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ORGANIC ALLOTMENT
BLOG

Caroline Foley's expert guide to a few things to do in February

Pruning, planting, mulching, chitting and sowing seed: just some of the jobs that need doing in the garden or allotment this month

Caroline Foleyguardian.co.uk, Monday 31 January 2011 09.40 GMT



Get shallots and garlic in now

If January was about planning, February is about preparing. It's an odd month, usually as cold as January, with a UK mean temperature of an inhospitable 1°C (32°F). Yet it is on the brink of spring. If you look about you will see that bulbs are sprouting and buds are beginning to swell optimistically in the longer days and increased sunshine.

In preparation for seed sowing next month, make sure that all your propagation kit is well scrubbed, the greenhouse is clean and you have a fresh seed sowing compost ready. Keep old compost for potting on or for your borders.



Time to chit the seed

potatoes

Save old plastic bottles to use as cloches. If you are feeling energetic, knock up a cold frame or a polytunnel - either large or small; or purchase one. Getting in a supply of fleece or aerated polythene will be helpful, particularly if you have early flowering fruit trees that could be knocked back by frost.

This is the ideal month to get your potatoes chitted ready for planting out in spring. Under cover or indoors, at 10-15°C, you also can sow your broad beans in modules. The widely available 'Aquadulce Claudia' continues to be an unbeaten favourite for early sowings. 'Feltham First', 'Meteor' or 'Early Onward' peas can also be sown in root trainers or guttering for transplanting in spring for a May or June harvest.



Bulbs are on their

way

Fast growing summer cabbages such as the pointed 'Greyhound' or the ball headed 'Primo' can also be started off under glass now.

However, unless you are in a particular rush, or are in a warm micro-climate, it is better to wait a few weeks before sowing much else. Carrots, cauliflower and turnips could be sown now under cover but they prefer not to be disturbed. They grow more energetically when sown in situ after the frosts. Spinach grows at speed and will need to be transplanted in about three weeks, so don't sow until the end of the month at the very earliest.

Garlic and shallots sets are the exceptions. Both need a few weeks of cold of 0-10°C to break dormancy. Onion sets go in later but if you fancy a challenge, you could try growing them from seed. Onions don't need heat to germinate. However, if you do have a heated propagator, you could enter the professional classes and grow tomatoes, aubergines, or chillies from seed.

Finish pruning any apples and pears before spring. Sprinkle a slow-release general fertilizer around the base of fruit trees and bushes, berries and currants. Mulch over the root zone with well rotted manure or compost, taking care that it doesn't touch the stems.

If you've just taken over a badly weed-ridden plot, prepare for action. First identify the weeds. Your main purpose is to see if you have any of the tough perennial weeds – which you would be wise to eliminate before you start. If so, it is best to get one manageable area ready by careful hand digging and weeding and shelve the rest to tackle later. Don't be tempted to rotavate as this will just chop up the weed roots from which a multitude of new plants will spring forth, making things worse.

The classic organic method of clearing the ground is sheet mulching which works by depriving the plants from light. Cut the weeds back to ground level with scythe or strimmer and cover the area. The expensive way out is to purchase weed suppressant fabric, dig a trench around the area, tuck the edges in and back fill the trench with soil

to keep fabric secure and flat. Finish off with a layer of mulch such as woodchip.



Prune your fruit trees

before spring

Alternatives are to use hefty black plastic or old tarpaulins. Thick layers of sopping wet newspapers (entire supplements) or strong cardboard have the advantage of being biodegradable which will save you the job of lifting them later. You could ask your local appliance shop or hi fi store to save you a stash of cardboard boxes. Weigh them down with bricks, logs or stones, paying particular attention to weak spots like joins and edges. If weeds come through in time, or if the cardboard or newspaper rots away before the weeds have given up the ghost, simply add more layers. You can cut holes in the covers and plant vigorous transplants like marrows, courgettes or kales through slits. Potatoes are another good bet.

If your main problem is grass, dig up the turf and stack upside down. Cover the turf stack and leave it to gradually rot down into useful loam.

Where the ground is good heart and ready to go, the horticultural fabrics will come in handy to warm the soil. Transparent fabrics will encourage any dormant annual weeds to germinate in the unseasonal warmth. If you hoe them off before sowing your own seed next month, the chances are that you will have stolen a march on them – at least for a while.

Caroline Foley's *Allotment Source Book* is out now.

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vorsprung

31 January 2011 11:19AM

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I'll be getting a load of horse sh!t and spreading around the summer fruiting raspberries.

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gregbecker

31 January 2011 8:29PM

Thanks for the tip about pruning the apple trees, perhaps I can get the pigeons to help now that they have finished with the *purple sprouting*
<http://plot52.blogspot.com>

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allanjenkins

1 February 2011 3:11PM

Thanks Caroline, we planted shallots on Sunday, fruit trees next...

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escapa

1 February 2011 7:22PM

We put some shallots in pots of compost to get them started last year in our school garden and it seemed to work well. We've done the same today and theyre sitting in the (very) cold greenhouse. Got the first earlies ready to start chitting- our youngest children at school 'look after' them - and then eat them up round the camp fire in July.

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allanjenkins

2 February 2011 8:44AM

Sounds perfect Escapa, we do something similar with corn, every kid get to pick theirs and cook it straight away (us, too). Sunflower adoption has been another success. Kids plant seeds and watch in amazement as the flower grows to tower over them

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