

Jobs on the plot

The winter weather is upon us and as the dark mornings and evenings draw in there is less opportunity to spend time on your plot. This doesn't mean you should stop tending your plot altogether though, as there are growing veg to care for and tasks to complete to keep your outside space in tip top condition for next season. You can also harvest veg ready for your Christmas dinner, including Brussels sprouts and parsnips!

THE CONTAINER GARDEN

- Keep pots raised to prevent any waterlogging issues as this can cause roots to rot.
- Use containers that are no longer in use to store crops such as parsnips and leeks that have been unearthed because of the wet weather.
- Don't let the strong winter storms batter your plants, keep them safe by moving them under cover or to a sheltered part of the plot.
- Prepare for frost problems by using bubble polythene wrap to insulate your plants (especially the roots) growing in pots outside.

"HARVEST FLAVOUR-FILLED CROPS FOR YOUR CHRISTMAS DINNER"

THE FRUIT GARDEN

- Although December is a key month to prune dormant fruit trees, avoid peaches, nectarines and plums as doing this now will create open wounds on the tree. This makes the plant more susceptible to silver leaf disease, so leave this activity until the summer to keep these trees disease free.
- Choose a space on the plot to plant fruit trees this winter, but check that the ground hasn't frozen over or is waterlogged from a period of heavy rain. You should avoid these situations and wait for the conditions to be more favourable before planting.
- Create a fruit bush patch on your plot in a sheltered, sunny area – planting now when growth is reduced is the perfect time. Decide whether you want blackberries, raspberries or currants, like red, white or black, and purchase specimens from reputable suppliers. Considering the different requirements of the plants is key to success.
- If the weather is particularly rainy then this can increase the risk of diseases spreading, like peach leaf curl. To help prevent this issue, put a plastic sheet over the tree.

Seasonal tasks

THE VEGETABLE GARDEN

- Despite the chilly weather you can still plant crops during December, from garlic cloves to shallot sets – your plot doesn't have to be empty during these cold months.
- Pick crops ready for your Christmas dinner, including kale and Brussels sprouts, take the latter when walnut-sized. Bring the potatoes out of storage, and earth up parsnips – make sure you lift these roots before the ground freezes solid!
- Keep your veg plot productive by sowing winter hardy veg. Broad bean 'Aquadulce Claudia' can be sown in December and will produce early yields come spring next year.
- Crops which are growing outside in the veg patch are vulnerable to damage from winter weather – use fleece and cloches to protect them.
- Stake Brussels sprouts which are growing to prevent wind rock, this is especially important for leggy specimens that are more vulnerable to this problem. You can also remove leaves that have turned yellow.
- Pick salads you are growing under cover this winter such as mizuna, mibuna and lamb's lettuce and enjoy straightaway.

Under cover

- *Care for crops growing under cover this winter, checking for pests and diseases, and watering plants appropriately.*
- *If it snows then clear this off the greenhouse glass and tops of polytunnels to prevent damage from the weight, and this will also increase light levels.*
- *Keep crops growing under cover warm with a standing heater, although this won't be needed all of the time, but when the weather turns particularly cold it will be useful.*
- *You will need to keep the doors and windows open less during the day, although do keep vents open to allow air circulation.*
- *If you have space, don't let remaining container plants suffer outside, bring them under cover to protect them.*
- *Insulate the inside of your greenhouse with horticultural bubble wrap, to keep the warm air in and your plants at a desirable temperature.*

PROBLEM OF THE MONTH:

pigeons

Pigeons can make a meal of crops you are growing throughout the year, but in winter they are after any tasty brassicas that you are cultivating outside in the veg patch. To keep any cabbages and other crops safe over winter there is a simple solution, which also helps protect crops against the frosty weather. Simply place fleece and cloches over brassicas to stop these feathered pests pecking away at the foliage.

The herb garden

When harvesting herbs growing indoors don't be tempted to take a large amount from just one plant as this will negatively affect its vigour. Just take several leaves at once to leave opportunity for the plant to regrow again. For a top tip, herbs don't like growing in waterlogged soil so be careful not to overwater, especially leaving their roots wet overnight is unfavourable.

December focus on: reflecting on the season

Assessing the season and contemplating how this growing year went is a great way to make the most of your plot and achieve your dream veg patch in the future. What crops did you grow that were a huge success? Would you grow vegetables in different areas of the plot next year? What went well and things that didn't are really important to consider as these factors will influence your decisions for next year. Have a look through seed catalogues to find inspiration, too.