

# RAHA Gardeners Question Time with Chris Bird from Sparsholt College

Comrades Club 17.10.2012

*1 Bindweed and Horsetails have been a particular problem this year and the Committee are thinking about trying to tackle these as a project. Any ideas?*

The only way is to dig up and remove the rhizomes. This is not easy eg horse tail rhizomes can be up to 4ft deep. Rotavating tends to spread the problem – it only takes ½” of rhizome to grow. Manure which has not been heat treated can also be a source. Close planting and green manure can reduce spread. Its also helps to have open soil with good drainage

*2 Given how much bindweed seems to like our soil and conditions, is there anything edible in the same family that we could grow but will not make us regret planting it?*

The main option is yam (sweet potato) - same family as bindweed. New variety available from Edulis Nurseries, Pangbourne. It has been said the average temperature will 1.5 degrees warmer by 2020

*3 How do we avoid potato blight? If we get it, what do we do? Are any varieties resistant eg Sarpo Mira?*

Option to focus on first earlys before blight comes. Kestrel and Osprey have some blight resistance. Mayan Gold recommended. Sarpo Mira and Sarpo Axona have ‘delicate’ flavour, but can leave in ground for 2 weeks after cutting haulms to allow flavour to develop

Beware ‘volunteer’ potatoes (left from previous years) spreading infection

Two types of blight:

- Foliage – usually mid July

- Tuber – usually 2-3 weeks after foliage blight

Remove haulms as soon as any sign of blight seen on foliage, tubers will continue to develop. Remove blight affected haulms from the allotment – take to Bunny Lane (Progro sterilisation kills blight spores)

Important to sterilise tools and shoes after exposure to blight – use multisurface kitchen cleaners, lemon juice or methylated spirits

4 *Problem with potatoes being eaten from the interior – is this disease or worms? What should I plant there for next year?*

This is damage by the keel back slug. Seed potatoes can be coated in soot which is an effective deterrent for slugs. Wet conditions this year have caused slug numbers to explode. Keep soil open during winter so frost can kill off slug eggs – can also bury slug tape. High levels of organic matter in the soil will encourage slugs



Next year try a totally different crop eg squash, courgette – aim for a 6 year crop rotation cycle

5. *Is there any way to minimise potato scab?*

Desiree has good scab resistance, as has Romano. High pH (alkaline) soil can promote scab. Horse manure and chalk treated mushroom compost are likely to be alkaline. Potatoes prefer a slightly acid soil pH 5.5 – 6

Its worth going to the Hampshire Potato Weekend, last weekend in January at the Whitchurch Community School

First early potatoes to try are

Rocket, Kestrel, Orla – good scab resistance

Swift – very early but not much flavour

Also worth looking at Epicure – second early, developed in Christchurch – good frost resistance

*6 After a season where nothing germinated for the first, second or third sowings, is there a right time to start sowing seeds on a veg plot?*

The main problem was probably low temperature – most vegetables originate in the tropics/subtropics and need some heat to germinate. Soil needs to be at 10 – 12degrees for seeds to germinate. Look for worm casts or when annual weeds start to grow to indicate soil is warm enough for germination

Where seeds are sown indoors use a deep cell size to allow good root development or root trainers to develop long tap roots

*7 Carrots always seem to germinate very unevenly – can this be made more consistent?*

Try pre-chitting carrots. Line a box with wet paper towel or blotting paper, sprinkle the seeds, cover and place in an airing cupboard for 2-3 days. Check regularly to make sure it has not dried out. When seeds have started to sprout, gather and plant in prepared drill as normal

Can also try fluid drilling. Mix germinated seeds in a preparation of wallpaper (or flour/water) paste without fungicide, put in an icing bag and squirt along prepared drill – this gives a better seed distribution with less need to thin. Can do the same with parsnips

*8 What is the best time to plant sweet pea seeds and best time to plant out to give the best yield?*

Mid to end November or early January in a cold frame or green house and plant out end March – can refer to National Sweet Pea Society which is based in Broughton

When planting out, can protect seedlings in ground from frost and pigeons with cut down old lemonade bottles. Make sure seedlings are hardened off for a couple of weeks before planting out

9. *With the changing weather pattern any suggestions for new vegetables and fruit (or varieties of more traditional ones) we could try in order to make the most of whatever we get.*

It's worth looking at some traditional Korean vegetables eg Pak Choi, Su Choi or Mizuna and to try perpetual spinach, cut and come again lettuces or Italian leaf lettuce. Also Swiss Chard, Ruby Chard and Rainbow Chard, Celery, Celeriac, Squash including Turks Cap, and of course beetroot, which is increasingly recognised for its healthy properties

10. *A magazine has warned that it is harmful to use old carpet to keep down weeds as it contains harmful chemicals.*

The problem is the carpet backing if it is rubber or rubberised, since rubber compounds can cause problems. However traditional wool carpets with traditional backing can safely be used and can provide some nutrient as it breaks down over a period of time

11. *Leaves on raspberries taking on a yellow tinge a couple of years after having good crops. This progresses to the next year to all the leaves and the amount of fruit decreases. Epsom salts have been with no effect. Any suggestions?*

This could be iron deficiency, pH too high or virus. Care needs to be taken that raspberry canes come from a reliable source to ensure that they are virus free.

Raspberries like a slightly acid soil pH6.5 and semi shade. They are greedy feeders and need a well rotted manure mulch each year

Worth looking at primocane (raspberries which crop on this year's growth) eg Glen Ample or Autumn Bliss. After fruiting, cut back only half the canes

which will produce two crops next year, one on the old wood and one on new wood.

*12 Can anything be done to increase yield of garlic bulbs and prevent rust?*

Plant garlic when soil is still warm – garlic like close spacing 6” between cloves. Use larger cloves only, don’t bother with small cloves. Can add a little sulphur to surface, which will help to reduce rust and acidify soil.

*13. Problems with onions bolting – are there better varieties which are less likely to bolt – is it worth getting heat treated sets?*

Bolting is mainly due to low temperatures in spring. Try overwinter Japanese onions eg Senshyu or Stuttgarter Giant, Ailsa Craig for spring planting. Red onions seem particularly prone to bolting.

Yes, it is well worth using heat treated sets to minimise bolting

*14 Problems with growing chicory – any must dos?*

Chicory is a massive feeder needs to be planted in very rich soil. Use a pot to cover and force like rhubarb. Its usual to have two crowns to force one each alternate year.