

theguardian

**OBSERVER  
ORGANIC ALLOTMENT  
BLOG**

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

Some thoughts on gardening in the month ahead

---

**Allan Jenkins**

guardian.co.uk, Monday 3 September 2012 10.36 BST

---



Squashes are best left outside until the last minute

While we enjoy the hoped for Indian summer (so far, at least), we should prepare for the possibility of frost at the end of the month.

When the potato foliage begins to wilt signifying readiness, cut the leaves down to ground level. Leave the potatoes as they are for a couple of weeks for the skins to harden, making them less prone to damage. On a sunny day, dig them up from a safe distance to avoid piercing them with the fork. This is an easier job if you can get your hands on a blunt-ended potato fork designed for the purpose. Make sure to get each and every potato out as any left in the ground can carry disease. Leave them to dry for a couple of hours before brushing off the mud and storing in dark but airy potato sacks or boxes. The best temperature for storing potatoes is 5 – 10C.

The leaves collapse when onions stop growing and show that they are ripe and ready. The traditional rule for harvesting is to wait until half the crop has flopped signalling that the others won't be far behind. If in doubt, you can predict readiness by feeling the base of the leaves for a 'soft spot' a few centimeters above the bulb.



The latest thinking, however, is to wait, as you do with potatoes. Leave the onions in the ground for a couple of weeks after the leaves have yellowed to allow the skins to harden. Whatever way you choose, gently pull them out on a sunny day as this will also prolong the storage time. Cure the onions carefully and you could still be eating them next spring.

If you have good drainage and sandy soil, you can leave beetroot, maincrop carrots and turnips in the ground until you need them. Give them a good mulch when frost threatens. If you have wet or heavy soil, it is better to lift them. Always leave a bit of stalk when harvesting as it protects the crown. Roots store well, lined up, but not touching, in banana boxes (available from kindly market traders or green grocers) or crates cushioned with almost dry sand or compost between the layers. A golden rule for harvesting is to only store perfect specimens.



A compromise between leaving them in the ground and harvesting them for storage is to make a clamp. This may sound a little primitive to the uninitiated but I can assure you that, as a largely forgotten but traditional way of storing, it is still done in the very best gardening circles.

Dig a pit, conserving the soil on one side. Line it with polythene, bricks or hardboard - whatever is to hand - as a base, then put on a thick layer of straw, packing the root vegetables between layers of more straw. End with a final layer of polythene or some such and pile the earth that has been out on one side on top with a straw to act as a chimney for ventilation. If you make a long low ridge, it is easy to chip bits off to get at the vegetables when you need them and it's easier than digging them out of the ground in icy conditions.



Leave parsnips in the ground for the frosts to sweeten. Jerusalem artichokes are also best left as they shrivel quickly once harvested. Cut off the tops leaving about 30cm of stalk so you can see where they are to dig up through winter. You will need to get every last one out in spring to stop them colonizing (while getting smaller and smaller and ever more difficult to peel) but meanwhile they will be a great addition to the winter larder.

Cabbages and Brussels sprouts stay in the ground but need to be netted against hungry birds, particularly pigeons. Earth up the Brussels to prevent wind-rock loosening the roots. Cut-and-come-again salad leaves should be fine outside under cloches except in the coldest weather. Change from summer to winter mixes which include hardy varieties like mustard, rocket and mizuna.

Winter squashes, marrows and pumpkins are best left outside until the last minute. You can tell if they are ripe by tapping them to see if they sound hollow. If necessary, help things along by removing any leaves that shade the fruits. When ripe, leave them to cure in a warm dry spot for the skins to harden for storage.



If you are caught out by cold weather, cut them down leaving a piece of stalk about 4cm long. Bring them in and put them on a sunny windowsill or in the greenhouse where there is good ventilation, turning them regularly. If you miss the boat as this can take some weeks, they can still be carved up as Jack o' lanterns. Incidentally it is quite fun to save the seed for next year as they are easy to propagate though there is no guarantee as to what you kind of squash or pumpkin you will get as a result.

Pinch out the leader - the topmost shoot - on tomatoes to stop them growing and to encourage them to concentrate on ripening. Take out stakes of cordon tomatoes and lay the plants down on straw. Cover with cloches to speed things up if necessary. Oddly,



it is not so much sunshine but warmth that ripens them. Another way is to put the green tomatoes in a drawer, dark box or brown paper bags with a ripe banana or apple. The ethylene gas - a natural gas that is also in tomatoes – that they emit will do the trick.



There should be plenty of soft fruit to [pick and eat or conserve in one way or another](#). Pick it when firm and fully coloured, when it comes off the plant without resistance but is still not quite ripe. Gooseberries and strawberries are harvested by breaking the stalk. Blackberries, their hybrids and raspberries come clean off leaving a little plug behind them. Currants are harvested in strigs, or bunches. The early apples and pears will start to come in and are ready when they part from the tree with a light twist of the wrist. Early varieties don't store as well as the main crop next month. Fruits on the sunniest part of the tree or plant will ripen first so usually it takes several goes to gather the whole crop.

We are coming up to the time for autumn clearance and preparing the ground for winter. Chase any weeds as you harvest. Start to build up a new compost heap. We'll look at the options of what to do with the empty land next month.

## Comments

6 comments, displaying Oldest first

- g

Staff
- c

Contributor

Comments on this page are now closed.

<div></div> <div><b>allanjenkins</b> 3 September 2012 4:22PM</div> <div><div>g</div></div>	<div>Recommend (0)</div> <div>Responses (0)</div> <div><u>Report</u></div> <div><u>Share</u></div>
<div></div> <div><b>nahema</b> 3 September 2012 7:29PM</div> <div>Yes sow leaves!I am going to tomorrow .After I have read which ones to sow now in Charles Dowding's " How to grow winter vegetables" I seem to remember you said that you had a joint copy? Good luck .</div>	<div>Recommend (1)</div> <div>Responses (0)</div> <div><u>Report</u></div> <div><u>Share</u></div>
<div></div> <div><b>nahema</b> 3 September 2012 7:30PM</div>	<div>Recommend (0)</div> <div>Responses (0)</div>

Sorry ,I forgot to say what a good post this is Caroline,but then I do always enjoy them!

[Report](#)
[Share](#)

**deborahsm**

3 September 2012 11:29PM

Franchi have some lovely winter salads and chicories. Have sown, a couple of weeks ago, coriander (shooting up) parsley, chervil( almost ready to harvest) corn salad, chicories, mustard, rockets and cima di foglia, cavolo nero, broccoli (late I know) Picked some wonderful bunches of mixed salad leaves from thinnings..

Neighbour Mick and I are experimenting with sowing seeds now, with the warm weather everything is germinating fast. We want to try and produce food all winter. Mick has brilliant cold frame and winter protection ideas.

If you visit in the next days Allan I can give you a whole collection of seedlings, everything has geminated in abundance. Beautiful day today, the raspberries are at their peak. Why do so many allotment holders never visit to pick their fruit?

Must get Charles Dowding's book, thanks for reminding me nahema

[Recommend \(1\)](#)
[Responses \(0\)](#)
[Report](#)
[Share](#)

**allanjenkins**

4 September 2012 8:43AM

course! will read charles's winter copmpanion, thanks everyone, will also try to get to you too deborah

[Recommend \(0\)](#)
[Responses \(0\)](#)
[Report](#)
[Share](#)

**StripSideMaddie**

4 September 2012 8:16PM

Allan - there's also Dowding's Salad Leaves For All Seasons.

I've got some Cos Lettuce Lobjoits, Lollo Rossa, and Radicchio to go in under polythene.

[Recommend \(1\)](#)
[Responses \(0\)](#)
[Report](#)
[Share](#)

Comments on this page are now closed.