

theguardian

## OBSERVER ORGANIC ALLOTMENT BLOG



### Things to do in October

From choosing fruit trees to the secret of great sprouts, leaf mould and manure: everything you need to know about gardening this month



Earth up sprouts to protect from winter winds

The harvest festivals around the [autumn equinox](#) are a sharp reminder that frost could be imminent. It is the last chance saloon for tender beans, tomatoes, peppers, chillis and aubergines. These need to be ripened, brought in and stored. Plants that are going to stand out through winter – Brussel sprouts, leeks and winter greens, should be staked or earthed up to protect them against winter winds.

When frost is forecast, cover the tops of trenching celery with straw kept in place with chicken wire. In cold areas of the country do the same for globe artichokes leaving the crowns exposed. Cut down the foliage of Jerusalem artichokes, marking the spot before they entirely vanish from sight. Unless your soil is light - in which case it is better to wait until spring - it's an easier job to dig now rather than in winter when the ground will be wet and sticky. Leave the soil in rough clumps for the frost to take its turn and break it down further.

If you are planning to grow asparagus next year, this is the ideal time to get the bed ready. Asparagus usually has separate quarters - not just because it is the king of vegetables - but because the foliage needs to stand all summer and would shade out other crops.

An asparagus bed lasts for 20 years, and a mature plant will send up 15 to 20 spears each season, so it is worth the effort of getting things right. Dig a trench about a spit deep and remove all weeds meticulously. The traditional bed would be about 1.2m (4ft) wide with two staggered rows of asparagus around 45 cm (18ins) apart. Asparagus doesn't appreciate cold wet soil, so if that's the sort you have, add grit or raise the bed.

It is vital to enrich the plot with quantities of rotted leaves, compost or manure. Start off now and add on more through winter.

Asparagus is best grown from three year old 'crowns'. It is advisable to get all male crowns as the female ones are inclined to produce quantities of ineffectual seed. This is one occasion when it is definitely worth considering the latest cultivars that come with the guarantee of the RHS Award of Garden Merit. These include 'Backlim' and 'Gijnlim' which should give you top quality spears and no hassle.



You bare-rooted soft

fruit should be ordered soon

Prepare for new fruit trees. It is much cheaper to buy bare rooted ones and we are really spoiled for choice. Brogdale in Faversham, Kent has apples that taste like pineapples, bananas and melons; crab apples that can be pickled; Belgian buttery 'Beurre' pears that melt in the mouth, fragrant medlars and quinces beloved by the Victorians, even a 'richly flavoured and sweet' Christmas Pearmain apple for Christmas. It's a revelation to see what is out there and definitely worth taking the trouble of browsing through the catalogues. Good nurseries will advise on the technicalities including rootstocks useful if you are only allowed a dwarf or trained trees on the allotment.

Bare rooted soft fruit should also be ordered soon for delivery in autumn or early spring. Prepare for its arrival, digging holes, breaking up the bottom to loosen the sub soil and incorporating lots of organic matter.

October is the best month for gathering in your stores of muck and mulch. As you trim and tidy, build up your compost heap to rot down through winter. Composting is a vital part of a cycle of fertility, a speeding up of a natural process to put back into the soil what has been taken out.

Some allotments make a combined group compost heap. This is highly practical as it can be built in a day. A really big heap made like this will heat up to a temperature of 60C/140F within a few days killing weed seeds, viruses and insect larvae. As the heap cools down, worms and insects will find their way into it. When it is ready in spring, it will have processed many times and have reduced to half its volume, be crumbly and sweet smelling and be loaded with energetic bright red brandling worms. With a small heap made slowly over weeks it is not possible to achieve the same high temperatures, so it's safer to leave out diseased material and rampant weeds.

Gather the falling leaves for leaf mould, for another free three star product. Though it contains few nutrients, leaf mould is a great soil conditioner and can be used for mulching and home made compost.



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allotment stocks up on cow manure

Just to make sure you have everything you will you could possibly need by way of precious muck, try contacting local stables to see if you (or the Committee) can get hold of a pile of horse manure to rot down over winter. The solid part of horse dung is full of phosphates and the urine is rich in nitrogen and potash – the three major nutrients required for plant growth.

Urine of all sorts, including human, has always been known to be the best possible nitrogenous activator for compost. The Romans knew about it and encouraged their workers to relieve themselves into the compost pits. In the 9th century plan at the Swiss Benedictine Abbey of St. Gall, the kitchen garden is resourcefully placed between the poultry houses and the latrines thereby making the best use of both bird and human waste.

While there have been remarkable advances in plant breeding, in other ways it would seem that things haven't changed that much since the Middle Ages.

[Previous](#)

[Blog home](#)

[Next](#)

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