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OBSERVER ORGANIC ALLOTMENT BLOG



Things to do in January

Our expert guide to gardening this month



Refrain from chipping holes in frozen ponds as it will disturb its wintering wildlife

With a new diary for 2010 in hand, it is worth taking the time to make a note of few useful dates that may have slipped past your notice last year. In my case it was remembering to sow hardy salads in August for eating this month.

These are dead easy to grow given a sheltered, sunny spot with good drainage. Drainage is important as any plants will freeze if left with its roots in icy water. With the exception of corn salad, which is remarkable in being the mildest flavoured green ever, home grown outdoor winter salads are usually punchy and can be bitter. If so, they can easily be blanched by putting a plate or flowerpot over them towards harvesting time. Though hardy, they will be more tempting to eat, given a little cloche cover when the weather bites.

A great winter standby, to be sown between July and September is American land cress. It is peppery like watercress but doesn't need any special favours, other than a good watering in dry weather. A spring sowing will give you summer crops, but it truly comes into its own as a winter crop. It is a brassica, so needs to go in the rotation pattern. Cover with cloches when a hard frost is forecast.

Corn salad, lamb's tongue or mache, has little shelf life and tends only to be sold in pricy salad mixes. A member of the chicory family, it is a hardy little rosette plant with dainty tongue-shaped leaves. It grows wild, typically in corn meadows and was a foraged green until Louis XIV's gardener, Jean-Baptiste de la Quintinie decided to domesticate it for the king's potager at Versailles. It adds an interesting texture to salads. It can be cooked quickly like spinach. It has three times more vitamin C than lettuce. Sow seeds at fortnightly intervals from August onwards to late autumn. If you leave one or two to flower, they will send up a single spike about 30cm tall and produce a pale blue five-lobed flower from which you can collect seed or just leave it to seed itself.

Winter purslane, otherwise known as miners' lettuce is another rosette type plant, which can be added to salads when harvested young or cooked like spinach. The fleshy leaves, stems and flowers are all good to eat. Sow it in September. Golden purslane is less hardy but more decorative with red stems and golden leaves.

Another salad leaf worth trying is salad burnet, a meadow native that was introduced to America by the Pilgrim Fathers. This too can be harvested throughout a mild winter and tastes of cucumber. Texel greens, derived from Abyssinian cabbage, grow fast and are ideal for young salad leaves with a mustard kick. They can be grown all year but, if sown in autumn with cloche cover, will provide you with nutritious, non-stop winter salads.

There are also many wild plants that you can grow or forage such as hedge garlic, salt bush and hairy bittercress. A few petals of Viola odorata – sweet violet – on your salad is just thing to cheer you up when winter seems endlessly dreary. I intend to experiment.

If we get another freeze, get the snow off the greenhouse and cold frames to let the light in. Use sharp sand – not salt which is harmful to the garden – to de-ice paths. Pour hot water to gently melt a hole in an ice covered pond. Don't attempt to chip out a hole out as this sends unpleasant shock waves to the many hibernators – including frogs and toads that have bedded down in its muddy depths for the winter. Float a tennis ball in the pond to prevent it freezing over again.

Don't attempt to dig when the ground is frozen or waterlogged. Turning over freezing soil moves the cold soil from top to bottom so that it will take longer to warm up in

spring. Make sure that new young trees remain firmly planted. The freezing and thawing action of icy conditions causes shrinkage and expansion with the result that the roots can get pushed out of the ground. Tread to firm the soil around the root ball.

Clear snow and ice from bird baths and make sure that the birds have water to drink and bathe. Put up bird boxes for robins. They nest earlier than most. They prefer low down places, anywhere from the ground (this is foolhardy) up to 3m. Though not too fussy, often nesting happily in thick ivy, robins, as well as wrens, like an open fronted nesting box. Place it facing north-east, out of the reach of cats, and tilted forward so that the rain runs off.

Put out fatty foods for the birds. Oily, nourishing seeds of sunflower, flax and rape will be enjoyed by the insect eaters as well as the seed eaters when there is ice on the ground. Look out for winter visitors - fieldfares and the redwing.

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