



Monthly tips for Low Moor Allotments



General tips

Somewhere near your plot will be somebody who has been working their allotment since before you were even born, who is itching to give you more advice than you can possibly cope with. Watch what they're doing and ask them questions. But, remember, if you ask three different people for their opinions, you'll get three different answers. Ask them anyway!

On the other hand, old allotment hands might well dismiss all new-fangled theories, like planting in raised beds without digging, or planting according to the phases of the moon to increase growth rate and crop size. But you'll never really know if these new ideas work until you try them out for yourself! Read books: there are some excellent month-by-month vegetable gardening books available.

What tools do I need? Basically, a spade. Yes, there are all manner of tools out there, but if you had to name just one tool it would have to be a good spade. If I had to name two things, mmmm. Decent leather gloves are always useful for pulling up brambles and nettles, etc., as is a watering can or bucket, but once you start listing non-essential tools it's hard to stop!



Every plot has a compost heap, not just because most allotmenters are into recycling and reducing their household waste, but also because compost is an excellent way of fertilising your crops, either by spreading it on the surface or by burying it in the trench that you put the plants in. Compost heaps need to be kept not too wet, not too dry, and there is a real science to getting them to rot down perfectly. If you get it right, your compost will be quite dry, crumbly and not at all smelly. Two compost bins allow you to have one 'current' and one that is covered over to steam away gently, gradually reducing in size and growing in goodness, until you are ready to use it.

Invest some time in mending your fences: rabbits, who just love eating what you grow, can jump up to about 2 feet (60cms), so you will need to erect and maintain barriers about 3 feet (90cms) high all the way round your plot. Not only can rabbits jump over your fences, they can also burrow beneath them. When erecting a fence, sink the bottom 12" (30cms) below the soil and angle it outwards. This should discourage rabbits from digging a tunnel through to your crops. The skies aren't safe either: hungry pigeons will do huge damage, so use netting to protect tender young plants like peas and beans.

Scavenging materials is one of the joys of allotmenting: you will be amazed what you can get for free from skips and building sites: timber, wire, lightweight windows, even unwanted tools and plants. Chicken wire or similar fencing is not always the easiest thing to get hold of, but always keep an eye out!



Onions and potatoes are easy enough to grow, but you might think they're too cheap in the supermarkets to bother growing for yourself. You might well change your mind on that, but why not try growing things that cost more in the supermarket: for example red onions, unusual varieties of salad potatoes, rocket, asparagus... One red onion bought in a supermarket costs more than a whole bag of baby onions (called 'onion sets') from the Low Moor shop! Brunswick Organic Nursery in Bishopthorpe (a nice cycle along the river and across the racecourse) sells some of the most interesting baby salad leaf plants money can buy, as well as lots of other lovely things.

Soft fruits (raspberries, blackberries, tayberries, gooseberries, redcurrants, blackcurrants) cost a fortune for a small punnet in the supermarkets, although they never taste as good as fruit you've just picked yourself, so fruit bushes are an excellent long-term investment. Although most fruit bushes will not start to give you fruit for a year or so, once established, they will more-or-less look after themselves, especially if you cover the ground surface around them with 'mulch' (finely chipped bark is an excellent option) which will keep most of the weeds down and keep the moisture in the soil. Don't plant fruit bushes until you're sure you've got rid of the nasty weeds, like thistles, nettles and couch grass, which may take you up to two years to complete. If the roots of these nasties get in amongst your fruit bushes, you might regret you ever planted them!

January

Stay in pub

Alternatively, you might like to prepare for the growing season by cleaning and disinfecting your tools and other equipment. Bacteria and fungi will happily spend the winter nestling in the crevices of your pots etc., emerging in the warmer weather to kill your plants. Most at risk are seedlings, which can be quickly killed by a disease called 'damping off'. This is caused by a variety of soil-borne micro-organisms and cannot be treated. It can be avoided by good garden hygiene, however, so spend some of the winter vigorously scrubbing your pots, trays, tools etc., before disinfecting with Jeyes Fluid. It is also worthwhile applying the same treatment to your glasshouse, cold frame, cloches etc.

February

Emerge from pub and dig vigorously to keep warm.

Thorough soil cultivation at this time helps to bring lots of slug and snail eggs to the surface, where they will be killed by the colder weather.

Are you sure you pruned all your fruit trees? If not, you'd better be quick!

The Gardeners' Store opens in early February, so go along to pay this year's Association subs and get stocked up.

March

Return to pub, but only after dark.

There are several species of frost-hardy lettuce (for example, Moroccan Little Gem) which you can plant out as seedlings in mid-March for very early salads.

Onions can go in now too, particularly towards the middle/end of the month. The store sells onion sets at very reasonable prices; they are the easiest (and one of the most rewarding) things to plant. Space them at least a handspan apart, leaving just their tops showing above the surface.

April

April is the month where you need to work hardest to get things sown indoors and planted outdoors: April showers and warmer weather make everything suddenly spring into life.

You can sow: aubergines, basil, beetroot, broad beans, Brussels sprouts, cabbages (for summer and winter harvesting), calabrese, carrots, cauliflowers, celeriac, celery, coriander, endives, French beans (dwarf and climbing) kale, kohlrabi, landcress, leaf beet, leeks, lettuces, mint (although if you're not bothered what variety of mint you have, just go and ask a neighbour if they can spare a root or two!), parsley, parsnips, peas, peppers, pickling onions, radishes, salsify, scorzonera, spinach, spring onions, purple sprouting broccoli, swedes, tomatoes, turnips. *NB.* You might want to keep mint in a pot in the ground, it's extremely vigorous once it gets established.



You can plant: asparagus, broad beans, onions, calabrese, carrots, endives, globe artichokes, kohlrabi, lavender, leaf beet, lettuces, maincrop potatoes, summer cabbages. Traditionally, people aim to get their potatoes planted by Good Friday. But Spring now comes two weeks earlier than it did 50 years ago, so if we have a spell of warm weather in late March, you should consider planting before then.

But don't be too eager to put out your tender plants too early; unexpected frost, hail or even snow might kill them.

Dig in your green manure.

May

Surround carrot seedlings with a 15-inch (40cms) high wall of fleece or clear plastic. Adult carrot flies, whose babies will ruin your carrots, fly close to the ground and will not cross a barrier of this height. Also, they don't like onions, so plant a row of onions on both sides of your carrot rows.

This month should see the remainder of any plants you started off in the greenhouse or on a window ledge inside planted out. This includes sweetcorn, courgettes, pumpkins, squashes, brassicas, cabbages, tomatoes, etc..

Don't forget to cage up your strawberries with netting as they start to ripen towards the end of the month. As soon as the first blush of pink appears, blackbirds and others will be at them!



Big weeding month. This is when the little blighters get their toes in the door of your veg patch - make sure you nip them in the bud!

June

Make as big a cage as you can for your soft fruits like raspberries. These often need harvesting every few days or so, and making the cages small leads to cramped legs and bad tempers! You can buy big canes and nets at the shop very cheaply.



June and July are perhaps the busiest months on the allotment, as everything comes up for harvest and to keep on top of things, you need to be going every couple of days. It's amazing how quickly things grow during this period, especially after some rain. Watch for things like rocket going to seed. You can harvest early cropping potatoes now, as well as many of the soft fruits. Raspberries, blackcurrants and gooseberries are all ready to be picked now.

July

August

As broad beans come to an end, don't pull up the plants, but cut them right down. Burn the tops to prevent the spread of any diseases, but leave the roots to rot down, because the tiny nodules on them contain nitrogen that will enrich the soil. If you're really lucky, the plant may sprout again and give you a last handful of beans.

Plant white (spring) onions now; when it starts to get frosty, cover them with plastic cloches and they'll keep growing till Spring. You don't have to eat them when they're the size of pencils, if you leave them to grow, they'll get as big as golf balls.

Eat blackberries, lots of 'em!

September

You should still be too busy harvesting to be reading this.

Are your apples and pears all in? (if your pears aren't in by now, they won't be worth eating!). Clear away windfalls to try and reduce the codling moth next year.

October

By now you should be receiving seed catalogues. Look in the back of gardening magazines like *Gardener's World* or *The Garden* for the companies' phone numbers. Most will be happy to send you a catalogue for free, while others may make a small charge. It is worthwhile ordering as early as possible from the more specialist companies, especially if you are after something unusual, as they have only a finite amount of seed.

November

Plant broad beans now, and winter frosts will toughen up the new growth, so that when mature, the tiny aphids that can spoil broad beans will be less attracted to them.

The shop closes at the end of the month, so make sure you've got everything you need, such as groundcover, timber for fencing, manure before it does.

December

Harvest Brussels sprouts. Boil for 3 weeks, or until they disintegrate, in time for Christmas lunch.

Ask Santa for good quality gardening books. Anything by the RHS is usually a good buy. Or you could ask for a gift subscription to a magazine like *Gardening Which?* Or a gift membership of the RHS. Anything just to avoid socks and bath foam really.

Prune those apple and pear trees back. The basic principle is simple, clear out the middle of the tree to let more light and air in. Circulating air and plenty of light gets rid of most of the fruit that are prone to rot on the bough. Don't cut off all your fruiting tips, but you should keep applying the same principle. It is better to get fewer, bigger fruit than lots of small, half-rotten ones! This is also a good time (November-January) to plant new fruit trees.

