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**OBSERVER
ORGANIC ALLOTMENT
BLOG**

A few things to do in August

The allotment expert's guide to gardening in the month ahead. By Caroline Foley



Sweetcorn silks signal a delicious treat

August is usually a hot and sultry month when even nature takes a break, says our allotment expert [Caroline Foley](#). Growth slows down and weeds germinate less. Suddenly there is less bird song. The birds stop courting and fighting while they moult and put on their new plumage ready for the autumn season. But it is a great time to enjoy summer vegetables - sweet young cabbages, cauliflowers, turnips, carrots, peas, beetroot and globe artichokes. As the silks go dark brown on sweet corn prepare yourself for a delicious treat. To double check their ripeness, peel back the outer husk on one and dig a finger nail into a kernel. When perfectly ripe it will produce a milky substance. If it is not quite ready it will be watery. If it is over ripe it will be doughy.



Harvest onions and let them dry in the sun

Harvest onions when the foliage collapses and let them dry in the sun. Pick cucumbers

before they go yellow and aubergines and peppers while still shiny. If you are going away, get a friend to water and harvest as crops mature and go over almost overnight. Some allotment committees encourage members to put up signs saying 'please help yourself to the produce' or 'please water' - a good idea both for plants and community spirit.

Finish summer pruning apples, pears and other trained fruit trees. Keep them well watered and mulched as the base of walls doesn't get much benefit from rainfall and the need for water is greatest when plants are fruiting. Summer fruiting raspberries will be finishing now. All the canes that have born fruit this year will be spent and should be cut down. The new young canes will profit from the resulting increase of light and air. Tie in the best of these for next year's fruit.

Sow parsley and spring cabbages in a seed bed and cover with insect netting. It will protect the parsley against the devastations of carrot root fly and the cabbage (always a popular target) against flea beetle, pigeons and particularly cabbage white butterfly. In August the second generation is on the rampage and will voraciously feed until autumn.



There may still be time to squeeze in another crop of peas

Get in a last sowing of salad crops outside - lettuce, spring onions and radish. You might be able to squeeze in a last crop of peas. Choose quick growers like 'Douce Provence' or 'Meteor'. If you have any peas left from spring sowings you might like to try save seed for next year. Unlike broad beans, which are profligate cross-pollinators, peas self-pollinate before the flowers open so they are more or less guaranteed to come true to type. Given good weather, let them dry on the plant and pick them off when the leaves begin to droop and the pods have turned brown or yellow. If the weather is on the damp side, cut them down with some stem and hang them in bunches under cover in an airy spot. When ready the pods will snap open effortlessly and the seeds will have turned brown or bottle green. The aim is to get them 'rattle dry' as the smallest amount of moisture left in them will cause them to rot. Leave them in a warm spot for another couple of weeks before storing in the dark.



Enjoy the bounty of summer beetroot

Towards the end of the month sow spinach for autumn and next spring. Good cultivars for autumn eating are 'Scenic' and 'Toscane' - breakthrough cultivars with unprecedented resistance to mildew. Sow fast growing Japanese onions like 'Swift' or 'Early' and overwintering salad onions. 'White Lisbon Winter Hardy' and 'Ramrod' are good bets. Sow a few seeds every couple of weeks as getting the timing right is a bit of a gamble. You want them to be large enough to survive the frosts but not so large that they panic and bolt as soon as the weather turns cold.

If you have spare ground, put in green manures. Mustard is a good bet for the potato patch as it inhibits eelworm and can be sown now and dug in during autumn. Alfalfa, crimson clover, winter tare, grazing rye or Italian rye grass can also be sown from the end of August.



It is time to pick your cucumbers

Snip back lavender after the flowers have faded but don't cut into old wood. As you prune you can propagate from semi-ripe cuttings. Bay, rosemary, thyme, box and sage are ideal subjects. To avoid disease problems when taking cuttings, always choose plants in top health, use fresh proprietary compost and clean your tools before moving from one plant to another.

Lift chives, split them by pulling the roots apart and pot them on. Chop the foliage back and grow them in a cool spot. When the weather turns they will be ready to come in on the kitchen window sill. Other herbs that respond well to this treatment are mint and lemon balm.

Even in the Silly Season it is good to keep one jump ahead.

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