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OBSERVER ORGANIC ALLOTMENT BLOG



Things to do in September

Your expert guide to gardening this month



Apples start coming on stream about now

Make the most of mellow September days and let the sunshine cure the harvest for you.

A couple of weeks at a comfortable 10 - 15°C encourages a corky layer of tissue to form on the skin of newly dug potatoes. This protects the potato and promotes healing of any small cuts and bruises. After that they should be stored for the winter in at a cooler 5-10 °C. Don't let them a glimpse of sunlight. Get hold of some potato sacks (markets and greengrocers are a good source of free ones) and tie them firmly at the neck.



Store onions in the sun or shed until they colour and rustle when crumpled

When you cut down pumpkins and winter squashes leave a long stalk. Put them out in the sun to dry or on a warm windowsill for a few weeks. As the skin hardens the dried

stalk will protect the fruit from rotting.

Catch onions when the leaves first droop. Left too long, they will start to grow again and be useless for storage. Leave them in the sun or an airy shed until the skins turn papery, take on colour and rustle when crumpled. This can take two to three weeks.

To get the last tomatoes to ripen in the ground, pinch off any flowers, unhitch them, lay them down with straw underneath and cover with cloches or fleece for extra heat.



Store potatoes in

sacks and out of the sun at 5-10C

As you clear the harvests start a big compost heap to rot down over winter. As a result of the news about manure being contaminated with hormone type weed killer, Aminopyralid, it is more essential than ever to have good alternative sources of organic matter. Though not widely used by farmers, Aminopyralid appears to be affecting allotment growers countrywide. It remains active on plants even after it has gone through the digestive system of animals in the form of hay. The result is untimely death and destruction to many crops including potatoes, tomatoes and legumes.

So, check your manure sources. If in doubt, the following test is recommended. Fill three flower pots with compost and the other three with well mixed compost and rotted manure combined. Label them and sow three broad bean seeds in each. If Aminopyralid is present the young emerging beans will be stunted. If you are in a hurry and prepared to sacrifice a tomato plant, try planting that in a 50-50 compost and manure mix. If you already have a heap that looks suspicious, it is recommended that you return it to source, bin it in the council waste scheme or leave to rot down for at least two years before doing another test.

Meanwhile, waste no time. Fill bare patches with green manures. If you move fast, there is just time for a catch crop of fodder radish or mustard. Sown early this month, it will be ready to dig over in late October. Alfalfa, winter beans and Italian or Hungarian grazing ryegrass will keep the ground covered overwinter and give nourishment to it afterwards.

Plums will be a top production now, pears about ready and apples will start coming in this month and next. Although rooted strawberries can be planted in spring, September is a better time, as it allows time for a good root system to develop. Remember to plant them at exactly the same level as before. Early this month is the last chance to get strawberry root runners going. You do this by pinning them down with a hairpin of wire into pot of potting compost sunk into the ground.

After the last of the summer raspberries, the old wood should be cut right out, along with weaker stems. Pruning will encourage better and larger fruits while the increased air circulation will help to prevent disease. The 'everbearing' raspberries (the twice fruiteders - eg, 'Heritage') are treated in the same way.



Time to prune

summer raspberries

If you have a tangled clump, arguably the most effective technique is to dive in from the bottom taking the worms' eye view. Wearing gloves, long sleeves and, armed with sharp secateurs, you can cut these off with one fell snip at ground level. Leave about eight new canes per plant and chop off any suckers with a sharp hoe.

It must be admitted that this is all quite a business and perhaps the reason why some gardeners stick to the autumn raspberry and forget the summer ones altogether. Pruning the autumn varieties is one simple and swift operation. You just cut the whole lot down to the ground once a year once they've finished fruiting.

My latest fruit passion is the [Japanese wineberry](#). It comes into fruit about now and tastes like a raspberry – an ambrosial one. A distinguished looking bramble, it is hardy and easy to grow. The small fruits come encased in calyxes covered in thick red hair rather like a moss rose. It's a fiddle to harvest and perhaps this is why you don't see the fruits in the shops.

Blackberries, loganberries and the hybrids will need the same treatment as raspberries after fruiting. [Blackberries](#) are great food plants for wildlife and are traditionally combined with windfall apples for the classic crumbles and jam or the more unusual [apple and blackberry cake](#).

Keep an eye out for wild food in the hedgerows. Elderberries, damsons, brambles and sloes can be made into delectable jams, jellies, chutneys, even home made [alcoholic drinks](#) – fair reward for the enterprising gardener.

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