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**OBSERVER
ORGANIC ALLOTMENT
BLOG**

Caroline Foley's expert guide to a few things to do in September

Green manure, onion sets, and other jobs for the month ahead



September the key month for green manures such as field beans ...

September is a key month for harvesting and for earthworks – digging and sowing green manures while the soil is still warm.

The classic overwintering types of green manure – grazing rye, field beans and winter tare – are terrifically hardy. Others, like *Phacelia tanacetifolia* and the mustards grow so quickly that, if you sow them now, you can either cut them down before winter or take a chance and leave them until spring.

An interesting new member of the mustard pack is Caliente Mustard. Developed at the University of Washington, in conjunction with Washington potato farmer Dale Gies, and the Research Institute for Industrial Crops (ISCI) in Bologna, it was bred to be biofumigant for agricultural use. In other words, given the right conditions, it can suppress soil-borne pests and disease.



... or grazing rye

I first heard about it from the gardeners when visiting the trial grounds at [RHS Wisley](#), where they are trying it out. They are also promoting it in their very-well-worth-visiting new vegetable show garden. It struck me that [Caliente Mustard](#) might be of considerable interest to allotment growers, particularly for the underground crops of potatoes and roots.

What researchers have done is to beef up a naturally occurring compound (isothiocyanate or ITC) found in all brassicas. When this is broken down glucosinolates – compounds that make brassicas hot, mustardy and distasteful to pests – are released in large quantities. When these come into contact with a natural enzyme (myrosinase) and water, the biofumigant gas is released. This suppresses populations of eelworms, wireworms and other nematodes along with various soil-born diseases by natural means.



Plant overwintering)

onion sets now to be ready in June

To get the best results at home, it is recommended to encourage vigorous growth by fertilizing the ground before sowing with manure or rotted compost and to keep it well watered. As mustard is a brassica and prone to brassica problems, it is a good idea to protect it with fleece or netting.

If sown at the end of September, it should reach the ideal height of around 15cm by the first frosts and be able to withstand the winter weather down to -12C. In spring, it will be ready for a spurt of vigorous growth to supply quantities of excellent biomass and humus.

When it comes to cutting it down, around April, farmers plough it up. The home grower is recommended to tackle a small section of land at a time because speed is of the essence.



Sun-dry tomatoes for

a taste of summer later

Pull out the plants whole and chop them up as small as you can. Better still, macerate them in a garden shredder to a soup-like consistency or run over them with a mower. Dig them into the soil within the hour to trap the gases underground and water well. Interest in Caliente mustard seems to be growing. Whereas before you could only buy industrial sized quantities, now it's available in normal sized packets for domestic use.

As the days shorten, prepare for the end of summer. Start to gather in your crops. The signal for harvesting onions and maincrop potatoes is when they show signs of running out of steam and the leaves start to turn yellow and droop.

Choose a warm dry day. Dig them out with a fork, taking care not to pierce them, and leave them in the sun to dry. Don't wash the potatoes but brush off the mud before storing them in the dark in a cool airy place but where the temperatures won't drop below 5C. Don't store any that are damaged.



Harvest onions also

need a day or two in the fresh air to cure

Onions also need a day or two in the fresh air to cure. When the leaves have withered away and the skins are dry and papery to the touch, they can be stored by plaiting or being put into nets and hung up.

To keep up production, plant some Japanese (or overwintering) onion sets. They will be ready to eat next June when your stored onions have run out and the spring batch still has a few weeks to go. If you are quick, you could get in some spinach for eating in October. September is also the last month this year for planting strawberries.

Ripen the last of the peppers, aubergines and, of course, your pumpkin for Halloween. If you have a tomato glut, you could try to sun-dry them for a change. If this seems unrealistically optimistic – even if we are lucky with the best of Indian summers – the oven method works well and will provide haunting memories of sunny days on the plot in the chilly months ahead.

It would be interesting to hear from anyone with experience of growing Caliente Mustard on the allotment or in the garden at home.

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