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OBSERVER ORGANICALLOTMENT BLOG

When the woodchips are down

Shredding, coppicing, sprouting seeds... new tasks for the new year, by allotment expert Caroline Foley

As the old years fades and the new one sleepily stirs, our allotment guru Caroline Foley offers her suggestions to making the most of the slow-grow days of January...

Start the year on the right foot by recycling the Christmas tree. If your council doesn't offer a recycling service, maybe get together with other plot holders and hire or borrow a shredder. Then you can have a good chipping session - not only of the Christmas trees but of any other woody material and prunings that are lying around. Get the biggest and best one you can afford as the smaller ones are inclined to rattle and roar. Don't forget to take the tinsel off the tree first and to wear protective clothing, including ear defenders.

As long as the ground isn't frozen or waterlogged, you can be even more virtuous, and get digging. If you have heavy soil, leave the soil in clumps to get broken down by the frosts. If it's light, cover it with black polythene to keep the worst of the weather off and to warm it for spring sowing. If you are making new beds a 120cm/4ft width is ideal for reaching across from both sides without the need to tread on them.

While you are working, remove the roots of any perennial weeds - ground elder, docks and bindweed - taking care to get every last bit out. Bury the annual weeds as you go. Chase after chickweed (commonly known as 'Mischievous Jack'),

couch grass, bittercress and dandelions as they carry on growing right through winter.

Mix in well-rotted compost or manure (which is on the acid side) on dug beds except on land set aside for root crops and brassicas or the cabbage family. Root crops like light soil on the alkaline side, so you may need to lime it in February or six weeks before sowing. Brassicas are also grown in alkaline soil as it gives them some protection against clubroot.

Carry on with winter pruning of apples, pears, all the currants and berry fruits but

leave the stone fruits, particularly plums, until summer when they are less prone to attack by silver leaf fungus. Make sure that tree ties are secure but haven't got too tight. Check apple trees for canker. It shows as roughened and raised patches and sometimes the bark splits. The treatment is to prune back to healthy tissue. http://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profiles1200/apple_canker.asp

By the end of the month give fruit trees some slow-release fertilizer. Seaweed meal is ideal or blood, fish and bone.

Every allotment should have a hazel in a corner for a supply of home grown peasticks and stakes. January is a good time to take them as its's before the nesting season and the tree is still dormant. If you just want a few, cut what you want off right down to the ground. If the hazel is more than three years old and you want more, or if it is looking tatty and needs a new lease of life, you can do a 'full coppice' and cut the entire tree down to ground level. Grade the sticks and stakes by size and sharpen the points ready for use. Birch also makes great pea sticks. If you gather them now or in early February they will be pliable as the sap is just beginning to rise.

An interesting January challenge is to make a 'hot bed'. Widely used by Victorian gardeners, it is not as cranky as it sounds. If you can find a good source of fresh manure, it is an environmentally friendly PC way of propagating plants free of charge. The hot bed can be made in the cold greenhouse, in the cold frame, in a compost bin or in a pit. The bottom heat comes from the manure. You need a quantity of three parts very fresh manure in straw to one part of John Innes No 3 (or a mix of top soil and compost). To get a good heat up, the manure needs to be 60-90cm (2-3ft) deep. The growing medium needs to be 2-30cm (8-12in) and is laid on top. Leave it for a week to heat up to about 24°C/75°F. If it gets too hot leave it a little longer or cool it down with water. Then you can sow directly into the growing medium. With a cloche on top, it's ideal for New Year salad crops, cut-and-come-again orientals, or for making a head start on peas, beans, turnips and autumn cauliflowers.

If all this sounds rather energetic, or if the weather is too bad to go out, you could try sprouting - a panacea for frustrated allotmenteers. Sprouted seeds - freshly germinated cereal or vegetable seeds - are power packed cocktails of antioxidants, trace elements, vitamins, valuable plant enzymes and minerals. Eaten regularly, they are credited with the power to improve general health, to boost the immune system, and combat tiredness and stress. Any edible grain or vegetable seed will produce a nutritious crop within the week without the need for you to stir from your kitchen.

You can buy 'sprouters' - towers of perforated plastic trays - or manage with an ordinary glass jar and a fine sieve. Soak the seeds overnight. Strain them off in the morning. Rinse, strain and return them to the jar and cover with cling film, or a lid, so they don't dry out. Keep them in the kitchen at room temperature (aprox. 20°C/68°F), on the windowsill if you want them to be green, or in the dark if you want them to be white. Rinse and strain twice a day through the sieve until you see some root and

shoot. Then you can add them to salads raw, stir-fry or cook them in other ways. They are at their most nutritious when eaten fresh tand can be kept in the fridge for a few days. Seed merchants, garden centres and health shops stock seeds for sprouting or you can use up your old vegetable seed. You can also try growing dried pulses from the supermarket. There is quite a good chance that they will work if they are not too old. Favourites varieties are alfalfa, aduki beans, wheatgrass, and buckwheat.

We are on the home stretch now with a few more minutes of daylight every day - an extra hour by the end of the month.

Here's wishing you a fertile and verdant New Year.

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soundsofOregon
4 January 2008 4:17PM

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I really do look forward to Caroline's observations and suggestions. Such breadth and depth. I always pick up useful intel. Sometimes, not always good news. I have a couple of young fruit trees around my garden plot that have all the signs of bad canker - plum hard hit and pear on its way. Ouch. When the trunk is badly affected I presume the response is to yank 'em? How contagious is canker to other trees in a garden, does anybody know? Strikes me the trees might have come in with the disease in the first place. Or perhaps they succumbed when stressed out with a lateish initial planting? (I picked them up as leftovers from a charity plant sale). Are tree nurseries reliably canker-free?

Caroline's remarks about weeds have me _itching_ to sound orff in a glossollaliacal tizzy. Indeed, the topic is such a fascinating one for me, I think I will have to save my extended remarks for a longer article. Mebbe a couple, even, relating to the hands-on specifics of living with weeds - especially the ones Caroline mentions, which are a very signficant presence in my garden. Yes, most of our garden weeds here in Oregon are, like me, non-native, naturalizing European imports. Interestingly, many of them tend to be more 'ecologically expansive' once they make the trans-Atlantic jump. I wonder if the same applies to me? In the meantime, a quick related snippet of a philosophical turn.

Recently, I was reading Steven Foster's account of an herbal apprentice in India, whose final test involved an instruction to go to the hills and gather plants _without_ medicinal qualities. After several days of roaming the surrounding landscape, the apprentice returned with head hung low. "Master," the apprentice lamented, "I was unable to fulfill the task. I found no plants without medicinal qualities." The teacher roared with laughter and announced, "You have passed the test."

There's much about this tale that resonates deeply with my own unfolding experiences around the garden in recent years, in particular around my ever-evolving relationship with plants commonly referred to as 'weeds'. Holey moley, how loaded is that word, eh? 'Weeds are bad. Everybody sez so. So it must be true.' I'm reminded of Paula Jones' astute observation: "It's a curious fact that wild plants or herbs are gladly admired by the human race - even protected if need be, against possible extinction. But let them be called weeds, however erroneously, and even kind, gentle souls, turn to violence...I would like to see the word 'weed' abolished altogether for being one of the most intolerant, negative words in the Engish language."

I'll save ya the epistemological hoopla around 'word prisons of reduced identity', and 'responding to objects according to the tone of their names' and suchlike, except to say that our attitude toward weeds demonstrates a perspective on Nature that has had foundational, and not entirely positive, implications for the direction of our culture at large. And turning our cultural course back toward the essentially Real - toward a way of living in accord with Nature - may begin, in part, with revisiting the 'negative baptisms' we have attached to key ecological processes that hold up our world as we know it. At the very least, we may find clues in this perceptual territory which point to a more coherent perspective on da Nature of thingz. Easier said than done, of course, because this story is only half about the world 'out there.' Indeed, the critical factor here is perhaps the inner ecology of the Gardener - evidence suggests our attachment to word cages such as 'weeds' tell us more about the subtle, invisible negative conditions of our own deeply-held assumptions and feelings about our place in the world than they ever do about the rightful place in our world of any plant. As the American poet Emerson sagely put it, a weed is "a plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered."

Then again, even as our inability to perceive things as they are may well be significantly conditioned by the language we use to describe them, rebaptizing a word cage (and all the baggage that goes with it) with a name that is more worthy and spacious requires going far beyond the niceties of a name-change. A fully realized semantic transition demands a fundamental shift in perspective - a fundamental shift in conscience perhaps - finding a more worthy and spacious part of ourselves. Perhaps finding virtues about ourselves we have not yet discovered. This can be a slow, difficult and, yes, disturbing process because such growth typically demands that we surrender habitual, comfortable certainties, false as they are, relating to core perceptions of ourselves, and look, eek, with fresh eyes upon our world. Letting go is often a liberating experience, of course, because to liberate the truth is to liberate yerself, but yes, a transition not without its immense inner challenges. And you thought weeding dandelions was just that! <grin>

All very well, ya might say. But how does such high-minded schtick translate into getting down and dirty in our veggie plots with the weeds? Loving couchgrass is just dandy, but what about the realpolitik of actually feeding ourselves? What on earth can a relationship with dandelion teach us about our 'inner

ecologies' and a gentler understanding of the nature of the world and existence? Well, an absolutely fascinating topic that that has me _itching_ to get to the specifics. Right now, in my garden, a fascinating story. I think I'll get to it for my next column, Alan.

allanjenkins
4 January 2008 7:07PM

Have always had a soft spot for 'weeds' and less so for rabid gardeners who rip everything out, let alone spray. Had a wonderful thistle on the plot last year that I had to replant three times due to others' need to remove it. And leaving the wigwams to be overrun with bindweed bells at the end of autumn brought much enjoyment... that said, find it harder to find the tao of letting the slugs run riot, and wish the rodents or pigeons had not eaten ALL the field beans.

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johnbox
6 January 2008 5:30PM

I have tried and failed to find a hand-operated shedder for garden waste. I can find quiet ones on Google & in the shops - but they all are electric or depend on fuel. I can even envisage what it would look like - a couple of ridged rollers with some gearing to allow for hand cranking?

Any ideas?

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