

It's that time of Year

This is the exciting time of year when the first seedlings start to appear and we start to find time to visit our plot in the evenings. These are the months that transform our plots from mostly soil to an almost complete array of vegetation.

The weather is getting warmer, the days are getting longer and it is time to plant and sow outdoors. Established plants will need feeding, seeds need to be sown, and young seedlings will require potting on.

But watch out for frost during May (by June there should be no risk), keep plants watered as we move into summer, and keep slugs and other pests at bay.

These are also very important months for keeping on top of weeds – conditions are also right for these to grow - so regularly hoe and hand pick out weeds. Hoeing also helps the ground to retain moisture – find out other ways of doing this in the newsletter article below.

As we move towards early summer remember to: earth up your spuds – applying earth around the base of plant stems will reduce tubers' exposure to frost as well as keeping them in the dark to stop them turning green; thin out direct-sown crops such as spinach, carrots and lettuce; and move leeks and brassicas to their final positions.

Remember to ventilate your greenhouse on warm days, and consider using blinds or shades to avoid excessive temperatures, and damping down pathways to maintain moisture levels (and discourage mites).



Jobs

April: Erect pea-sticks and bean supports, prune cherry and plum trees. Keep an eye on pests – slugs/snails, aphids

May: Harden off plants by leaving them outside during the day and under cover at night.

Ensure that plants do not dry up – remember that occasional thorough watering is often better than more frequent light watering.

Plant

April (outdoors) - second earlies and maincrop potatoes, carrots, beetroot, parsnips, squashes, French & runner beans, sweetcorn.

(under cover) - Tomatoes, aubergine and other fruiting veg.

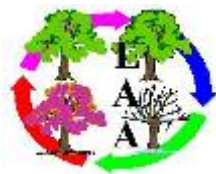
May: (outdoors) Basil, beetroot, Brussels sprouts, cabbages, carrots, courgette, squash, pumpkin, cucumber

(under cover), French and runner beans, lettuce, peas, sweetcorn, cauliflower, sprouting broccoli, aubergines, pepper

Harvest

April: (more) rhubarb, spinach and chard, spring cabbages, asparagus

May: Broccoli, cauliflower, lettuce, spinach, spring cabbage, asparagus



Update from the Committee

Health and Safety Inspections – The next inspections will be undertaken during April. Please take care to ensure that your plots are safe and tidy– e.g. that there are no trip hazards and any broken glass is removed from plots. There is evidence of rat holes at some parts of our sites so please try and control their presence by blocking runs, regularly turning compost heaps, and restricting discarded fruit and vegetable to compost bins/heaps.

Membership Subscriptions – A big thank you to those of you who have renewed their subscriptions. Reminders will be sent out over the next week or two for the few remaining unpaid membership fees.

AGM/Barbecue Update – Details of arrangements for our Annual General Meeting and the Association’s barbecue are subject to the easing of Lockdown restrictions and we hope to be able to announce firm plans by the end of May.

The Shop – There was a good day of trading when on the shop’s first day of the year: Saturday 20th March, with members making use of contactless payments including iZettle. A price list was sent to those members who have supplied email addresses in advance so that members were aware of the range available.

Contact Details - If you have changed email address or are not receiving email updates from the Association please send your latest contact details to us at email@longcroftallotmentassociation.org.uk.

Digswell – There was a strong turnout for the working party on 3 April which cleared the former ‘cat-shed’. This generated unwanted items that are now piled up outside the shed - help yourself if any items are of use.



Broadwater – A Muntjac deer recently found its way to the site from the railway embankment border - thank you to those who helped to escort it off the premises.

New Members – No new members have recently joined but our waiting lists are continuing to grow.

Polite Reminder

Trees and structures - please remember that if you wish to erect a shed or a poly-tunnel then you will need permission from the Association (and there are size limits). The same applies if you intend to plant trees (other than dwarf varieties) on your plot. Normally there won’t be an objection unless it is likely to impact on other plot-holders in either the short or long term.

The relevant forms and details of the requirements/restrictions can be found at:
<https://longcroftallotmentassociation.org.uk/requests-and-forms>.

Down at the Shed

The LAA shop will open on the following Saturdays between 09.30 and 12.00:

April 10th, April 24th, May 15th, June 12th, July 17th, August 14th, Sept. 11th, Oct 16th.

The numbers allowed in the shop at a time will be controlled and usual distancing rules will apply.

Preferred payment is via a card, ideally touchless.





Chitted Sweetcorn?

Chitting potatoes is a widespread practice but did you know that you can also chit sweetcorn? And April is the time to give it a try!

The Allotment Gardening web-site describes how this can be done, and in a way which “never fails to produce a good crop with a high germination rate”. For more information visit the following link:

<https://www.allotment-garden.org/vegetable/sweetcorn-growing/>



Retaining Moisture

The arrival of spring heat, along with bright sunshine and low humidity, increases evaporation of moisture from the soil. Also, in April and May, the weather can be highly variable there can be several days (or weeks) without rain so it is important to help retain moisture in the soil.

Water is naturally drawn to the surface where it is lost by evaporation. The primary benefit of hoeing is to damage the roots of weeds but the process of hoeing leaves a covering of fine soil which restricts evaporation.

Generous applications of well-rotted organic matter will improve any soil and help with water retention. Nutrient rich compost and (well-rotted) manures are most effective during the growing season whilst lower fertility soil improvers such as leaf mould can be added at any time.

Mulching –the addition of organic matter to the surface of the soil – provides a further barrier to evaporation and can help the soil to absorb rainwater. Mulch should be applied to soft fruits in early spring and to vegetable crops when they have grown to a few inches in height. Although manure and compost are commonly used mulches any organic matter will retain moisture can be used such as wood chips, straw, or early grass cuttings which are often freely available, natural alternatives. Old carpet and purpose-made sheets provide further options.

Remove weeds, particularly deep-rooted perennial weeds, to reduce demands on the soil’s reserves of moisture. All plants require moisture so removing all plants other than those you’re trying to grow will prolong the availability of that moisture in the soil.

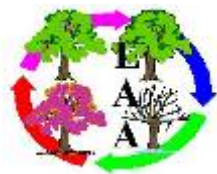
If watering is required then occasional deep watering is more effective than frequent, shallow watering and helps plant roots to grow stronger and more quickly. Sunken flower pots or cut-off plastic bottles can help reduce evaporation during water and allow more water to sink into the ground.





Crop Planner

	key:					
			sow			
			plant			
			harvest			
	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep
Broad Bean						
Runner Bean						
Pea						
Potatoes						
Leek						
Onion / Shallot						
Garlic						
Beetroot						
Carrot						
Swede / Turnip						
Courgette						
Pumpkin / Winter Squash						
Tomatoes						
Chilli / Aubergine						
Chard/Leaf Beet						
Cabbage						
Kale						
Black/Redcurrants						
Raspberries						
Strawberries						
Fruit Trees						



Preparing Seedbeds



April is too early to plant most crops outdoors, but the perfect time to ensure that beds are ready for planting from early May.

The soil should be broken down into small, evenly sized particles. Any large stones or woody plant material should be removed. Regularly rake the bed so that the soil is level, and hoe the soil to prevent weed growth. Hoeing and raking should be done when the soil is dry, so that it is crumbly in texture – the elusive “tilth”.

Ideally organic matter would have been applied in the autumn, but well-rotted compost/manure can be added and raked in now. There is no need to dig the ground because young seedlings have shallow root systems (and digging risks bringing weed seeds to the surface).

Covering the bed ahead of planting will suppress weeds and also help to warm the soil, allowing seed growth to start earlier and thereby gaining valuable days/weeks.

Avoid treading on the seedbed after it is prepared and allow it to mature for 10-14 days before planting seeds or transplanting seedlings.

Early Spring Recipe

Nettle Soup

A “win-win” of a soup – a satisfying combination of a delicious and nutritious snack and the removal of a nuisance invader from the plot!

Make sure you wear gloves when picking, and select only the youngest 4-5 leaves together with the bud.

Substitute nettle leaves for spinach if you are not feeling so adventurous.

Ingredients (serves two as a lunch, four as a starter):

- 200 (8oz.) nettle leaves
- 1-2 large onions
- 100 (4oz.) butter
- 4-5 cloves garlic
- 1 pint vegetable or chicken stock
- 100g (4oz.) thick cream or crème fraiche
- Salt and pepper to taste



Wash and rinse the nettles and set aside to drain.

Finely chop and fry the onions in butter until golden brown, adding the garlic cloves, crushed for the last 2-3 minutes. Add the nettles and stock and simmer gently for a few minutes.

Blend the soup into a smooth puree and season with salt and pepper. Pour into serving bowls, and decorate with a generous swirl of cream/crème fraiche. Serve with fresh crusty bread.



Worms – Help Around the Clock

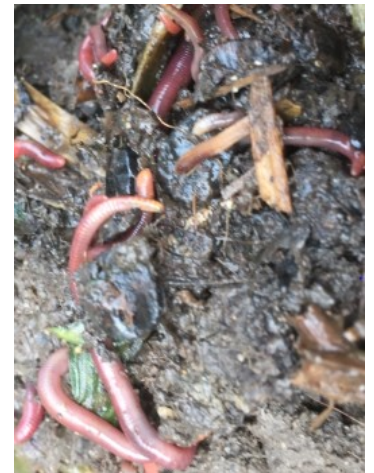
Healthy soil is based on underground biological activity – particularly those of earthworms.

Worms help to create the soil that the plants live in, increasing the quality of soil around the clock. They do this by digesting organic matter (bacteria, dead plants, leaves, etc.) on the surface and depositing them as “casts”. Worm casts are extremely fertile, containing more calcium, iron and phosphates than the soil around them, and also containing nitrogen and potassium. They also bind soil particles together, improving soil structure.

Worms burrow around within the soil, particularly in the vicinity of plant roots, which helps to aerate the soil, bringing oxygen to plant roots, and create pathways for water and roots. Whilst compost dwelling worms are non-burrowing, some species of earthworms burrow only in the upper layers of soil whilst others burrow to depths of up to two metres (6ft) in dry weather.

Worms breathe through their skin which needs to stay moist, so we can help them by:

- Applying mulches of straw, lawn clippings, leaves or shredded newspaper/paper bags serve.
- Only digging when absolutely necessary
- Controlling their natural predators (which include ants, snails, slugs)



Comments and Feedback



If you have any news, tips, features, recipes or photographs that you would like to submit for future issues of the Newsletter please send them to...

Newsletter Editor: email@longcroftallotmentassociation.org.uk.

Visit the Longcroft Allotment Association website: www.longcroftallotmentassociation.org.uk

