

RAHA Gardeners Question Time 16.10.13

With Chris Bird from Sparsholt College

Q. Onions from seed and sets suffering from Onion White Rot. Books say you cannot grow any of the Onion family for 8 years. Anything to reduce time?

A. No but 8 years is conservative time. Leave ground as long as possible then buy good quality seed/sets. It's a fungus so burn/bin every bit of affected plants and sterilise tools, boots etc to stop spread.

Q. Do Whitefly damage Brassicas or just a nuisance?

A. More of a nuisance as plants growing quickly can survive but may introduce viruses to plants. Root aphids are more serious if you have them and plants need to be taken out before spread

Q. Cabbage White Butterflies have been prolific this year attacking Brassicas and seem to fly through netting, so is fleece the only answer?

A. Fleece good but Enviromesh is even better. Mid – July is peak time normally and females who lay eggs have black spots on wings so go for them. Can use bio controls but will kill all butterflies with possible unintended consequences. Butterfly caterpillars eat outer leaves only so better than moth caterpillars which eat through to the heart of cabbage.

Q. How can I eradicate Club Root from my plot?

A. It's there for about 20 years so stop it arriving. A poor quality plant without a good fibrous root system going into an acidic, badly drained soil is a recipe for Club Root, so avoid those things. Sterilise everything used on that patch and in future plant things like Squashes. Brassicas includes wallflowers.

Q. How many cobs should be left to mature on Sweet Corn and how to ensure all cobs filled?

A. Usual advice is 2 (3 on best years). Wind pollinated and do best in block of many plants. Assist process by shaking male tassels. Watering issue if underdeveloped - key watering time just after the male bit flowers and withers. Don't let cultivars interbreed but go for F1 hybrid e.g. Sungold

Q. What should be done with Sweet Corn stalks after picking – leave in to rot down or pull and compost?

A. Roots don't provide Nitrogen like Beans but can leave in heavy soil as the hole created as it rots will aid drainage. If plan to dig ground anyway pull and compost – after shredding as fibrous

Q. How many butternut squashes to grow per plant and when to harvest? My patty pans had more male flowers than female so if removed as soon as possible would this give more fruits?

A. Think about end user and size of squash required. 5 per plant is the norm or 7 if trying to feed large family. Harvest when heavy and giving them a tap results in an echo. Removing male flowers is good but can also get F1 seed which is female only. Yellow courgettes growing in popularity

Q. What can I grow in a shady dry area under the boughs of an apple tree?

A. Legumes – French or Runner Beans (using tree as support?) but still need to water a lot. Korean vegetables e.g. Pak Choi or Su Choi, Mizuma or cut and come again lettuce leaves also. Thin the tree branches as much as possible to increase light.

Q. Yields from Peas this year very poor. Sown outdoors following the very wet Spring and may have suffered in hot dry conditions after. What tips for good returns?

A. Peas originate in Asia and need heat to germinate. Soil needs to be 12 degrees for germination (signs of worm casts good temperature indicator). Use F1 seed and/or sow late or sow in guttering and cloche protect until 2” high before plant out to get established. Black leg fungal disease or foot rot is a sign of drainage problems.

Q. Why did outdoor tomatoes do better than greenhouse ones in a hot dry Summer?

A. Probably too hot as plants have cut off point at 35-40 degrees where they stop growing. Tomatoes originate in South America and like it hot but also humid so damping down in greenhouses helps. Problem in smaller greenhouses of not getting enough air/ventilation in them too.

Q. How to establish a good compost heap and are activators advisable?

A. Key is for layers of balanced materials. Put 6" layer of coarse woody open material at bottom followed by same of green soft stuff until 1cbm bin full then start second one. Don't need to turn it if layered correctly. Use layers of Straw or Horse manure too but also water the heap to help keep bacteria active. Brandling/Tiger worms are good and can be introduced. Commercial activators not considered worth it but male urine is source of chemicals.

Q. Does organic gardening (using organic fertilisers and no pest or herbicides) have merit compared to "chemical" gardening in non – commercial situations? What is an effective organic Potassium source that can be used?

A. Organic gardening should increase the soil micro-organisms and give more fertile soil in the longer term whilst "chemical" gardening is just for current crops each season. In exacting conditions organic gardens generally do best. Better growth/yields helped by relaxed spacing of plants i.e. so not overcrowded. Wood ash is best Potassium source and can be left to weather and/or applied to compost heap too.

Q. When is the right time to cut back Autumn raspberries and likewise Summer varieties?

A. Cut the Autumn ones back to ground level after they finish fruiting but with Summer ones (again after fruiting) cut back only the old canes (silver with side shoots). Keep younger brown canes around pencil thickness and tie them in. Keep canes 3" apart.

Q. How should gooseberry, redcurrant and blackcurrant bushes be pruned?

A. With gooseberry and redcurrant they fruit on old wood so you need to get a framework over 3-5 years. Take off the tips of long side shoots. Fan/cordon is good as makes picking easier. Blackcurrants are different as fruit on the first year wood so take off the whole stem when fruits. Remove oldest wood (one third each year) and also remove lowest ones that will drag on floor when fruiting.

Q. I have 2 adjacent Apple trees but in June/July one attracts the Rosy Apple Aphid causing leaves to curl and fruit not develop but the other doesn't. Why and how to prevent/treat the pest?

A. These aphids prefer/select certain varieties of apple (affected tree is Sunset) In Autumn compost all affected leaves – don't leave at tree base. Use winter washes (new ones like Growing Success) to kill eggs left behind and break cycle of infection and after, flowering, apply fatty acids/soft soap when fruits still small

Q. Should you allow fruit to develop for 3 years on a Plum tree before harvesting? How to do this – picking blossom or small fruits or another way?

A. Accepted wisdom is leave it fruit free for just 1 year and pick off the young fruits when still pea size

Q. How and when best to prune Plum trees?

A. Summer when harvesting the crop is best. A heavy crop can crack branches so take these out back to the main stem. Long new shoots need thinning to 5-7 only and bend these over (festooning) and tie back to main stem to give an arch. After fruiting, remove and continue on a 3 year cycle

Q. How to manage/deter red ants on my plot?

A. Disturb the nest, use ant powders and deter by regular heavy watering i.e. keep soil moist as they love dry conditions

Q. How can I grow consistently large Swedes?

A. Temperature and drainage is important with air in the soil i.e. not compacted. Fork the ground before planting. They do not like to be disturbed so root trainers are good for starting them in and treat like sweet peas and plant out the whole thing. F1 varieties may help and/or raised beds if ground is heavy.