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**OBSERVER
ORGANIC ALLOTMENT
BLOG**

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

Starting sweet peas, seed potatoes, and other tasks for the month ahead



Seed potatoes start to become available in January

Little is essential on the allotment in January, other than maintenance, housekeeping and preparing for better weather.

Protect your plants from cold, check stakes and ties, [clean your tools ready for next year](#). On fair days you can plant fruit trees and [prune apples, pears](#), blackcurrants, gooseberries and currants.

With icy weather, the compost heap will barely be ticking over, so you might as well [start a bean trench](#). It will provide moisture as well as nourishment for the beans later on. Dig a trench about 30cm deep and wide. A lining of newspaper will help to hold in moisture through summer. When the trench is almost full, heap the soil over it. It will sink down as the compost rots and flatten out.



Incidentally, if you are on a small plot and don't have room for a compost heap, there are different ways of trenching discretely between rows for the benefit of your plants.

Keep an eye out for chickweed which can carry viruses. It grows right through winter, even flowering under snow.

If you fancy some warming work instead of heavy gardening, you would be well employed constructing a shed. Even a greenhouse, it would seem, is not beyond the skill of a capable DIY person.



More low tech, and definitely cheaper, is the greenhouse made out of recycled plastic bottles threaded on bamboo canes. A great example of this was to be seen at the Eden Project garden at Chelsea Flower Show last year. The only problem might be gathering a sufficient supply of plastic bottles, unless you could make it a joint venture with other plot holders. You would also need to check with the management as some allotments have strict rules on garden structures.

Cold frames will be invaluable for crops outside and for hardening off in spring. It's a simple job for a woodworker to knock up a smart version or it is child's play to make one out of an old drawer or bricks piled one on top of the other as the base with glass or plastic sheeting on top as the light.



The one item that transforms seed sowing is a heated propagator. Even this you can make (if you are clever) rather than buy.

There is not a lot of point sowing seed this month unless you are in a race to get ahead. One exception is the sweet pea – a classic for exhibition among traditional allotmenters. Exhibitors sow in autumn or January to get the strongest plants. Sweet peas are easy to grow given sunshine, deep soil and plentiful water with free drainage. Protect them from mice as they find sweet peas as irresistible as the eating varieties.



The sweet pea, a humble plant with small but heavily scented purple flowers when it was introduced from Sicily in the C17th, has morphed into myriad shades of colour and form - notably the frilly Spencer, the large flowered 'grandiflora' and the dwarf or 'cupid' type. Yet, unlike the rose, which has on occasion been vulgarized, no developments in breeding have managed to diminish the sweet pea's innocence and charm.

Seed potatoes will become available from January on and you can start to chit them. If you have space to grow indoors, you could even grow them in containers next month for an early crop.



Use the dark nights ahead to make plans and mull through the catalogues. Take care, if you order on line, to avoid the pitfalls of not seeing what you are getting before buying it.

While you are in the planning mode and if – like me – you are apt to forget exactly what you have sown and when, a helpful New Year's resolution would be to make better records of your plot in 2012. It needn't be a great literary work. A diary with scribbled thoughts, experiences and prompts – such as what to sow in the heat of summer for winter eating – should pay off handsomely.

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sparclear

3 January 2012 9:53PM

Useful reminders, many thanks.

Re: plastic bottles

* white kind are thin enough to slice up into plant-row markers, using a Stanley knife

they make very good stout labels, about 1 inch wide. Shape other end to a point.

* use a Chinagraph pencil to note the plant variety, date, etc

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**Sparebulb**

3 January 2012 10:33PM

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Plant markers can be made from lager tins as well. Cold frames can be made from anything, but the better built ones will last longer between maintenance. You could also build cold frames out of plastic bottles, if you keep them (the bottled top frame) a standard size then they could later be built into a green house. Also while clear bottles are to be preferred even the green and brown bottles can be used on the lower part of the greenhouse as they will help warm the soil.

You can also use the larger clear plastic bottles as cloches by cutting the ends off and then down one side. I live in an area where all houses are the same (1927 estate) so I build everything to those window sizes, then when I see someone having the 'windows done' I can ask for the old ones- the double glazing company will be happy to give them away as they have to pay to dump them, and I can use them as replacements for any damage as they are a standard size- skip jumping is also fun- I must get around to posting up some pictures of my scavenging, all built with hand tools as my shed was robbed recently so I have few power tools left- although it's a state of mind more than anything else.

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