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## OBSERVER ORGANIC ALLOTMENT BLOG



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

There is still lots to sow before autumn kicks in



Close to last chance for perpetual spinach and chard. All images Allan Jenkins

All will tell you that outdoor growing has been one frustrating uphill battle this summer. Crops that have managed to grow against the odds have failed to ripen for lack of sun. Due to the rain, fungal disease has been rife. Seedlings have failed due to damping off.

Other menaces have been botrytis, and downy and powdery mildew, leaf spot, Sclerotinia (or white mould), fusarium wilt in tomatoes and blossom end rot in tomatoes, and potatoes to mention but a few.



The bees have stayed at home while the snails and slugs have had a field day. The

arrival of the mighty 'super breed' slug from Spain has only added insult to injury.

However, we've had a few hot days recently and the weather prospect for August seems better. Fortunately, there is still time to take stock, sort things out and grow some summer crops.



The disease that has been worrying everyone most right now is potato blight. This is a devastating disease if left to spread but, if you can catch it in time, quite often you can save your crops. For early warnings join the Potato Council's free blight warning system. Once you know there is trouble afoot, you can dig them up with luck before it moves down from the leaves to the tubers. Take note to try the disease resistant varieties next time. There is no cure for tomatoes with blight, alas.

Observation is the gardener's most powerful tool. Get into the habit of keeping an eye out for any signs of ailment. Check over and under the leaves for mottling, spots, fungal like appearances or lurking creatures.

If you suspect fungal disease, cut away the affected part and get it off site. Hygiene is crucial in the battle against fungus and rot. Wear gloves. Have an antibacterial spray (the type for kitchen use is fine) and squirt tools with it before moving from one plant to the next.



If you have empty land that you won't need for a while, put in a fast growing green manure. This will prevent run off and the leaching of nutrients in the event of yet more rain while enriching the soil for the next crop.

Crimson clover is a personal favourite. It has jolly red flowers that will cheer up the gloomiest wet day. Bees love it and it puts down strong roots to stabilize the soil.

Cut it down before it seeds to get nourishment back into the soil. Being a legume, it will provide nitrogen for the next crop – ideal for brassicas.

If you are planning to leave it in over winter you could get clever and mix it with Italian rye grass which will mop up the nitrogen, hopefully retaining it until you cut that down too and are ready to sow.



Mustard is a good choice for the potato patch as it inhibits eel worm. Phacelia is one of the top twenty bee plants, so leave a few to flower. Trefoil makes excellent weed suppressing ground cover under taller crops. Fenugreek is one of the fastest, with a ten-week turn around. Buckwheat is also fast growing, trouble free and will be killed by the frosts, so it can be left over winter as ground cover if you wish, gradually being taken down by the worms thereby saving the work of cutting it down.

The one disadvantage, against myriad benefits, is that green manures make ideal habitats for pesky slugs and snails.



Sow seeds of Japanese globe onions to fill the onion gap next June. The ideal is to get them to a height of 15 – 20cm before the first frosts. As this is a bit of a gamble, sow two batches two weeks apart. Alternatively wait until next month to plant sets. 'Senshyu Yellow' is a tried and variety and 'Keepwell' is a popular type that lives up to its name as a storer.

The Japanese bunching onion, which can be eaten young like spring onions or left to grow on to leek proportions, is a versatile plant, useful in winter.



August is the last month to sow perpetual spinach (or spinach beet) outside. It's a great plant for the allotment as it needs no cossetting, even withstanding seaside conditions. It isn't grown commercially as it doesn't have much of a shelf life – another bonus in my view. It's great for cut-and-come-again and for winter greens, especially if given some cloche cover when it gets cold.



You can also grow the more glamorous members of the beet family – the chards. There are many varieties with leaves smooth or crinkly and coloured stems, some almost fluorescent when lit by the dying sun. Chards are greatly enjoyed in Provençal cuisine for sweet dishes like tourte de blettes as well as savoury ones and salads.

Sow turnip seed or swede (the 'Swedish' turnip) for delectable golf-sized autumn crops or to grow on through winter. They will have got big and tough by then but will be fine for neeps ('tur-neeps') on New Year's Eve. Remember too that you can eat the leaves as greens in winter. Turnip 'Market Express' has good flavour when young while swede 'Best of all' is an reliable old favourite.

A less familiar turnip-like vegetable is kohlrabi. It translates from the German as the cabbage turnip – which accurately describes its taste, though the texture is crisp like water chestnut. It has a rather engaging sputnik shape and can be cooked like turnip or eaten raw grated in salads when young. Turnips, swedes and kohlrabi are all brassicas, so keep in mind the rotation. Try RHS Award of Garden Merit kohlrabi 'Blue Danube' or 'Kongo'.



In the same brassica bed you can also sow [pak choi](#), [winter radish](#), [Chinese cabbage](#) and [oriental mustards](#).

[Florence fennel](#) can be sown now for eating in autumn – beware though, it is temperamental if conditions aren't entirely to its liking. However, if it bolts you can still use the leaves for flavouring.

If you are quick, you can get in a fast crop of baby carrots and baby beetroot for autumn eating. The Nantes type carrot '[Ideal](#)' and baby beet '[Pronto](#)' should provide a tasty crop by autumn.



Keep sowing and growing salad leaves. Thinking ahead, sow some winter salads – [American land cress](#), [winter purslane or miner's lettuce](#), [Texcel greens](#), [salad burnett](#) and [lambs lettuce](#) – or buy a mixed packet. Start off spring cabbage ready for transplanting next month.

When I started writing this rain was coming down in sheets and now it's hot enough to melt. If nothing else, it must be said that the weather keeps growers on their toes. To hedge your bets, I hope you saved some rainwater.

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1 August 2012 8:37AM



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**Uoooo10**

1 August 2012 2:59PM

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