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OBSERVER ORGANICALLOTMENT BLOG

Things to do in December

Caroline Foley's expert guide to gardening this month

It's a good time to dig and divide your rhubarb

Little is urgent in December as long as you are ready for a cold snap, your crops are in and your covers in place. It is, nonetheless, a good month for general repairs and to get any digging done and dusted before the end of the year. In January and February the going will be harder.

If you have a rhubarb plant that is four or five year's old, you could dig it up and divide it. This will give you instant new plants while rejuvenating the parent. Once the plant has disappeared from view for winter, lift it carefully with plenty of root. Put it on the ground and drive two garden forks back to back through the roots into the soil. Prise them apart. You can usually get three good offcuts. If this is too tough going, you may need to use a knife or a sharp spade to cut through. Rhubarb can survive a little brute force. Cut out any old or rotting growth at the centre. Make sure that there is some root and some buds on each division. Replant the root sections so that the crowns are about 2.5cm below ground.

Artichokes and cardoons are generally replaced every three years. As they grow offsets , it is easy to keep renewing your stock. Drive a sharp spade between the plant and the offset. Tidy it up by cutting off ragged edges, and having made sure that each section has some root and shoot, replant it.


Sea kale and rhubarb can be forced now

At this time of year both seakale and rhubarb can be forced for delectable young, out-of-season shoots. Rhubarb, originally from Russia, had been around in Britain for 300 years before a Chelsea gardener left a chimney pot over his rhubarb by happy accident in the 19th century. The resulting almost luminous pink shoots were so tender and delicious, that rhubarb has been forced as a delicacy ever since. You can spot forced rhubarb in the supermarket as, apart from its almost unnaturally vivid colour, it has yellow leaves that have been deprived of light. To force it on the allotment, cover the crowns where they grow with straw or dry compost to keep the plant warm and put a dustbin over the entire plant to block out all light. It should be ready in about eight weeks.

The story of how Witloof chicory came to be forced is similar. itloof is the white torpedo shaped type chicory more commonly known by it French name endive. Jan Lammers – a soldier whose name has gone down in history as a result – made the discovery. In 1830 he went to war and left his chicory forgotten in his cellar. When he returned he found that the chicons had become plump and had lost their bitterness.


Time to force Witloof chicory, too

If you happen to have Witloof chicory growing, the technique is dig the plants up and plant them in containers. Cut off the tops to within an inch of the crown and cover with another flower pot (hole blocked) to cut out all light. Keep them frost free at a minimum 10C (50F). They will be ready within the month. You can keep the supply going all winter if you do a few every week. Virtually a national dish in Belgium, Witloof chicory is good for salads, soups and braising.

This year this has been a lot of potato blight, the disease that caused the Irish potato famine. Blight is usually sparked off by warm humid weather, most particularly in what is known as the 'Smith periods'. These are two consecutive days when the temperature is a minimum 10°C (50°F) and the relative humidity is at least 90% for eleven hours on

each day. If you would like to be warned of Smith periods you can sign up for free blight alerts from The Potato Council. If you run the computer mouse over the council's image of a potato looking for flaws in the skin, the effects of various diseases, with accompanying explanatory text, show up in a startlingly graphic manner.


Look for blight resistent potatoes

If you have suffered from blight this year, keep up the rotation and look for blight resistant potatoes. The breakthrough Sarpo Miro, which was introduced in 2005 was developed by Sárvári family in Hungary with the aim of feeding Soviet Russia. Though astonishingly blight-proof (9 out of 10 tuber blight resistance), it was criticised for being a rather scrappy potato by some. The news is that it now has new and smarter maincrop relatives, all 'low input' varieties with high resistance to virus and drought, blight and other potato diseases. These are the red Sárpo Axona, the white Sárpo Shona, and the purple skinned Blue Danube, the pink skinned Sárpo Una and early maincrop white skinned Kifli. Other potatoes with high blight resistance (7 out of 10 for tuber blight resistance) are 'Orla, Cosmos , Valor, Verity, Remarka and Lady Balfour - the potato named after the founder of the Soil Association and author of *The Living Soil* (1943)

Before you pack up for the festive season, sow seed for saladini on a light window sill to enjoy in the New Year. The catalogues have plenty of all season and winter blends to try. For a extra flourish add in some seed of beetroot Bulls Blood – a Victorian variety included in bedding out schemes for its regal scarlet foliage.

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