



It's that time of Year

Although often the coldest month of the year, February is when the allotment year really starts – after the cold and wet days of January there should be more opportunity to start working on the soil, particularly if it is free draining.

The days are starting to get longer so there's more time to get crops started under cover and tend to the plot.



Winter is starting to recede and spring is on its way. It's time to prepare beds for the year ahead. The days are unpredictable and the ground can be too cold or wet to guarantee plant growth, so keep an eye out for damaging frosts. But that shouldn't stop us from taking our chances and start planting crops. And if the weather is fine you can dig compost trenches so that legumes' and squashes' beds are rich in nutrients and moisture throughout their growing summer months.

In greenhouses, polytunnels and on windowsills some of the earliest sowings can be made, giving summer crops a start for the season ahead. Peas, carrots, beetroot and lettuce can be planted out under cloches.

Seed potatoes are ready for chitting early seed potatoes, and you should dig some organic matter in ready for their planting. If you have a soil thermometer, when the reading is above 7degC you can consider whether or not to plant out the chitted potatoes and sow the first seeds of the year.



Jobs

February: Dig over your plot and add well-rotted organic material, chit seed potatoes. Last chance to prune hard fruit trees.

March: Prune berries, prepare frames/ cloches/ fleece. Weed, remove large stones and rake seedbeds and apply fertilisers. Dig bean trenches.

Plant

February: (outdoors) Garlic and shallots, broad beans, fruit trees and bushes, (under cover) peas, spinach, broccoli, tomatoes

March: Broad beans, peas, early chitted seed potatoes, onions, root and stem vegetable, cabbages and cauliflowers, lettuce and salad crops.

Harvest

February: Winter salads, kale, Brussels sprouts, swedes, cabbage, leeks, parsnips.

March: Early rhubarb, kale, sprouting broccoli, leeks and spring onions.



LAA Update

Update from the Committee:

Waiting Lists – There are currently seven people on the waiting list for plots with none being available at either site.

Water supplies to tanks – these have been isolated to prevent frost damage to pipework over winter.

Quotes for an additional water tank at Broadwater have been obtained by the Committee and, having obtained permission from the council, The Committee has agreed to install it using LAA funds– our Broadwater members can look forward to improved availability of supplies for future growing seasons.

Digswell – The trees on the eastern boundary require maintenance/pruning and it was suggested that this could be undertaken at the next work party when loppers and an extendable saw would be brought along.

Broadwater – The gate has now been repaired and an adjacent section of fence which was damaged has now been fixed with adjacent foliage trimmed to prevent the recurrence of damage.



Mulch Ado...

The weather has become more unpredictable with long dry spells and occasional periods of exceptionally wet weather. One way to help moderate these extremes on the plot is to apply mulches to your beds.

Mulch is a thick layer of organic matter which absorbs rainfall, reduces evaporation and keeps the soil warm. Ideally it should be at least 10cm (4") thick, but as this would dwarf small seedlings it can be applied in layers.

The first layer should be overlapping card or newspaper applied around any established plants. This layer's job is to block out light and suppress weeds. Weed control fabric could be applied as an alternative.

This layer is then covered with plant matter to keep it in place: grass cuttings, leaves, compost, wood chip, straw and small non-pernicious weeds (without seeds) are all ideal. This is the layer which is most effective at moderating the temperature and moisture content of the soil.

Manure can be used but this sometimes contains weed seeds so it may be better to apply a thin layer of manure below the paper/card. Mulch can be applied at any time of year and crops can be planted by simply making a hole into the soil below.



“My rule of green thumb for mulch is to double my initial estimate of bags needed, and add three. Then I'll only be two bags short” - Anon



Cavolo Nero (Tuscan Black Kale)

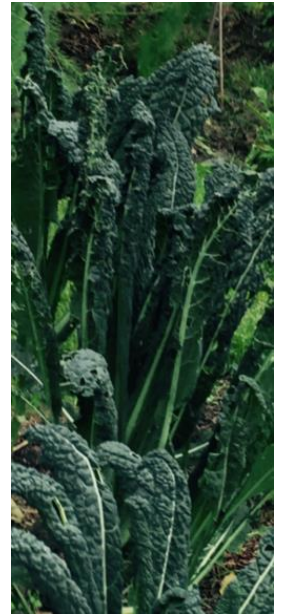
Cavolo Nero is an attractive, dark leaved variety of kale which is both decorative and attractive – it has been called curly kale's Italian cousin. Whilst kale is generally planted out in spring for harvesting in winter, they can be started under cover in March to be harvested during summer but will continue to crop into winter.

Simply fill a seed tray with a good seed compost to within 1cm of its top and water with a fine watering can. Sprinkle the seeds thinly over the surface and cover with a very thin layer of seed compost and leave in an unheated greenhouse.

Once they start to germinate, transplant each seedling into its own pot. The seedlings should be handled by their leaves, and planted almost up to their leaves.

Once hardened off, plant out.

Cavolo nero is a strong tasting kale which is perfect in stews, soups, stir fries or steamed as a vegetable accompaniment. It is high in B vitamins such as folic acid.



Early Spring Recipe

Pickled Cabbage

A delicious accompaniment to roast pork, spare ribs or German-style sausages.

- ¼ large white cabbage
- 1 onion
- 2 tablespoons sea salt
- 50g (2oz) palm (or soft brown) sugar
- 2-4 fresh green / red chillies
- 200 ml (½ pint) cider or wine vinegar
- Small bunch coriander leaves
- Small bunch mint leaves



Remove the core and finely shred the cabbage. Peel and thinly slice the onion. Combine the two ingredients with the sea salt and leave in a colander for 20-30 minutes until the leaves start to soften.

Rinse thoroughly with cold water and squeeze out all excess moisture with a tea towel or paper towels.

Put in a mixing bowl with the palm sugar, chopped chillies and vinegar and allow to steep for 30 minutes.

Just before serving, stir in the coriander and mint leaves, finely shredded.

Down at the Shed

The Shop returns in March when it will be open from 11:00-12:30 on Sundays throughout the summer – **the** place for seeds, canes, netting, value fertilisers, manures and composts.

All goods are top quality and are excellent value compared with local garden centres and DIY stores.





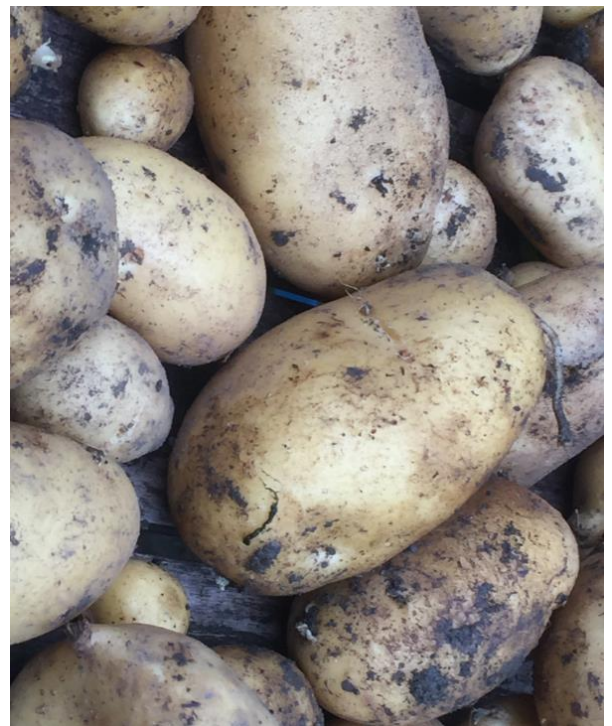
Chitting Potatoes

February is the time to prepare potatoes for planting by 'chitting' them – storing them in such a way that they start to sprout before being planted in the ground.

The potatoes should be spread out over a single layer in a cool, dry place which is free from the risk of frost. Large, unused egg boxes are ideal for this, allowing air circulation between each seed potato.

Ideally the storage area should be bright but the seed potatoes should be out of direct sunlight. After a few days the potatoes will then grow short stubby shoots which will help the potato plants to grow when they are planted out to get them off to a fast start when planted out. St Patrick's Day is the traditional day of the year to plant potatoes.

There is some evidence that you can grow larger potatoes by breaking off the weaker shoots just before planting, leaving only the three or four stronger shoots to grow.



Overwintering Plants



Overwintering herbs, chillies and other vulnerable plants reduces the need to buy new plants each year. Extending the life of existing stock also allows those plants to grow larger with more productive yields.

Plants should be lifted and potted in gritty compost before there is any risk of exposure to hard frosts. Trim the tops of each plant by up to 50% to reduce strain on the roots and to encourage new growth over the coming year. Water thoroughly and this should see the plants through until planting out in the spring.

Inspect every fortnight for signs of yellowing or falling leaves. Prune any stems which show signs of die-back to just above healthy buds. Remove any plants which show signs of disease.

When green sprouts start to emerge start watering with a weak solution of liquid feed. When there is no more risk of frost, harden off and plant out.



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 the short or long term.

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

