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OBSERVER ORGANIC ALLOTMENT BLOG



A few things to do

Autumn doesn't spell the end of your allotment or veg patch's usefulness says Caroline Foley

Caroline Foley, author of the [Allotment Handbook](#) with some excellent advice for extending the growing season of your plot or patch.

If you have bare ground after the harvest, now is the time to decide what you want to do with it through winter. It will sensible to cover it one way or the other to keep out weeds and to prevent goodness and nutrients being eroded and leached away. If you have thuggish perennial weeds (e.g. ground elder or horsetail) and have run out of steam trying to unearth them, it might be worth covering some of the area with black polythene or silage bags. Plants cannot live without light. You can make slits to plant vigorous growers like potatoes or squashes next year while leaving the weeds to gradually fade away. It can take two to three years to eradicate the toughest ones. The common practice of using old hessian-backed carpet is frowned on now due to the chemical content.

Otherwise consider some over-wintering green manures. They have much the same effect, shading out weeds, preventing erosion particularly on light soils - but they come bearing gifts. When dug in, they add humus to the soil. Italian ryegrass is a good choice for heavy soils as the penetrating root systems help to break it up - the downside is that it is tough to dig up. Winter beans store nitrogen in their roots, released into the soil as they rot down - ideal if you plan to sow leafy crops in spring.

<http://www.kitchengardens.dial.pipex.com/greenmanure.htm>

If you can get others (or your Committee) interested in sharing, why not buy seed wholesale? Try [here](#).

A cold frame or a miniature polytunnel is a great investment for winter crops.

Even hardy crops benefit from a little protection and end product will be more succulent for having had a sheltered life. A cold frame can be constructed quite simply out of an old drawer with a glass (or safer) polystyrene cover. Instructions [here](#) and [here](#).

Good DIYers can also make their own small [polytunnels](#) with hoops of wire and polythene or, better still, some of the new horticultural fabrics. They are the best invention ever for the organic gardener as they keep out, not just the cold, but also the pests, while letting water through. Or you can buy them in [kits](#).

Put cloches over parsley and chervil to keep them going through autumn.

Split clumps of chives. They will die back with the frosts but re-sprout in spring. Pot some up for the kitchen windowsill to keep up supplies.

Salad leaves are worth growing all year round. They are expensive in the shops and a doddle to grow, even in winter. Choose a sheltered, sunny spot and grow them under

cover. Sown now, [winter lettuces](#) like the old classics 'Arctic King' and 'Winter Density' grow slowly, gently ticking over to mature around January.

More exciting though are the vigorous and colourful orientals for cut-and-come-again leaves. Joy Larkcom - the unchallenged authority on [oriental vegetables](#) (and author of the definitive book of the same name) - recommends a sowing now of mibuna, mizuna, green-in-the-snow, mustard, pak choi, komatsuna and texcel greens. In my experience the ready mixes of oriental saladini and stir fry leaves also work fine even in winter and you don't need to buy so much seed. An additional blessing is that slugs and snails generally leave them well alone.

Carrots for spring can be sown now in the cold frame. 'Amsterdam Forcing' is a tried and tested variety. Sow on ground that was manured for the previous crop. A new variety that I am looking forward to trying this year is 'Nantes Fruband'.

Recommended by the RHS, it are said to sail through cold weather for the earliest crops of succulent [spring carrots](#).

Sow spinach for spring. Make several sowings a week or so apart and select the strongest to grow on.

To do your bit for nature, make a few [insect hotels](#) for the hibernating lacewings, ladybirds and solitary wasps that demolish garden pests. All you need to do is gather some short lengths of hollow sticks. Lengths of bamboo are ideal. Bind them together with string. Find a sunny spot for and perch or hang your hotels up securely out of high winds, making sure they won't sit in the wet.

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PeterHCT

19 September 2007 7:46PM

"to prevent goodness and nutrients being eroded and leached away."

Pleae. Nutrients certainly may be leach out. Soil may be washed away. Goodness is a quality, an intangible. If there is something else to be leached or eroded, specify. Please eschew baby-talk.

What, exactly, is wrong with the traditional old carpet?

"Chemical content" covers all matter in the universe. In this context 'frowned on' suggests the more preciously organic plot-holders taking a dim view. Is there anything specifically harmful to the gardener or to whoever eats the crop or indeed to the soil fauna?

That apart, some good seasonal stuff, thank you. As for horsetail, might be worth digging it out as far as possible, but it goes down a hell of a long way. Remove and destroy all pieces. Constant disturbance is said to weaken it. As for lack of light, it happily pokes its way underneath paving.

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**Ian Tucker**

21 September 2007 4:29PM

Caroline Foley replies... Garden Organic (formerly HDRA - the Organic Organization) has ceased to recommend old carpet as a weed smothering mulch as it is likely to contain chemicals in the form of fire retardants, dyes, insecticides for moth control and contaminants trodden in over its lifetime as a floor covering. A more environmentally friendly choice, just as effective and cheap, is to lay on thick newspapers covered with heavy cardboard. With a generous layer of well-rotted compost or manure on top, you have a biodegradable mulch that will black out weeds, can be planted through and will rot down to improve the soil at the same time. I am glad to say that I have never suffered horsetail penetrating heavy plastic though I have known it to try to creep out each side. Escapist tendencies can be curbed by weighing the mulch down with bricks or heavy stones, making sure to leave no gaps.

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