

JOBS FOR DECEMBER IN THE VEG GARDEN



December on the whole is one of the quietest months for a gardener. Often the ground is too frozen or too soggy to take on much work. On the odd occasion though we're blessed with a beautiful crisp day that might encourage us to get outside, so here goes:

1. Have a close look around your garden and see if anything needs repairing or is showing signs of wear and tear. We've suffered some big gales over the past couple of weeks so stake anything that's blown over and look out for where improvements can be made to protect the plot from the elements.
2. If the ground's not too wet or frozen, take a look at the weeds growing. Recognising weed lifecycles is a tremendous help to anybody gardening organically. If you spot any that are flowering now, pull them out before they set their seeds.

3. We've just experienced some of the worst flooding in a long while, and it's quite likely that heavy rains will be occurring more and more often. If an area you're cultivating is suffering from flooding you may need to improve the drainage or consider putting in more permanent raised beds. Ditches can be dug and drainage stones and pipe placed in them that will divert water away from your beds.



If your beds are waterlogged but the water drains away fairly quickly, you may just need to dig in lots of well rotted organic matter to improve the drainage.

If the area is flooding badly you may have to consider moving your vegetable bed.

4. We've already experienced our first flurries of snow this winter. Placing markers on the rows containing root vegetables (eg. parsnips) will help you to find your veg when you're ready to cook it. Snow acts as an insulating blanket so your veg will appreciate the extra bit of warmth.
5. Check stored fruit and vegetables. Use up any that aren't storing well. We have a freezer drawer full of chopped onions that were on bulbs that hadn't dried properly. The best bits were blitzed in a food processor and placed in portion sized freezer bags ready for use.
6. The dormant season is the best time to plant hedgerows that will attract beneficial wildlife to your garden.

Oak, beach, hazel, hawthorn, field maple, hornbeam, gelder rose and blackthorn can all be purchased bare rooted now very cheaply and will attract all manner of birds and insects. However, if your garden is next to a field containing horses or cattle, you may consider putting a fence between them and your trees, as they too will enjoy the new, varied diet.

7. December's a great excuse for being a bit self-indulgent. There are some lovely, pampering hand creams in the shops and on-line that all gardeners' hands will appreciate at this time of year. Or to give those callused, cracked hands a bit of TLC next season, look out for a decent pair of gardening gloves.
8. If you haven't done so already, lift and store any late sown turnips, swedes, carrots or beetroot.
9. As the ground becomes empty, well-rotted manure can be spread over the surface of roughly dug soil. The freezing and thawing of water in the soil will help to break it up so that it will be easier to handle in the springtime.
10. Apple and pear trees can be pruned now and autumn-fruiting raspberries that have finished fruiting can be cut and disposed of which will help to prevent fungal diseases spreading.

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Suggested Varieties to Sow/Plant Now:

December is the traditional month to look through the seed catalogues, decide what you want to grow (what do you like to eat?) and make a list. Make a note of sowing and planting times too.

- Onion seeds sown into modules just after Christmas will make excellent plants and bulbs and will benefit from the longer growing period.
 - Plant rhubarb sets now, as they will benefit from the frosts.
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Organic Tip for December

Companion Planting is the practice of growing two or more plants together that will benefit each other. They may use scent, colour or chemicals to attract predators, act as sacrificial plants or repel insects.

Planting companion plants amongst your vegetables or growing them in pots and containers and moving them about between rows can be hugely beneficial.

There are combinations of plants scientifically proven to help or hinder as well as those handed down through folklore. The best thing to do is try various combinations of plants in your own garden and see what works best for you.

A few popular examples include:

- * Poached egg flower (*Limnanthes douglasii*) - attracts hoverflies throughout the summer whose larvae feed on aphids.
- * Pot Marigold (*Calendula officinalis*) - edible flowers that are loved by pollinating bees (so plant near beans, cucumbers and melons)



- * French Marigold (*Tagetes patula*) - seeds can be raised in the winter months saving money at the garden centres. Their strong smell will discourage whitefly. Evidence is also showing that substances from the roots can help to prevent microscopic eelworms so can be planted with potatoes and tomatoes.
- * Mint and Hissop (*Hyssopus officinalis*) are strong smelling herbs so place pots between rows of lettuce as they're said to deter slugs. Both herbs can be left in their containers and used as companion plants every year.
- * Nasturtiums act as a sacrificial plant - they attract the black bean aphid thereby leaving the beans alone. They are also attractive to cabbage white butterflies, flea beetles and slugs. Once they've been infected they should be destroyed.

- * Thyme in pots around the Brassicas (cabbages etc) - the smell is said to confuse the cabbage root fly.
- * Borage - self seeds freely and is hugely attractive to pollinating bees. The flowers are edible and it's said to repel eelworms. It's also a good source of phosphorus.