

RAHA Gardeners Question Time 15.10.14

with Chris Bird of Sparsholt College

Q. Climate: Is there a crop that is happy regardless of drought or deluge and what proved most successful this year? When do I plant vegetables for a winter garden and what kinds of vegetables?

A. Kale is good for winter or cut and come again greens also Pak Choi but this will need fleece protection. Shorter Pea varieties also French Beans and French Runner Beans cropped well as did Swiss Chard and modern Potatoes. Plant Kale and Sprouting Broccoli from July for winter.

Q. Ponds: Thinking of making a small pond to help cut the slug/snail population by encouraging a frog or two. Is this sensible and what hints could you give to ensure success?

A. A water feature is better without steep sides. Have a minimum depth of 18" or 45cm so it will not freeze or have shelving with a beach area. They are good for bees as they use it for water. One third of water needs to be covered. Or have an undisturbed corner for toads etc.

Q. Fertilizer: Is there a simple regime/guide for administering fertilizers or best to just apply Growmore to everything or do nothing at all? How often should I use fertilizer for plants in containers? With leafy Asian vegetables (spinach-type) what is the best (hopefully) organic fertiliser to use for good leaf growth?

A. Fertilizers are for topping up. Organic fertilizers feed the soil or modern way is to feed the crop. Nitrogen for leafy crops and Potassium for roots. Organic fertilizer used little and often can then be adjusted to the weather. Growmore is equal parts Nitrogen, Phosphates and Potassium so can present problems if over applied. Nitrogen should be added early in the season also lawn clippings. Wood ash is good for potash. If plants are growing well then do not add any. Well rotted bullock manure is best. If new plot then use a soil test. Good fungi will release phosphate. In winter use semi rotted manure, cover and plot will be ready in spring. Seaweed liquid is good as trace elements while things like comfrey and nettles good for Nitrogen. Used mushroom compost is neutral as sterilised and barium based so will no longer produce mushrooms. Chicken pellets need applying two months prior to planting Brassicas. If adding lime or nitrogen use ratio of 1 year in 3 depending on crops.

Q. Tomatoes: I had a problem for the first time of tomatoes grown in greenhouses where the skin is splitting. Any ideas?

A. Uneven watering is usual cause. May be lack of calcium. If watered at wrong time of day water can evaporate. Better to flood them. Remove old plants which have blight but soil should be alright as blight does not rest in soil it needs the plant to feed on. Falling fruits and seeds can harbour the infection. Humidity and high temperature for 2 weeks makes blight likely. Blight resistant plants but do not always work.

- Q. Saving seeds:** Doing this for several types of vegetables (tomato, squash, sweet pepper, cucumber) but don't know what I am doing. How do I know which will work and which not? Will seed from F1 varieties come true? Last year I grew several varieties of F1 Tomatoes and had seedlings from when fruit self seeded so planted out this year to see what would happen and fruit was identical to the original variety. Is it worth doing this?
- A.** Problems occur when wrong part is saved. Peppers and squash seed to be washed off. Use large plump seed. F1 will produce 1st generation then some kept will produce F2. Do not use F1 lettuce. Peas and F1 cucumbers are alright as cucumbers are all female. F2 plants are good but slightly different. Harvest seeds at different times.
- Q. Rhubarb:** One of my rhubarb plants has died this year. It started to lose stems in the summer and now appears completely dead, although the remains are still solid, not rotted off at all. Should I be worried for the other plants, and can I do anything to protect them? Is it safe to compost the allegedly poisonous leaves of rhubarb?
- A.** Leaves are poisonous but may be composted. Honey fungus can kill it or old age (20 years?) If it sat in water last winter that could be cause. Dig out dead part in case it's honey fungus and sterilise all tools. Soil needs a large range of fungus. Fungus eliminator can be used. Putting good fungi in helps eliminate bad fungi. Most fungi are beneficial. An active soil is the most robust system.
- Q. Carrots:** Why do most of my carrots grow in this curly shape and what can I do to remedy it? (**photo**). Despite growing marigolds around carrots they have still been attacked by carrot root fly. What other protection is recommended?
- A.** Forking and fanging is caused by seed bed being too firm. Also stony or organic matter not broken down. If seed bed is not loose enough the end will grow until it hits something. As Growmore has been used it may have a layer which was over fertilized at the depth where forked. Advice to use fertilizer three weeks before or top dress afterwards. Or grow short rooted varieties. Advice for deterring carrot root fly is to grow Flyaway variety. Use an 18" plastic barrier around crop. Do not thin and harvest when younger. Use garlic juice which is also good for slugs.



- Q. Elephant Garlic:** Dug up my first and have noticed that around the base of the bulbs there are small hard coated little corm like growths. What are they? Can I use them to produce new bulbs?
- A.** Yes.
- Q. Parsnips:** Planted them in the borders but they seem to be all crown and very little roots, some of them have resembled an octopus, is it because they are in the borders and not main beds that cause these mutations?
- A.** As with carrots this can be too much fertilizer and pan in soil. May reset itself now cooler and wetter and should bulk up after a frost.
- Q. Squashes:** Grow several varieties and while the size of the fruit seems fine, only get 1 or 2 on each plant. How to maximise volume and yield? How do we dry our Gourds? (used for decorative effects)
- A.** Advice to keep growing in season as long as possible. Greedy feeders so needs regular nitrogen and plenty of water. F1 seed recommended. Gourds need cutting with a long stem (over 2") and dry in even temperature before varnishing.
- Q. Raspberries:** When should I move or plant Autumn raspberries and how should I cut back raspberry bushes properly and when?
- A.** Move and replant both varieties in autumn. Autumn varieties cut all stems down after fruiting then move. Can cut just half canes and leave younger ones for earlier crop next year. Spring varieties cut old stems and leave new ones. Joan J good standard variety.
- Q. Annual Mercury:** There is a spread of the weed - Annual Mercury .You can clear a bed by pulling out the plants but they keep coming back. Any suggestions as to how we can get rid of it: What is it and how can I get rid of it? It is always in seed.
- A.** It liked the hot conditions and may indicate high Phosphate levels too. Repeatedly weed as stock of seed in the soil but don't add to compost. Crowd it out with green manures
- Q. Manure:** Which is best – farmyard, organic, B&Q etc?
- A.** Bullocks manure is best as they are fed on a high protein diet. Cows manure is only half as good. Horse manure is good but not if bedding is wood chip as wood chip steals the Nitrogen as rotting. Straw based horse manure is best. Some manure can be toxic as can contain weed killer. Shoddy [Sheep fleece] is good as it is natural. Green manure good but need right bacteria to fix the Nitrogen. Winter Tares is good. Do not buy shop bags of manure with faded labels as nutrients may have leached out as indicates stored for long while.

