

theguardian**OBSERVER
ORGANIC ALLOTMENT
BLOG**

Mellow fruitfulness

The planning and the planting you need to be doing now.

By Caroline Foley



October in the garden makes me think of fruit, says allotment guru [Caroline Foley](#), particularly the last of the windfalls for apple and blackberry pies. This is the time to order bare-rooted fruit trees and soft fruit, gather the last of the harvests, propagate blackberries, prune cane fruits and put up grease bands.

While a ban on trees is common on allotments, many sites will nonetheless allow trees trained flat as cordons or [espaliers](#).

These make a decorative screen, with blossom in spring and fruit later, while hardly taking up space.

Get expert advice from a good nursery before making your order. Considerations include whether a variety is self-pollinating or needs a mate. It's important to know which rootstock to choose as this will affect the ultimate size of the tree. You may need [advice](#) on heritage varieties versus modern cultivars. If you are in an area given to spring frosts, you would be wise to choose a late flowering variety. Fruit trees should come certified as disease-free.



Bare-rooted trees are much cheaper than container grown ones and are as good, if not better. They arrive during the dormant season and should be 'heeled in', or temporarily planted, as soon as possible to prevent the roots drying out. Prepare the ground for them while conditions are still favourable - the going is easier now than in January. Make a generous hole so that the roots can spread out luxuriantly. Layer in manure and compost when you back fill. A handful of bonemeal will help the formation of strong roots. The old adage is that if you spend one sou on the plant, you should spend ten on the planting.

Another way round the tree ban is to grow dwarf varieties in large containers. Nurseries are coming up with new breeds of heavy cropping 'patio' trees.

Put grease bands on existing fruit trees to deter the winter moths. Between November and March the almost wingless females of the winter moth (along with the mottled umber moth and the March moth) emerge from their pupae and scramble up apple, pear, plum and cherry trees to mate with their winged partners and lay their eggs. When the young caterpillars hatch in spring they find themselves strategically placed to wreck your harvest by feeding off the emerging buds. On trees with smooth bark, sticky papers work well. If the bark is rough and uneven, it is more effective to smear the grease directly onto the trunk.

Cut down all the canes that have borne fruit this year of blackberries and their hybrids - the tayberries, loganberries etc. - and tie in this year's growth. To propagate more, pin down the tips of young vigorous canes with a hairpins of wire. They will have rooted well by spring and can be severed from the parent.

Autumn raspberries are cut down to the ground once they have finished fruiting.

In milder parts of the country wait until the New Year as they may start to re-grow then get cut back by the frosts.

Broadbeans can be sown in November but are more reliably sown in February outdoors under cloches for early crops in May.

The 'Aquadulce' range of broad beans are the most popular for winter. They are generally sown in a double staggered row at about 20cm (8 ins) apart. They need deep friable soil as they put down a hefty taproot. Go for the round pea for winter sowings. 'Oregon Sugarpod' is a good choice. Sow these in the same way as the beans but closer. Watch out for mice as they are inclined to steal peas almost before you've turned your back.

Continue tidying up. As plants go over, remove any leaves that show signs of disease. You may find scab, leaf spot or rust on the leaves of apple and pear trees. Bin or burn them. Get into the habit of stripping any yellowing leaves off sprouts.

Earth up and stake tall plants (like Brussels sprouts) to protect against winter wind rock.

It is still not too late to sow a few summer greens outside. Cabbage 'Hispi' and green sprouting broccoli (or calabrese) can be sown in the cold frame or under cover for transplanting in early spring, ready to eat in May or June. Calabrese 'Arcadia' or 'Corvet' are tried and tested varieties.

Don't forget to order your seed potatoes for next year.



Meanwhile brighten up your plot with spring bulbs. A succession from January would be winter aconites snowdrops, crocus, daffodils, Scilla, Chinodoxia and Muscari - the grape hyacinth. In April and May you can have narcissus, tulips, Cammassias and early alliums. The old fashioned biennial bare-rooted wallflowers available now make a classic, combination with tulips. It's true that they don't do much in winter but, come spring, they pack a real punch with their scent.

To remind you of May with lily-of-the valley scent in the depths of winter, purchase a plant of Sarcococca hookeraiana var. humilis - the Christmas box. It's a small unassuming evergreen shrub, happy in a shady corner. But one small sprig in flower has the power to scent an entire house.

Wash out bird boxes to remove any old nests that might harbour parasites. Put out plenty of bird food and leave seed heads where you find them for the birds to enjoy.

Take time through winter to make new and creative plans for next season from the never ending kaleidoscope of choice.

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BrienComerford

21 October 2007 1:41AM

A very edifying and pristine article. The grandeur and serenity of planting fruits and vegetables. The communion with nature and the compassionate feeding of the birds. It's a slice of Eden.

Brien Comerford

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**tfules**

23 October 2007 5:17PM

Have I got a great recipe for those Blackberries. You have got to try this Blackberry Sour Cream Pie, it's amazing....enjoy.

<http://noshtalgia.blogspot.com/2007/10/berry-berry-good-pie.html>

[Responses \(0\)](#)[Report](#)[Share](#)**TopVeg**

23 October 2007 7:18PM

We are still picking blackberries - it really shortens the winter!

[Recommend \(0\)](#)[Responses \(0\)](#)[Report](#)[Share](#)**Jackasset**

26 October 2007 6:55AM

Why do so many people buy 'cut flowers' as gifts? They are put in a vase, given water and then they die quickly, 2 weeks tops. I would much rather give a living plant which can be transferred to a garden, or why not pack a trowel/handfork, go for a healthy walk and plant it in some neglected spot to give others some passing pleasure and encourage same? Why are there never any fruit trees in school playgrounds, only those neutral ornamental things? I know for a fact that some children won't eat anything which doesn't come in a plastic wrapper and are aghast at the thought of tasting something straight from the branch. Have we de-educated our descendants so much? What of theirs? If you don't have your own garden, make a contribution to the surrounding lands, fields, hedgerows and footpaths. Fruit trees' blossom is beautiful too, their resultant crops serve to feed our wildlife and enhance the beauty of this land we are only stewards to.

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