



## It's that time of Year

It's the start of the New Year and with it comes a new growing season. Things never slow down for gardeners and there are jobs to be done even if we're not sowing or harvesting. And any time spent actively outdoors brings mental and physical benefits – what better excuse to get down the plot?



January is usually the coldest month of the year and many planned trips to the plot are likely to be disrupted. When that happens it's an opportunity to review the year, plan ahead, sort through old seeds and restore tools. If there is a break in the weather, try and complete any winter digging – spreading compost/manure - while there is still time for the frost to further break down the soil and cover any prepared ground with plastic sheeting or tarpaulins to prevent soil becoming water logged.

Now is not the time to be tempted into rushing things – it's the time to be disciplined and patient.

## Jobs

January: Manure empty beds. chit potatoes. Winter prune fruit bushes and 'hard' fruit trees.

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.

Remember - compost, manure, grow bags, fertilisers, fleece, bamboo sticks etc., are available from the Shed.

## Plant

January: Fruit trees and fruit bushes. Garlic sets, shallots, hardy peas and broad beans (Aquadulce varieties), winter salad leaves.

February: **Outdoors** - garlic and shallots, broad beans, fruit trees and bushes. **Indoors** - peas, spinach, broccoli, tomatoes.

March: broad beans, peas, early potatoes, root/stem vegetable, onions, cabbages and cauliflowers, lettuce and salad crops.

## Harvest

January: Leeks, parsnips, swedes, hardy winter brassicas: cabbages, kale, Brussels sprouts.

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

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



## Pruning hard fruit trees

Always prune established apple and pear trees between November and February – when the weather is coldest the trees are dormant. Use sharp loppers/secateurs and ensure the blades are sharp and clean before making any cuts.

Pruning seeks to achieve three key objectives: to remove and dead, diseased or damaged wood; to remove overlapping or overcrowded branches, and; to boost the growth of buds for the year ahead. The key rules to follow are:

- Remove branches which are growing inwards, towards the trunk.
- Shorten long branches by 30-50%, and cut them at a 'lateral' – an outward growing side branch.
- Make cuts at a slight downward angle (so that rain water drains off reducing the chances of rot).
- Ensure cuts are clean by trimming any torn or ragged edges.
- Cut out any new shoots from previous pruning cuts.

Work safely – wear gloves and take regular rests to help maintain concentrate, review progress and plan the next series of cuts.



## LAA Update

### **Update from the Committee:**

**Annual General Meeting** – The Association’s Annual General Meeting will be held from 7:30pm on Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> March in the Jack Lee Hall, Woodside House. This is a great opportunity to: hear about plans for the Association; to voice your own thoughts on how to enhance our Association; and to socialise with fellow allotment holders. We be joined by James Homer, responsible for managing the Borough’s allotments, who will share the latest thinking from the Council.

**New Chairman** – In the autumn, Philip Fotheringham stood down as Chairman of the Association, having previously served as Treasurer and a long-standing member of the Committee. Andrew Hepher has volunteered to take over Philip's role, as Chairman-elect, until the next AGM. I’m sure all members would like to join me in welcoming Andrew to the role, and to Philip for his years of invaluable service to the Committee.

**Help with the Shop** – we are seeking volunteers to help man our shop – The Shed – for a few hours at weekends. It’s a good chance to support your association, meet other ploholders, and plan your purchases for the coming year.

**Digswell** – The next Work Parties is scheduled for Saturday 6 April – please help out if you can.

**Broadwater** –Covers have been fitted the water troughs at the site for health and safety reasons. Please ensure you replace these after use.

**New Members:** Since the last newsletter was sent out we have been joined by Miss Melanie Oduka, Miss Allyson Hawes, Mr. Miguel Trigueira, Mr. Eddie Sanson, Mr. Jeff Harper, Mrs. Jacky Ball and Mr. Robin Creasy.

**Communal fruit trees:** At both Broadwater and Digswell sites there are several fruit trees on communal areas from which members can help themselves, of course in moderation. If you have any doubts about the location of these communal areas please ask your site reps for clarification.

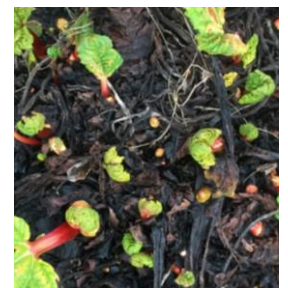


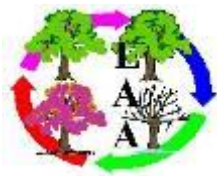
## Forcing Rhubarb

Forced rhubarb, also known as ‘Champagne rhubarb’, is much sweeter and tenderer than ‘normal’ rhubarb and is easy grow. Encourage early growth by covering an established rhubarb plant with a few handfuls of straw over the rhubarb ‘crown’ and place an inverted bin (if you don’t have a rhubarb forcer) to encourage earlier growth.

The above process raises the temperature around the plant and the absence of light stimulates early growth. The process is associated with an area in West Yorkshire known as the rhubarb triangle, and produces a paler crop, with thinner stems and a higher sugar concentration. The stems grow upwards within the cover and should be harvested when they are 200-300mm (8-12”) long.

And it’s all the better for being available at a time of year when there is precious little fruit around.





### Crop Planner

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
key:						
Broad Bean						
Runner Bean						
Pea						
Potatoes	chit	chit				
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						



## Plant them now – Broad Beans

Broad beans can be planted from October through to February, but the earlier they go in the better the crop is likely to be, but spring sown crops will produce only a few weeks later than overwintered plants – so if you haven't planted yet there is still plenty of time. Their early flowers attract insects so they will help to pollinate other crops.

Plant in well-drained soil with plenty of organic matter dug in.

Seeds should be planted 50mm (2") deep, 20cm (8") apart in rows that are 60cm (2') apart to allow air to circulate around the established plants (road beans are susceptible to chocolate spot in cool, damp weather. Water every two weeks during dry weather. Beware of slug/snail damage when the plants begin to emerge. If your plot is exposed then the compact shape of dwarf varieties will protect them from the wind.

'Pinching out' the tops of plants regularly has two benefits: it encourages pod growth (rather than foliage); and it encourages fewer blackfly which are attracted to younger, sappier leaves.

The beans should be picked by pulling the pods sharply downwards and are ripe when the beans within are about the size of the top joint of a finger. The flowers are also edible and can be added to salads.



## Crops to grow in pots

Growing vegetables in pots can be a good way to minimise weed growth and control plant growth. Pots also make a change from rows of crops providing visual interest to the plot.

Most types of soft fruit and vegetables will grow in pots. Salad leaves and onions, herbs, garlic, tomatoes, potatoes, strawberries, currants and chillies are often grown in pots, and potatoes can be grown in pots or potato bags. Carrots, beetroot and courgettes can also be successfully grown in pots, but seem to be less common (but for no good reason!). Whatever you decide to grow it's best to use plants that have been developed to be smaller than usual - dwarf, compact or mini varieties. Some vegetables are not well suited to pots: brassicas; tall growing vegetables such as sweetcorn; and 'thirsty' crops.

The key rules are:

- Use pots that are big enough – generally diameters of 30cm or more produce the best results
- Use good quality compost – the plants have limited soil in which to grow so their soil should be full of nutrients
- Water regularly – the soil in pots dries out more quickly than those in the ground.



## Down at the Shed

The Shed reopens from Sunday 3rd March. It will be open from 11:00-12:30 on Sundays throughout the summer – the place for seeds, canes, netting, value fertilisers, manures, composts and light gardening equipment.

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







## Reshaping your plot

Now that there is so little growing on the plot, it's a good time to visualise how it might be redesigned and reshaped.

Firstly think about the layout, and how you can provide access to all beds without compacting the soil. This can be achieved through a combination of grassed areas, paving, soft paving such as gravel or woodchip, and strategically placed slabs.

Some plants take up a lot more space than others: squashes, rhubarb, tomatoes are likely to spread, whereas carrots, beetroot, leafy crops and the alliums are space-saving. Similarly, construct frames and plan to grow taller plants (sweetcorn, runner beans, etc.) where they won't cast too much unwanted shade.

Taking this a step further, some crops can be grown in combination where they require different nutrients. For example, growing onions amongst carrots can help deter carrot fly and the 'three sisters' – sweetcorn, climbing beans and squash – complement each other as they grow.

Some plants can provide visual interest – e.g. taller flowering plants such as artichokes or cardoons, and crops with colourful foliage such as mixed chard varieties and some brassicas. Most flowers will also add interest and attract pollenating insects.

Desirable features:

- An open site with long hours of sunlight
- Shelter from northerly and/or prevailing winds
- Well drained soil
- Easy access to all growing areas
- Space to store compost, tools and to relax

Undesirable features:

- Tall trees that block out light and have roots which take moisture from crops
- Exposure to strong/cold winds
- Soil that is prone to waterlogging



## Winter Recipes

### Chinese Style Chard

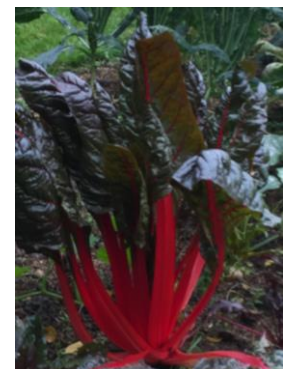
An accompaniment to an oriental meal or quick and easy snack on its own.

- 150-250g (6-8oz) of chard
- 1 tbspn sesame or sunflower oil
- 3-4 cloves garlic, crushed
- 1 tbspn dark soy sauce
- Chilli seeds (optional)

Blanche the chard in salted water for 2-3 minutes and drain.

Heat the oil in a hot frying pan or wok, add the chard and garlic (and chilli seeds if you like additional spice). Stir occasionally for 3-4 minutes. Add the soy sauce and stir for a further 2-3 minutes.

Serve hot, with additional soy sauce to taste.





## Brussels Sprouts Salad

Raw fresh Brussels Sprouts are surprisingly good raw in salads – give them a go in this variation of a Waldorf!

- 50g (2oz.) fresh nuts (hazelnuts or walnuts are ideal)
- 100g (4oz.) fresh Brussels Sprouts
- 2-3 tablespoons of dressing (olive oil with wine or cider vinegar)
- One apple – Cox's Orange Pippin is perfect
- 25-50g (1-2oz) stilton or strong Cheddar
- Seasoning – salt and crushed black peppercorns

Pre-heat oven to 180°C and toast the nuts for 10 minutes. Allow to cool and chop or slice thinly.

Peel the sprouts and slice thinly. Put them in a small bowl and toss with the dressing and seasoning. Thinly slice the apple and stir in with the sprouts.

Crumble the cheese and loosely toss with the sprouts/apple. Sprinkle with the nuts and serve.



## 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...

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