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## OBSERVER ORGANIC ALLOTMENT BLOG



# Caroline Foley's expert guide to a few things to do (and not do) for April

In praise of spring and Ethelind Fearon's *The Reluctant Gardener*

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**Caroline Foley**

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To be eaten whole like 'French beans when young and as broad beans later'

For allotment holders, spring – so eagerly awaited and celebrated as it is - also means a good bracing for the onset of hard work. I, however, have been sidetracked from rushing out to plant my potatoes by a surprising little book [\*The Reluctant Gardener\*](#), written in 1952 by [\*Ethelind Fearon\*](#), doyenne of the lazy approach. Her rallying cry is about cutting corners and whittling away wasted effort so as to show the reader 'the short and easy ways to good husbandry'.

The ideal garden is one that 'will do its own work, feed itself, clothe itself, sow itself, tie itself up, cut itself down and in all respects be as relaxed and happy as its owner.' There is, she says, no end to the tricks you can play with vegetables to save yourself work and avoid growing more than you need.



Her approach is quite up to date in some ways as she advocates the use of mulches and irrigation channels to conserve water (and effort), home-made liquid manures and she comes close to no-dig gardening. Less PC is her advice to use paraffin to deter carrot fly.

In the chapter on 'Dodging Vegetable Duty' she argues that 'You would be surprised how much of the grim toil undergone by the allotment holder is unnecessary. It is just self-martyrdom inaugurated by Adam and hallowed by custom and tradition ever since. But you will find:

- a. That half the things you sweat over are better bought than grown.
- b. The ones that are better grown can be grown much more easily than you thought.
- and c. Quite a lot of them will serve two purposes, thereby cutting out one operation, one ache, one moan.

Who wants to grow potatoes anyway?'



As for growing full sized onions, she declares, 'No serious student of reluctant gardening would so demean himself to attempt it. 'Onions are 'pernickety, despotic and prone to fungus disease, onion fly, bull neck and a whole host of unpleasant pests. If you want an onion you can stuff, get it from the greengrocer.'

Better, she advises, to grow Welsh onions which have authentic onion flavour but are no hassle as they will grow anywhere and right through winter. Self-generating, when the clump gets too big you can split them which is why they are known as 'everlasting' onions.



If you insist on growing potatoes (and she admits to a grudging liking for the first home-dug tubers) she gives a shortcut method. Dig a little so the delicate roots of the potato can 'run about'. Cut out a trench, keeping the soil on one side and place the your seed potatoes on the floor of it. Fill the trench with compost, and when the potatoes grow through, earth them up with the soil you dug out from the trench. By growing them in 'soft luscious compost' she argues, you will get nothing but 100% perfect potatoes, and none 'baffled and battered' as they try to push through inhospitable soil.

She is ahead of her time recommending oriental vegetables back in the 1950s when they were still a bit of a rarity. As she points out, you can eat them as cut-and-come-again baby leaf for salads and stir fries, at the 'chicken feather' stage as large seedlings, or at full size. Another advantage is that when cooked, 'they entirely lack that objectionable cabbage-y smell.'

French beans are a case in point as they can be eaten as green beans (haricots verts), as flageolets (when they are eaten like fresh peas) and as dried haricots for winter.



Calabrese and turnips produce roots in summer and 'greens' in winter (though not from the same plant). There are ornamental kales, good to eat but which can be used for flower borders or arranging as 'widely used by our most famous decorators'.

Broad beans can be cooked whole when the size of your little finger, tasting like the pea bean. In that way they are like 'French beans when young and broad beans later' as popularized by the garden writer, Miss Elinour Sinclair Rohde.

Fast forward to 2012 and latest trend on the market for the home grower for is grafted vegetables. Though widely used in Asia for decades, it was only in the 1990's that they caught on in the USA and Europe. Robots have speeded up the previously painstaking and expensive process so effectively that in the year 2000, 700 million vegetable plants

were grafted in Japan and Korea. 95% of cucurbits, tomatoes and aubergines are now grafted commercially there before being planted out.

'Turbo charged' grafted vegetables are claimed to produce two thirds to three quarters more crops per plant. As they are grafted onto disease resistant roots, you should have no problems in that direction. As a result, apparently, there is no need to worry about rotation either. They can go back into the same soil year in year out, saving space, time and labour.

No doubt about it, Ethelind Fearon would approve.

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**KaveyF**  
31 March 2012 9:04AM

We thought we were so clever when we came up with the same trench idea for potatoes several years ago. Much easier to fill back in as the plants grow, than to earth up. Has worked well for us in the back garden for years. At our new allotment last year, we did the same thing. Only to discover later, with next to no yield at all, that there is a thick, impenetrable layer of clay only an inch or two below the depth of trenches we dug, so the potatoes couldn't go down further. We'll abandon the trench method for the lottie but continue it for home.

We're very much of the lazy gardener type, though we do buy seeds rather than plugs/ seedlings as it's too expensive otherwise.

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**howardsooley**  
2 April 2012 9:19AM

I love reading there pieces.....they help me set my mental clock of where we are in the year...otherwise I think I'd be running a bit late. Thanks X

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