

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

**September/October**

Have fun with a giant sunflower when the petals have gone by making the seed-head into a face. Rub out the seeds to make a mouth, eyes and nose; use grasses for hair, crab apples for eyes and nose, and bean pods or carrots for a mouth. 'Male' version might even smoke a pipe.

Sunflower heads, when all the seeds have gone, make good traps for earwigs and other small pests. Just lay them on the ground, empty side down and leave them there for a few days before turning them up to check your 'catch'.

Sow green manure as soon as you empty a space, unless you will be using it immediately. Even three weeks is enough time to get a useful amount of growth of mustard or spinach.

For longer periods of green manure, choose one of the varieties that will tolerate a frost. Mustard will not, but rye grass and scarlet clover will, and the scarlet clover has a pretty flower.

Save your own seed for green manure from common plants. Anything which grows quickly from seed will do, for instance pot marigolds (Calendula), beans, or even weeds such as fat hen, as long as you dig them in before they seed again.

- **Preserving herbs for winter.**

Herbs can be preserved for winter use in several ways: by freezing, drying or storing in oil.

- Parsley is best frozen. Just put the whole stems and leaves in a large bag, and put this straight into the freezer. When they're frozen, (this should take less than two days) scrunch the bag to crush the leaves, then remove the stems – no need to chop the leaves when you want to use them.
- Bay leaves, rosemary, sage and thymes are best dried, then stored in an airtight jar.
- Mint and basil are best chopped finely and stored in good oil. It is best to chop them in a food processor or liquidiser together with the oil, as you can then be sure all the green is covered with oil and won't go bad. Each time you use some, top the jar up with more oil.
- You can also freeze chopped herbs in water, in an ice-cube tray.
- Thyme should be dried thoroughly and rubbed off the stems before storing in a glass jar.
- Marjoram can be dried by hanging bunches in a shed or greenhouse, then rubbed and kept in glass jars. Basil loses its scent and taste if dried, so whizz it in a food processor with plenty of good olive oil, and keep it in a glass jar, ensuring that there is always a good layer of oil on top. Chives are best kept chopped finely and mixed into butter, then frozen in ice cube trays. You can do this with mint as well.
- Nasturtium seeds make good substitute capers – just pick them when they are still soft and store them in vinegar.
- Pickling onions – you don't have to spend ages peeling little onions to pickle. You can also pickle slices of larger onions – just peel and slice them and layer them in jars with vinegar. They should be ready to eat in a couple of weeks. Red onions make the prettiest pickles, or you can add your own red colour with some blackcurrant cordial.

**TRADING CENTRE HOURS OF OPENING**

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

**Every Wednesday afternoon at 2.30pm to 4pm until the end of September.**

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

## **ADDISCOMBE, WOODSIDE & SHIRLEY LEISURE GARDENS**

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#### **• Storing fruit and vegetables**

- Pack apples in boxes so they do not touch each other. The blue plastic trays from supermarkets are useful, and can be stacked to save space but still allow air to circulate.
- Check stored fruit at least once a month in case any are starting to rot.
- Store root vegetables in boxes of dry sand, sawdust or peat, arranged with a good layer of the dry material between them.
- Store onions once they are well dried. They can be kept in mesh bags, or if you left the tops on, once these have also dried, you can use these to tie the onions to a stout string. The same applies to garlic.
- Ripen green tomatoes by putting one ripe tomato, apple or banana in the boxes with them. They do not need to be in bright light.
- To store beetroot, twist the leaves off and let the roots dry for a couple of days, then put them in perforated polythene bags. This keeps them moist enough to stop them shrivelling, and airy enough to prevent mildew.
- Store potatoes in a cool dark mouse proof place. They can be stored in dry peat, but an opaque paper sack will do as well. If you leave them in the light they will turn green and become poisonous. Check them at least once a month in case any of them are starting to rot. Your nose should tell you this as soon as you open the bag.
- Store pumpkins, marrows and winter squash unwrapped but not touching each other on shelves.

When cooking beetroot, twist the leaves off rather than cutting them off, as this will let them 'bleed' into the water. As well as the obvious cold dishes, (not to mention the new foodie recipes) you can serve them hot, sliced, and with a white sauce enhanced with horseradish.

When picking pumpkins or any of the winter squashes, take them off the vine by cutting the vine on either side of the fruit stem. Do not pick them up by the stem, as this can easily break off, and let rot get in. Also, keep the cut surfaces away from clothes, as they tend to exude liquid which cannot be removed.

Any damaged squash should be used straight away. Cut off the damaged parts, and wrap them in cling film – but even like this, they will not last more than a couple of days.

You can cook the tips of squash plants – leaves and tiny fruitlets all together.

Some winter squash have very tough skins, which makes cutting them risky if the knife slips. An alternative way to get into these squash is to put them in a stout plastic bag and drop it onto a hard surface (NOT kitchen floor tiles unless you really want to crack them!) so it breaks up, when you can then cut the bits more easily.

Try this two-person apple picking technique – number one is up the tree, number two stays on the ground, but is wearing a big apron which is held out to catch each apple as number one drops it. It can then be moved to another container without bruising the fruit. If a third person is available, they can move the fruit from apron to box/bucket. This also works with pears and plums.

Don't climb plum trees – the branches are very brittle and break easily.