and many of them are edible:

- Stinging Nettles (*Urtica dioica*)– you'll need gloves to pick them (pinch the tender tips off) but once cooked they lose their sting. Cook them quickly with no more than the water that sticks when you wash them, and some butter. Serve on toast with a poached egg.
- Hop shoots (*Humulus lupulus*) – pick a couple of inches of the growing tip and treat like asparagus.
- Fat hen (*Chenopodium album*) – pull the little plants up and nip off the roots, then treat like spinach, adding to other dishes like stir-fry or vegetable soup.
- Chick-weed (*Stellaria media*) can be cooked or added raw to a salad. Good in an egg salad sandwich.
- Ground elder (*Aegopodium podagraia*) - thought to have been introduced here by the Romans as a green vegetable. Treat like tender cabbage.
- Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) – a rather bitter salad addition – blanch them with an upturned plant pot for a few days to reduce the bitterness.

Make sure you know that you are dealing with the right plant. All should be washed well in plenty of cold water, in case they have been tainted by foxes.

After all the rain we have been having, raised beds are a really good idea, if only to get some of the early seeds in. This is also a good way to start onion sets. For places where you won't be planting immediately, put down some fleece to warm the soil.

Herbs

- When sage plants get leggy, propagate new plants by covering the old plant with a mound of earth, leaving just the tips showing. The stems should produce roots in a couple of months and you can then cut them off and pot them on. This works for thyme too.
- There are different coloured and variegated versions of most herbs – mint, thyme, marjoram etc. Although pretty, these are not as hardy as the plain green versions, so keep some of the old type for use.

As a change from ordinary chives, try garlic chives (*Allium tuberosum*). These have flat leaves and attractive white star-like flowers.

TRADING CENTRE OPENING HOURS

Saturday 10.30am -12.15pm. 2.30pm - 4.15pm.

Sunday 10.30am - 12.15pm.

Wednesday 2.30pm - 4.00pm April—September only

The canteen is open Saturday and Sunday mornings 9.30am - 11.30am

ADDISCOMBE, WOODSIDE & SHIRLEY LEISURE GARDENS

Janet Macdonald's tips for getting the best out of your allotment

Window boxes

- Buy several spare troughs so you can easily replace tired displays, and change the contents with the seasons.
- Alternatively, don't make holes in the bottom of the troughs, and use large pots inside the troughs for growing. Not only does this let you change the contents more easily, it also makes watering easier.

Give some thought to what edibles you might grow in window boxes. Best are salad items such as small lettuces, spring onions, radishes, carrots (especially the all-round ones) and the 'dual-purpose' nasturtiums. With these, pick the flowers to eat before they get too big. You can also grow French beans in window boxes, but keep them well spaced. Another possibility is peas for salad sprouts, and either 'micro' leaves, or a thickish layer of lettuce seed to pick as baby leaves when they get big enough.

Green manure

- Run a lawn mower over your green manure before digging it in. This is easier than trying to chop it with a spade.
- If your green manure plants get too mature to dig in, just pull them up and add them to the compost heap.
- Buy spinach seed in bulk for a quick rotting green manure.

Blanch your rhubarb with a black plastic bin liner – just stretch it over the crown of the plant, put a few stones round the edge to hold it down and wait until you can feel a good length of stem before taking off the bag and pulling off stems to eat.

All the cane fruits, like blackberries or raspberries, fruit on last year's new growth, so now that spring is on its way, with summer fruiting varieties, prune the old fruiting stems right down to the ground and tie up the new growth for this year's fruit. With autumn fruiting varieties, prune all the stems to 6 or 8 inches high and wait to tie them up when they get big enough. Wear gloves for this – raspberry prickles break off in your fingers and torment you later.

Here's something tasty to do with cabbage – stuff it, either in individual leaves or as a whole head. With the individual leaves, trim out the thick centre bit, blanch the leaves briefly, lay them out, add a spoonful of filling and fold them up. Lay a couple of coarse leaves on the bottom of a roasting tin and then lay the stuffed leaves on top. Pour over some stock and add a foil cover before baking them in a medium oven.

For the whole cabbage, cut the bottom level so that it will sit upright, separate the leaves and starting from as close to the middle as you can get, push stuffing down between the leaves. When the whole thing is done, reshape it, wrap it in some butter muslin and steam it until a sharp knife goes in easily. Serve it in wedges.

Stuffing should include cooked rice, chopped onion, grated carrot, raisins, garlic, and for meat eaters, sausage meat or bacon.

An alternative way to cook cabbage is with this Indian dish – wash and shred the cabbage, wash it well, and shake off most of the water. In a large saucepan, melt some butter (or use olive oil), add some mustard seed and stir until it starts to pop, then add the shredded cabbage, some grated carrot and a little garlic (if you like it), and cook, stirring, until it is tender. Season with salt and black pepper (and maybe a little nutmeg) before serving.

If you have a greenhouse or cold frame, put a few seed potatoes in a large pot or grow-bag, adding more compost as the plants grow. This should give you some edible potatoes several weeks earlier than those outdoors.