

theguardian

**OBSERVER
ORGANIC ALLOTMENT
BLOG**

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

It's the month for green manure, cow manure and other mulches



Field beans make fine green manure. All images Howard Sooley

As you harvest and clear your plot, decisions need to be made about what to do with the vacant land. There are various schools of thought depending on the soil type, the state of the plot and the amount of frost to be expected in different parts of the country. Also there is the debate of whether or not it is a good idea to dig at all.

If the plot is still rough with thistles, docks or other persistent perennial weeds and, if you work organically, then it is best to bite the nettle (as it were) and tackle it once and for all. Cut the weeds down and block out the light with thick cardboard (of the sort that washing machines come in), hefty black pvc or a horticultural sheet mulch designed for the purpose.

Weigh the covers down with bricks or stones so no escape is possible. Depending on the weed, it could take as much as three years, so it's good to start the process early on when the growing season is coming to an end. You can make slits and plant vigorous vegetables through it. Potatoes are a good bet to plant through it next year. If this leaves you with no land to cultivate, you may decide to hand-weed sections, making sure to get every last bit of root out.



If, however, you have heavy uncultivated clay but no bad weeds, the old way would be to turn it over and let the frosts start to break it down through winter, saving you work and back ache until next spring when the task should be easier.

On the other hand if you have light soil, it is essential to prevent the winter rains leaching out the nutrients. A cover will also cut out - or at least cut down - the weed problem. Weeds take up valuable nutrients and some can spread disease. For example shepherd's purse can carry clubfoot. It can also harbour eelworm as can fat hen and chickweed. Chickweed and groundsel can also spread cucumber mosaic virus, which is very bad news indeed for the cucurbit family, melons, courgettes, squashes and the like.

If you land is well cultivated, you could lay on a thick mulch of manure, leaf mould or well-rotted compost. Apply it after a good rain to trap in moisture. This will slow down weeds and any that do grow will be easy to pull out. It will also prevent leaching and be gradually taken down and sieved by the worms who will also aerate the soil as come and down in search of it. Come spring, the mulch should have vanished into the topsoil completely - much to its benefit and yours.

Another important way to provide a winter tonic for your soil is to grow some green manure. It will prevent leaching as the roots knit together, mop up nutrients in the soil and store them so that when the green manure is broken down and incorporated next spring it will release them back into the soil. In this way they improve fertility while the bulk of green material increases the humus content and improves the texture. Green manures make terrific habitats for wildlife. Bar the fact that they will harbour slugs as well, green manures are an all-win proposition. Get them in as soon as possible now so they have a chance to establish before winter.



The best green manure for heavy soil is Hungarian grazing rye (Secale cereale), sometimes known as forage rye. It grows fast and is tough enough to sail through an icy winter. It produces a thick mass of foliage that will keep down weeds. It has strong roots that will help to break up the soil and it is a good at mopping up and storing the

nutrients. Research shows that it releases 90% of the nutrients back into the soil when you dig it in to give the following crop a flying start. If you plan to sow something with fine seed, like carrots, wait a month before doing so after digging it in as grazing rye inhibits germination. Small plants will be fine and you don't need to worry about rotation as it's not in any of the main vegetable families.

Winter field beans (Vicia faba) prefer the cooler weather to germinate. They should survive anything but the most Siberian of winters. To get the benefits of both, mix it together with Hungarian rye grass.

If you live in the south, you could try a crop of mustard (*Synapsis alba*). It grows so fast it should have time to forge ahead and be big enough to cope with the first frosts. It is good for fine soils that lack organic matter and is the ideal choice to follow the potato crop as it is said to rid the area of eelworm.

Caliente mustard goes one step further than the others as it contains bio-fumigants which suppress eelworms, wireworms and other nematodes organically. When I wrote about it a year ago, it was something of a novelty for the home grower. Now you can find the seed without any problem.

To get the benefit you need to be prepared to chop it up really finely in spring before incorporating it back into the soil. You can do this with a sharp spade and a touch of elbow grease, shred it in a leaf shredder or you can pile it up and run over it several times with the mower. The golden rule is that the finely chopped up caliente is incorporated into the top soil within 20 minutes so as not to let the valuable gases escape. The soil should then be raked to a fine tilth and rolled or lightly stamped on to keep the gases in. When you have chopped it down next year, leave the ground for a couple of weeks before sowing the next crop.



The shredder or mower will come in handy yet again for chopping up your pile of autumn leaves. This will speed the process of transforming them into valuable leaf mould and save a considerable amount of space. Put them into wire cages in a shady corner or tie them up in black bin bags with a few holes punched in. Alternatively you can add them to the compost heap. The leaf mould should turn into wonderful crumbly stuff within the year.

Other jobs for October. Stake your Brussels sprouts and give the winter greens a bit on bonemeal. Tie grease bands round fruit trees

October really feels autumnal. Apple day in on October 21st and there will be plenty of events in the next few weeks.

Growing salads for winter.

[Previous](#)

[Blog home](#)

Comments

1 comment, displaying first

 Staff

 Contributor

Open for comments. [Sign in](#) or [create your Guardian account](#) to join the discussion.



allanjenkins

3 October 2012 11:47AM



as always in awe, caroline, thank you for sage advice...

[Recommend?](#) (0)

[Responses](#) (0)

[Report](#)

[Share](#)

Open for comments. [Sign in](#) or [create your Guardian account](#) to join the discussion.

© 2012 Guardian News and Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.