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OBSERVER ORGANIC ALLOTMENT BLOG



Things to do in January

Caroline Foley's expert guide to gardening this month



Now is a good time to plan paths or ponds

While the plot is under ice or soggy, barren and bare, remember to feed the birds, but don't attempt to garden. Instead, take the opportunity to have a fresh look at the lay out. Use the spare time for construction and planning – possibly a new path, a fruit trellis, a pond or more ambitiously, a polytunnel or a greenhouse. Make a planting plan.

Check through your favourite catalogues to see what has come onto the market and is worth trying out. You may find newcomers that solve old problems. One such possibility is the new runner/French bean cross 'Moonlight'. The French bean in the mix gets round the poor setting problem that can beset the runner.

If you suffered from tomato blight last summer – as so many did – consider the new blight resistant cherry tomato 'Losetto'. While if you are resigned to more freezing winters ahead, it might be worth pencilling in the new leek 'Below Zero' which withstands the weight of heavy snowfall without damage.

Some newcomers are verging on curious. One such is the tomato/potato, which, I gather, is somewhere in the pipeline. Another is the revival of the 'family tree'.

The best catalogues these days will give you growing tips descriptions along the way. The Organic Gardening Catalogue 'Best Buy' and 'Best Organic Vegetable Range in *Gardening Which* are full of useful and occasionally intriguing, growing tips. Two that caught my eye were on companion planting.

Three seeds of Birdsfoot Trefoil into each brassica module, they say, will serve to confuse the cabbage root fly sufficiently to send it off elsewhere to lay its eggs. In their trials, this has cut infestations down by 48 per cent. Birdsfoot trefoil is an ideal companion for brassicas as it doesn't compete too much for nutrients.

On the same principle, mixing up seed of scarlet flax (*Linum rubrum*) with carrot seed

will help to defeat the carrot root fly. This seems to work as the carrot fly always travels low and in straight lines and would be put off by barrier of tall plants. It is certainly worth trying these tips out if you are not keen on netting.

Another great read is the [Seeds of Italy catalogue](#). Written with an infectious enthusiasm, it evokes all that is most mouth-watering about fresh Italian produce. Seeds of Italy are proud of the fact that their founder, Giovanni Franchi, started the business by selling seeds from his horse-drawn cart in Parma in 1783, the Montgolfier brothers flew over Paris in a balloon. \

The company remains in the same family seven generations later. Their catalogue out this month includes a section from their cookbook, [From Seed to Plate](#), on preserving, a useful addition when it comes to transforming gluts into store cupboard delicacies such as chilli jam and passata. They also have some rarities like 'agretti', a bitter leaf popular in Umbria and Rome to accompany fish, but difficult to find elsewhere as the seeds are only viable for four months each year

Watch out for heritage varieties that will be coming increasingly available due to some relaxation on the [National Listing](#) for the 'amateur seed packet market'. Meanwhile the [Real Seed Company](#) gets around the law by making their customers [a club member at the cost of one penny a year](#). A small not-for-profit company, it concentrates on the home and allotment market. All the seeds are open pollinated, non-hybrids, so you can save your own seed from their stock for future use.

The [RHS Plant Finder](#) does not cover vegetables and fruit but does provide a list of their Latin names which can be useful if you are looking for something out of the ordinary. For everyday vegetables, I am inclined to refer to the [RHS Award of Garden Merit lists](#). You won't find the very latest as they need time to conduct their trials. However, the award is not given out easily and in my experience AGM plants are pretty much guaranteed to perform well.

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