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OBSERVER ORGANIC ALLOTMENT BLOG



Things to do in September

From sowing snow-proof salad to planting Japanese onions there's plenty to keep you busy on your veg patch post-harvest

As the gaps appear after harvesting you can fill them with [green manures](#) for an easy life and to nourish the soil or put in some winter crops. Seed sown in autumn for the New Year and next spring can produce exceptionally sturdy plants in autumn that should positively gallop ahead as soon as the frosts are over.

Autumn-sown broad beans are known to give bumper crops and, being out of sync with the blackfly season, are rarely bothered by them. If you want exceptionally big and beautiful onions for the show bench, now is the time to start them off. Winter is a great time for growing all sorts of greens ranging from unusual salad leaves to turnip tops.



Kale in the allotment. Photograph: Allan

Jenkins/Observer

You have to allow more time for plants to grow through winter. They stop and start with the dips and rises in temperature. Hardy cool season plants go into a state of suspended animation once weather gets below 4° – 7°C (40° – 45°F). So a winter lettuce planted in September won't be ready until January but most would agree that it worth waiting for a fresh home grown lettuce at that time of the year.

If you plan to grow salads, spinach, spring cabbage or oriental greens outside through the worst of the winter, it is worth every penny to invest in some [crop covers](#). . Just keeping the crops frost free and a few degrees above the ambient temperature can extend the season by several weeks at both ends and prevent the produce from getting unappetizingly battered and toughened by harsh weather.

Lettuce seed sown this month usually germinates quickly and can be thinned to about 16cm (6ins) apart. Choose hardy varieties like the heirloom cos type, 'Winter Density', or one of the winter butterheads. 'Arctic King' was bred purely for winter growing and has exceptional hardiness, while '[Valdor](#)', (which breeders poetically describe as having a 'tight heart') is regarded by many as the best winter lettuce of all.



Oriental in the allotment. Photograph: Allan

Jenkins/Observer

Some of the lesser grown salad leaves come into their own in winter when there is not

much fresh green about. Most are humble plants that will grow almost like weeds and are unfairly disregarded for this reason. They can be used for cut-and-come-again to perk up out-of-season salads. Lamb's lettuce, also known as mâche or corn salad and widely enjoyed in France and Italy, produces masses of fresh green leaves. Generally it dies down in the worst of the winter but pops up merrily again as soon as the weather improves, though new cultivar, 'Cavallo', is said to keep going even when there is snow on the ground.

Sow a few seeds every two weeks in a sunny spot between now and late autumn. Thin by taking out every other plant until you are left with gaps of about 10cm (4 inches), then pick leaves from the outside and let them grow on.

American land cress is a wonder plant that really does deserve to be grown more widely. It looks and tastes much like watercress being glossy green and peppery. Unlike watercress though, it doesn't need special conditions or much care and attention. It always looks vibrantly healthy even in the icy depths of January.



Orientals in the allotment. Photograph: Allan

Jenkins/Observer

Claytonia, Claytonia perfoliata, or winter purslane, is also known as 'miner's lettuce' as it was staple greenery for the miners in the 1849 Gold Rush in California. It is a half hardy plant with juicy, succulent leaves and needs a spot of protection against frost. It couldn't be easier to grow being happiest in poor soil where it will self-seed merrily.

Some of the seed companies do mixed collections of salad leaves and oriental greens specifically designed to autumn sowing and winter eating.

Don't delay but sow spring cabbage now in modules to plant out in October. Pointed cabbages 'Duncan' and 'Peter' get the top marks for versatility. They will provide you with good leafy spring greens right through to March and hearted spring cabbages in summer. Any seeds left over can be sown in spring for summer and autumn eating.

Winter spinach 'Sigmaleaf' will produce generous pickings of tender young leaves and the heritage 'Giant Winter' is a good performer even in the coldest weather. Make several sowings a few weeks apart and select the sturdiest.

Many grow turnips in winter for purely for their green tops. So, if you have seeds left over from last spring, this is an excellent way to use them up.



Winter greens in the allotment. Photograph: Allan

Jenkins/Observer

Put on some fertilizer and get your overwintering onion sets planted out early in the month. 'Swift' is popular variety that produces a crop six weeks before the spring sown ones. The original Japanese overwintering onion 'Senshyu' is another good bet. Onions obligingly grow to the size allotted to them - within reason. For full sized ones, plant them about 7.5 (3 inches) apart with the growing tip just below the surface.

Plant new strawberries or pin down the runners. Remember to start on fresh ground every three years, either all at once or in stages. Keeping young strawberries well watered in autumn will make for good fruit the following year.

Some hardy annuals can also be sown out now for next year. These include, marigold,

Calendula, poached egg plant, Limnanthes, California poppies, Eschscholzia, and poppies Papaver somniferum, all of which are top of the pops for friendly predators and bees.

[Previous](#)

[Blog home](#)

[Next](#)

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