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**OBSERVER
ORGANIC ALLOTMENT
BLOG**

Know your onions

Don't fall apart in the autumn, says Caroline Foley

With the late autumn sun barely making it over the trees, the ground cooling down and the mists creeping in, allotment writer [Caroline Foley](#) offers advice to making the most of October.



While most plants enjoy a little cover through winter, others need a good frosting to break their dormancy. One such is **garlic**. Planted now in the south and next month in the north, it should get the desired couple of months of icy weather. You can grow from bulbs bought at the greengrocers but this is risky. They might come from some sun-drenched place and be less than happy on your chilly plot.

Buy a bulb from a seed merchant, nursery or garden centre. It will be certified as disease-free and bred for growing in the UK. Choose plump, juicy bulbs, split them up and plant the cloves in well-drained soil in a place that will catch the sun in summer when they need a good baking. Plant so that the tip just shows above the surface. They will need sparse attention thereafter apart from weeding from time to time and watering in dry spells. Keeping them too dry affects the juiciness as well as the length of storage time. Each clove planted will make a full head of garlic next summer. Keep a few back for sowing next year. Garlic adapts to its situation, so in time you could even breed your own allotment variety.



Plant autumn onion sets, with the soil up to the 'neck'. They will be ready for eating between May and July. You can control the size of the onion by the spacing. For small to medium onions, plant closely at 4cm/one 1/2 ins. For big onions leave a gap between them of 10cm/4ins. Tried and tested varieties for autumn planting include 'Radar', 'Swift' and the red salad onion, 'Red Cross'.

West Riding in Yorkshire was the place traditionally most associated with rhubarb - another plant that needs a period of cold. Take off all the leaves as they die back to let frost get to the crown. Rhubarb can be split to make more plants at any time from November until spring. Dig up the entire plant using a fork to avoid damage. Divide the roots with a sharp spade into generous sections, each with some healthy root and a bud or two. For a delectable treat in the depths of winter, you can 'force' it by covering the whole plant next month with a bucket, dustbin or terraotta rhubarb forcer making sure to block out every ray of light. Wrap straw, cover with compost or another insulating material (like bubble wrap) around the cover for warmth. The stems will be ready to harvest in 5 - 8 weeks when they are about 30cm (1ft) tall. If you have two plants going at the same time they can recover in alternate years.

I find that growing produce that you don't find in the shops is one of the greatest pleasures of the plot - whether it be edible flowers, stripy tomatoes or purple carrots. Seakale is a prime example of a delicious treat - rather like asparagus with a whiff of the ocean about it - that is easy to grow but has become a rarity. Gerard describes it in his Herball of 1597 as found on 'the bayches and brimmes of the sea, where no earth is seen, but sande and rolling pebble stones.' The Victorians were very fond of it. It was gathered wild, piled up on the beaches and covered with sand for blanching before going to market. At home, you can force it by cutting it down to base, covering it with straw and topping it with a black out pot with the hole blocked. If it's too big and unwieldy for this, construct a frame around it covered with black plastic sheeting, or simply pile leaf mould and sand on it. It should be ready in about three months.

A Belgian farmer, by the name of Jan Lammers, on his return from the battlefield in 1830, discovered that the chicory that he had forgotten in the cellar had lost its bitterness and had grown sweet and plump. Hence the famous Belgian endive.... For good recipes, click [here](#)

Sweet peas are classic allotment plants. Sown by the end of October (November in the north) they make sturdier plants and will flower a month earlier than those sown in spring. Nick each seed opposite the 'eye' with a small sharp knife to help germination. Sow them individually about 1cm/half inch deep in a seed tray in well-watered potting compost. Cover with a sheet of glass, Perspex or cling film and keep inside at a comfortable temperature of around 18 - 22C/64 - 72F. They should germinate in about a week to ten days. Harden them off gently by leaving them out by day and bringing them at night for a few days. Grow them on in the cold frame to protect them from heavy rain, slugs and mice. The ideal temperature is 10 - 15C/50 - 59 F. The idea is to

toughen them up. When they have about four true leaves pinch out the top to encourage them to bush out. At around 10cm/4ins tall they can be potted on into individual pots and planted out at the end of March.

If you've missed the boat for sowing purple sprouting broccoli and spring cabbage, you may still find young plants for sale. These can be planted out now to grow on to fill the 'hungry gap' in the New Year and early spring. Brussels sprouts take about 100 days to mature, so if you purchase young plants now you could well have home grown sprouts for Christmas day. Cover young greens with netting to stop the birds plucking them straight out of the ground. Put out bird food instead.



Make a woodpile in a cool shady spot. A mixture of beech, oak, ash and elm in different shapes and sizes would be ideal if you can lay your hands on it. Pile on leaf litter to draw in any passing toads and hedgehogs. Other visitors might include young frogs and newts, slug eating centipedes and beetles of various sorts. The regal stag beetle, now under threat, lays its eggs underground near rotting wood so that the larvae can live and feed there before hatching.

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30 September 2007 6:48AM

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30 September 2007 12:30PM

We accidentally created a woodpile 10 years ago. It was a 40 foot leylandi hedge that we inherited with the house after fellig we couldn't work out what to do with the trunks so we logged them and stacked them in a corner. Later we piled some earth round them and made them into a loggery as opposed to a rockery. For 5 years it functioned well and is still full of

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saxifrage thrift and heathers, in addition for the last five years we have a regular hatch of stag beetles. The females crawl around the lawn (caeful mowing in July) but the mails clatter around in the air over the fish pond. We now scout round for large logs to replace the original ones which are fast rotting away. So it would seem any old logs will do the trick. Ours ranged in size from 3 to 12 inches in diameter.

graham



TopVeg

3 October 2007 4:42PM

Such an interetsing list of things to plant now. We started making logpiles a couple of years ago & our garden birds have increased in number!

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