AUTUMN: Harvesting, hanging up the onions, picking the cucumbers, making green tomato chutney. Weed growth slows (a bit), and things begin to look tidier.

This is the time to think about next year’s seed purchases, maybe start some early sowings, like Aquadulce broad beans, or cauliflowers (see Martin Scotton’s article in this issue). And autumn digging begins: Barbara Wood tells us how she puts her plot to bed.

If you took on an overgrown plot this year, now is the time to start making a difference. It’s more fun than going to the gym!

SITE NEWS IN SEPTEMBER
This summer, for the first time in years, there have been incidents of vandalism overnight, mostly involving interference with sheds, and apparently not with the motive of theft. Please tell a member of the committee if you have experienced this, or seen anything suspicious. All incidents are being reported to the Park Police, though in an emergency tenants should call 999. We aren’t the only ones to suffer: there have also been problems for the cricket club, and our neighbour site on the other side of the Park. Things seem to have got better with darker evenings and the end of the school holidays. But we have returned to the practice of padlocking the double gates at night, thanks to the kind help of several tenants living nearby.

IS ANYONE OUT THERE?

Our May issue didn’t reach you all – we know that, because our ‘collect your own’ experiment left about a third of the copies still waiting, with tenants’ names on them, in the shed by the gate. This one will arrive by delivery if you want to receive yours by email in future, contact jobjox@beeb.net.

- We still want your photographs, for the Autumn Social competition, and the AGM display.
- We’d still like to produce some greetings cards of our own, if anyone knows of a cost-effective method for mass production. Contact Jenny Bourne on plot 27F, 8977 0816, jennybourne@beeb.net if you have any ideas.
- Jo still requires any family recipes you may have to use up those seasonal gluts, please email them to josims@beeb.net or leave them in the shed by the gate.

PRESEVING YOUR HOME GROWN PRODUCE is the last hurdle, before relaxing and enjoying the fruits of your labour. Below are some facts and tips.

Freezing – probably the most popular form of preservation, keeps food fresh by completely stopping bacterial action. Most vegetables require blanching before freezing to halt enzyme action.

Pickling – very versatile technique that is primarily used for preserving vegetables, fruits and nuts. Acetic acid (vinaigre) is used to inhibit bacteria. Salting used to be popular before refrigeration and is now mainly reserved for meats.

Fermentation – alcohol destroys bacteria, so food immersed in it remains edible for years. Fruits that don’t disintegrate are probably the best for storing in a runtop.

Drying – oven drying has become popular since the explosion of celebrity chefs on our screens. A very simple, but time consuming process that can be used for vegetables and fruits, most popular by far is the ‘sun dried’ tomato, but I’ve had success with peppers, chillies and apples.

Bottling – sterilises the food and jars, good way of preserving fruit if you’ve run out of freezer space. Suitable for all fruits, including tomatoes.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY
The Autumn Social will be on Sunday 9th October between 1pm and 3pm. Pumpkin and sunflower judging, children’s activities, lunch, drinks and friendly chat with your fellow gardeners.

The Annual General Meeting of Plotholders will be on Thursday 10th November, once again in the function room at the Lion, Wick Road, refreshments at 7.30pm with business and prize-giving starting at 8.00pm.
Cauliflowers and Brussels Sprouts —
Beginners’ notes from Martin Scotton, on plot 59

I hope this may be useful to those who lack experience in growing these vegetables. I will appreciate additional information, tips and tricks from the ‘old hands’ among you.

Varieties: For cauliflowers I recommend Mayflower (available from Dobies or Marshalls) which when sown in mid-October and then again in late February will produce a succession of 4-5lb curds throughout the following June. I am currently testing Autumn Gold and Castlegrait (both from Unwins) which are spring-sown for autumn-cutting varieties. Castlegrait is looking good, but Autumn Gold developed curds much too soon, despite adequate watering. Some varieties designed to grow through July and August are prone to this; perhaps very hot weather is the cause of the problem. Astral (Dobies), if sown at the end of May, will crop the following February – but the curds will be brown rather than white if the frost gets to them before you do!

Cauliflowers tend to crop all at once, so plenty of freezer space is helpful, but Brussels sprouts plants will yield good quality fresh veg for months. I recommend Brigitte (Unwins) and Braveheart (Marshalls) for November-December and January-February cropping respectively. Both types are sown at the end of March.

These two F1 hybrids are not in the least bitter tasting — which may be a mixed blessing as bitterness in sprouts indicates high levels of sinigrin, a substance shown to cause precancerous colon cells to self-destruct! This year I am also growing Wellington (Dobies or Unwins) in an attempt to extend cropping to March.

Sowing: My methods of sowing and planting are the same for both cauliflowers and Brussels sprouts, which are of course both ‘brassicas’ — i.e. members of the cabbage family. I sow 2 or 3 seeds, 1/8in deep, in a 4in plastic pot of moist multipurpose compost, with discs of newspaper to stop compost falling out of the bottom of the pot. The idea is to produce a sturdy plant that will shrug off club root disease and minor slug damage (see ‘Pests’) when it meets allment conditions. Seedlings will appear within a few days at room temperature. The pots are transferred immediately to a cold frame outdoors. Give them plenty of light but don’t let them overheat or freeze. (I have found that growing brassica seedlings indoors on a window sill is usually disastrous; the plants grow more quickly but the first true leaves are pale and very vulnerable to scorching by even moderate levels of sunlight.)

When the seedlings are about 2in high I select the strongest specimen in each pot and deseed the rest with a pair of scissors. The plants are grown on until they reach a good size while not being pot bound. Feeding is not required at this stage. Each pot sits in its own little plastic dish to which water is added as necessary. For Mayflower, sown in autumn and sitting around through the winter until planting time in early March, I use tap water that has been boiled. It is vital that young plants are hardened off before being planted out. This means exposing them gradually to strong sunlight and wind, and not just to low temperatures.

Planting: I grow all vegetables in beds that are 5ft wide and about 20ft long (the width of my plot). A bed this size will accommodate 2 rows of 10 sprout or cauliflower plants. Plants are spaced 2ft apart and the rows are 2.5ft apart. I practise a 3-year crop rotation and well-rotted manure or compost is added for the crop that precedes the brassicas. Powdered limestone (4lb) is added during the winter prior to planting; the recommended soil pH is 6.2-6.6 if you have testing facilities. Growmore fertilizer (3lb) is added immediately prior to planting. If you prefer to make your own fertilizer then mix ammonium sulphate (2 parts by weight), calcium superphosphate (3 parts) and potassium sulphate (1 part), and apply at a rate of 3-4oz per sq yd.

According to an article in ‘New Scientist’ magazine, the microbes living in garden compost will eat club root fungus (see ‘Pests’), so when planting out I dig a hole twice the depth of the pot, then half-fill it with my own compost. After compacting the compost with a special tool (milk bottle) the plant goes on top. Brassicas like firm, moist soil, so water them in and keep them watered during dry spells. A really useful tip — don’t plant things in ants’ nests! The secret of sprout success seems to be getting lots of growth to occur in June and July, so treat them to a foliar feed occasionally.

Pests: From the instant of planting you must valiantly defend your precious vegetation against the host of enemies described in the next section. When autumn comes and your sprout plants are dwarfing those of everyone else, don’t forget to support them with canes or stakes, or the wind might flatten them.

An allotment is a conservation area for plant pests and diseases, and several can be expected to visit your crops. I have personally suffered from all the ‘critters’ mentioned below. I assume everyone already knows about slugs and snails!
Tomato & Tarragon Soup

Cook 1 finely chopped onion, 1 sliced stick celery, 2 sliced medium carrots, 2 crushed garlic cloves in 40g butter and 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil for 3–4 minutes without colouring. Add 700g of fresh ripe tomatoes which have been skinned together with 2 tablespoons tomato puree, 1 teaspoon lemon juice, a bay leaf, 2 tablespoons chopped tarragon leaves and 1 litre of chicken or vegetable stock. Season with salt and pepper and simmer for a further 20 minutes or until the vegetables are tender.

Remove the bay leaf and liquidise. Pass through a fine sieve and reheat gently, adding cream if preferred.

Delicious served with warm crusty bread or rosemary croutons.

Vegetables Come to Kew

When we think of our neighbours at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, what sort of gardening springs to mind? Mature ornamental trees and shrubs, acres of woodland and lawn, historic glass houses, vistas of formal bedding...but kitchen gardening? Maybe not.

But quite a well-kept secret are the little ‘allotments’ run by the first-year Diploma students at the Kew School of Horticulture. These plots can be found next to the order beds (themselves a fascinating visit). Each student has a strip of 30 square metres (less than one of our half-plots) where they cultivate a range of crops, mostly compulsory, plus two additional choices of vegetables and cut flowers or companion plants. The plots, behind a neat little fence, are each labelled with the name of the student, with some information about their particular choice of plants, and their reasons behind it.

There are some interesting facts quoted and claims made: for instance that this small amount of ground, carefully managed, can produce much of the vegetables needed for a family of four, with a shop-value of £50. This puts our own £10 p.a. half-plots in a new perspective.

Plots are maintained for a full season, starting in November, when the beds are dug, and compost added. (See Barbara Wood’s article in this issue, about the importance of winter digging and preparation.) In January each student produces a cropping plan for the tutor, listing what will be planted where, and how often they will need harvesting and replacing. Seed-sowing begins in March, and throughout the season the students must keep the plots neat and weed-free, harvesting at the right times. They’re assessed every month on their range of crops, how they have chosen to protect them, and the tidiness and overall health of their plants.

As if having their efforts surveyed by visitors from all over the world were not enough, the students have another challenge: they garden using organic principles, and use barriers, and companion planting to keep insect predators from the crops they want to harvest.

I always visit the plots when I’m in Kew Gardens – it cheers me up just looking at that well-cultivated soil, full of compost from the vast ‘compost Alps’ on the other side of the gardens, where the heaps are turned by small tractors. This August there were very few gaps in the dense plantings, which included French beans, beetroot, turnip, courgette, sweetcorn, spinach, onions, herbs, 2 kinds of carrot and 3 of lettuce, as well as cosmos, peached egg plant, phacelia, tagetes and antirrhinum. One student had chosen to grow Tumbler tomatoes in baskets suspended from a set of wigwam. It isn’t all perfection – they are learners, after all, and I noticed pigeons had had quite a good time with someone’s cabbages.

But maybe vegetables are coming into their own as ornaments after all: does anyone remember last year’s formal planting in front of the Palm House? It consisted entirely of food plants, beans, corn, tomatoes, grown around shapes of houses and people. A potager with a difference.

More information about the student gardens can be found on the Kew website: www.kew.org.
Blight Insight

*Phytophthora infestans* commonly known as Late Blight is a fungus originating from Central Mexico and was the cause of the Irish potato famine 1845-1849. It affects tomatoes and potatoes and it is spread in two ways, directly by sporangia, and indirectly by zoospores.

It’s the sporangia which overwinter on infected material, including tubers left in the ground and which under the right conditions have the ability to spread rapidly over many miles. They also produce zoospores which are washed into the surrounding soil infecting the ground locally, and it’s these that are responsible for tuber infections, however, they only remain viable for about 6 weeks (most dangerous for the first 2-3 weeks), so if you can avoid lifting the tubers during this time, you can massively reduce your chances of tuber infection.

In order to reproduce, certain conditions have to be met. This is forecast by a system called Smith. A Smith period is 10 hours of 75% humidity at a minimum temperature of 10°C, two consecutive days fulfilling this criteria becomes a full Smith period, when sporangia is able to infect healthy foliage.

**Symptoms:**
- Small dark spots on leaf margins which can become surrounded by greyish white spore bearing mould on the underside of infected leaves.
- Stems may develop dark patches.

**Causes:**
- haulms dying prematurely causing low yields of tubers.
- Tomatoes die and fruits rot resulting in total loss.
- Zoospores can travel to healthy tubers and cause rotting.
- These cannot be stored and must be consumed within a fortnight.

**Sources of infection:**
- Volunteer Potatoes (those left from previous sowings).
- Infected foliage not disposed of correctly.
- Uncertified seed potatoes and tomato plants.

**Control:**
- Choose resistant varieties including urla, verity, sarpo mira, sarpo axona (potatoes) and fernline (tomatoes).
- Keep tubers well earthed up, (zoospores can only travel relatively small distances.)
- Buy certified plants & tubers.
- Keep the foliage dry – Sporangia can only infect moist foliage.
- Grow early varieties and lift them before blight becomes a problem (generally worse from August in the South East).
- Burn all infected foliage and tubers, do not compost or bury (unless it’s at a depth of at least 2 feet).
- Apply protectant fungicides BEFORE blight is seen, spray every 7-14 days depending on chemical used, ensure all parts of foliage are completely covered, undersides too. Most sprays are not organic, but can be effective if used correctly. These commercial sprays contain either copper (Bio Dithane 945) or mancozeb (Murphy Traditional copper). Bordeaux Mixture is allowable under organic rules but too much is toxic. See recipe below.
- Do not plant too densely, allow room for the air to circulate allowing the foliage to dry rapidly between rain or heavy dew.

If blight strikes remove all foliage and burn. Remove any unaffected tomatoes and ripen inside or make into chutney! Leave tubers underground for 2-3 weeks to allow the skins to harden and minimise the risk of zoospores infecting them.

Although we can’t eradicate blight at the Royal Paddocks, if we all dispose of infected material responsibly, and work together, we can certainly minimise the risk of outbreaks.

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**Bordeaux Mixture**

- Copper Sulphate 250g
- Hydrated Lime 315g
- Water 25 Litres