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ORGANIC ALLOTMENT
BLOG

Things to do in December

Caroline Foley's expert guide to gardening this month



Rejuvenate four to five-year-old rhubarb by dividing it. Photographs Howard Sooley

Rather like housework, hard working allotmenters will tell you that work on the plot is never done. Even in the depths of winter there are beds to prepare, fences and sheds to repair, greenhouses to clean (or possibly invest in). Then there is the annual dilemma of how thoroughly you should put the plot 'to bed'.

Hygiene is a key tool for the organic gardener but, it is not only pests that lurk in musty corners, but your good friends and allies – the hedgehogs that hibernate in leaf litter and ladybirds that hole up in the nooks and crannies.



If you only have a quarter plot, you will probably want to keep every inch weed free for growing produce. However, given a little more space to play with, you may decide to fir some give and take. Many healthy weeds are of use to wildlife. At the very least, they can be rotted down as liquid manure or put on the compost heap. Dandelions and nettles are a particularly good source of trace elements and major nutrients.

You could also leave a few of the edible weeds, until spring at least, when they will produce a crop of fresh young leaves for an eyebrow-raising soup like ground elder

gazpacho or for unusual salads.

Even the worst of perennial weeds – the likes of bindweed, docks and mare's tail – which will spread from the smallest fraction of root, can have their top growth composted. The roots should be taken off site and the plants should be prevented from going to seed. Also watch out for shepherd's purse and chickweed. Both carry on growing through winter. Shepherd's purse can carry clubroot and chickweed can pass on cucumber mosaic virus.



Traditionally December is the month for planting new trees. Now that allotment sites are beginning to permit orchards, there may be the opportunity of planting a free standing fruit tree or, if not, an espalier.

Fashions in growing fruit favour the 'backyard orchard' culture from the US. The idea is to grow smaller trees closer together than is traditional and to choose varieties for a succession of fruit. Get advice from a good nursery on the root stocks and pollinating partners.



Whether you belong to the digging brigade or the no-dig camp, a good supply of organic compost or manure will be invaluable. A newish source of organic mulching material comes from the door-to-door green bins which is mostly recycled into the parks and other green spaces.

Though councils vary in what they offer, some make it available to buy at Household Waste Recovery Centres for around £3 a bag. Having reached a high temperature, the compost is pretty much guaranteed to be free of pathogens. Some councils will even deliver locally if the quantity is large enough and the delivery place has easy access for tipping. It's a source worth investigating for an allotment site.

Town dwellers can also usually source manure from city farms. Some have it bagged up ready for sale while others are open for people to come and dig up what they want for a small fee (around £1.50 per sack).



If you are quick, there may still be time to plant shallots and garlic. [Three garlics cloves shooting in a pot](#) make an imaginative Christmas present.

If your spring cabbages are getting crowded, chop off alternate ones to be used as greens. Earth up the rest along with your sprouts to protect them from winter weather. With ice and snow forecast this month, dig up your leeks and replant them loosely where you can get at them easily. Trying to dig up a frozen leek is well nigh impossible. The stem is likely to snap off at a crucial point leaving you with a handful of useless leaves.

Rejuvenate and propagate globe artichokes and [rhubarb](#) that is four or five years old by dividing it. Every few years, you can also [force rhubarb](#) for delicious [puddings](#), [pies](#), [jams and compotes](#). Forcing is a ten-minute job well worth doing for out-of-season delights in store.

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[allanjenkins](#)

2 December 2010 12:45PM



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Miss 'our' rhubarb, given to us by Dan Pearson, left behind when we handed plot 1 back to Ruth; wonder whether we can persuade her it is old enough to split? Though lot less room on current space

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