ADDISCOMBE, WOODSIDE & SHIRLEY LEISURE GARDENS LTD
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Janet Macdonald's tips for getting the best out of your allotment
January/February 2020

- Cabbages and Brussels sprouts like to grow in firm ground, so prepare their site for this year's sowing early to let it consolidate, then trample all over it to make sure it is really firm. For Brussels sprouts already growing, stake them to stop them rocking in the wind, and earth up the bottom of the stems.
- Save waxed paper milk cartons to use as cheap plant pots. Being square, the milk cartons are easier to fit together in a tray, and you can easily make drainage holes by cutting off corners.

- **Onions**
- Get your onion sets in the ground as soon as weather permits. Onions go through a growth cycle that involves putting on top growth until there are a certain number of hours of daylight, then switch to making a bulb. If you plant them late, they don't have time to get a decent size.
- Buy more onion sets than you need and plant them closer than the recommended spacing. Then pull alternate onions when they are big enough to use as spring onions.
- Plant onion sets so they are covered by the soil rather than with their necks sticking out. This prevents their being pulled out by birds and will not affect the size of the crop.
- If your stored onions start sprouting, don't throw them away. Just pop them in the soil or a pot of compost and they will grow into spring onions. The outer layers may be a bit messy, but the centre will be fine.
- Buy onion or shallot sets that have been heat treated to prevent them putting up a flower spike. Although you can pinch these out, onions that have done this will not keep as long.
- **Don't forget to plant a single (lonely) petunia in the onion patch.**
- Keep bonfire ash away from potatoes – it makes the skins scabby.

Keep an eye on your stored produce and go over it regularly, like once a week. If you find items that have gone too far for ordinary cooking, it's time for making stock or a nice warming soup. Something else you can do with squash and carrots is make an orange coloured pilau. Use chunks of squash, carrots, and sweet potatoes, with a little chopped onion and cook them in the same pot as some rice and ground turmeric. Serve with flaked almonds and more onion, this lot fried crispy.

TRADING CENTRE HOURS OF OPENING

Saturday 10.30am -12.15pm. Sunday 10.30am - 12.15pm.

Canteen 9.30am - 11.30pm Sat & Sun) will continue temporarily in the hall until further notice, hopefully back in a newly refurbished canteen early to mid February.

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Tools and equipment

- Mark a set of measurements on the inside edge of your gardening boots with magic marker. Then you only have to put your foot alongside the row to see where the next seed or plant should go.
- Old tea-pots make handy tangle-free string dispensers. Paint them a bright colour so they are easy to see in the garden, put the ball of string in and feed the end out through the spout.
- Paint the handles of small tools a bright colour so you can find them easily after you've put them down.
- For easier digging, try continental shafts for your spades and forks. They look like a heavy broom handle and give more leverage than the usual short shafts.
- Cut up old tights and stockings to use as plant ties. Slice them diagonally and slip them over your hand onto your wrist until needed.
- Electrical multicore wiring, such as that used for old-fashioned land-line telephones, makes useful twist ties. Just strip off the outer layer and cut the coloured inners up into usable lengths – ideal for fixing raspberry canes to support wires.

Like baked potatoes? Got a microwave? Treat yourself to a soft potato baking bag. They only cost a couple of pounds and produce a dry skinned fluffy interior just like baking in the oven – but in a few minutes rather than an hour. They also work with other veg such as courgettes, small squash, sweet potatoes, carrots, cauliflower or corn on the cob.

Many winter squashes are too big to use up quickly, but can always be used for soup. Just peel, chop and simmer in water until soft, on their own or with onion, apple or potato. Season to your taste, and finish with a dollop of thick yoghurt when serving.

Another easy, and always popular, soup is leek and potato. Use about half of each, peel and chop the potatoes and remove the outer leaves of the leeks before slicing them thinly. Simmer the two together until soft, whizz in a big blender or use a stick blender in the saucepan, season and serve with a dollop of thick yoghurt or crème fraiche and some grated nutmeg. You can also add some cider if you like.

If you are making vegetable stock to store rather than use straight away, don't put any potato or brassicas in it - the brassicas will taint the whole thing, and the potatoes will make it cloudy.

After all the rain we've been having, it's tempting to suggest growing rice, but it won't grow in our climate, so go for the substitute quinoa. Victorians called it 'Petty Rice'. The young leaves are a good spinach substitute, and the seeds are a good replacement for rice, with high food values. Wait until it has finished flowering before gathering the seed, then rinse it several times before cooking as it is quite bitter otherwise. The plants will be 5 – 6 feet tall, and the flowering heads will be various shades of orange to red – good for a cut flower, but not retaining the colour for long after picking.