

## **YOUR READ IT HERE FIRST**

I have been growing fruit and vegetables on my allotment for a great many years. In that time I have tried out several ideas for better ways of growing. Some of them I read about in gardening books. Others were ideas of my own. Several of my own ideas I have covered in previous articles. The article below mentions a few others. I claim originality for all of them. They may exist in gardening books I have not read. I can only say with hand on heart that these ideas occurred to me independently. So it is with good faith that I claim “You Read it Here First”.

### **Taking on a New Plot**

What is the best thing to do when taking on an overgrown allotment or when converting an area of lawn to the growing of fruit and vegetables? To rid oneself of perennial weeds one could use glyphosate to kill everything (glyphosate apparently does not contaminate soil but I am not sure). However, I am a purely organic grower and I abhor such methods. One could painstakingly hand weed the entire plot (as I did originally with my allotment) to remove the roots of couch grass, bindweed, nettles, docks, thistles and other horrors. However, since 2000 I have been a no-dig gardener, and digging destroys the soil structure and kills beneficial soil micro-organisms, so hand-weeding to remove the roots of perennial weeds is not on. So what can we do?

The best way is first chop down the weeds with a scythe, sickle or shears, remove the debris to the compost heap, then cover the plot with an immense sheet of heavy grade impermeable black polythene. The edges can be buried to prevent the whole sheet departing to another part of the planet during a strong wind. If left for about 9 months all weeds will be dead, remaining debris can be removed and the soil raked and seeds sown – ie no digging. If, alternatively, you wish to get on with things, a section of the polythene sheet can be peeled back and weighted down. The strip revealed can be worked (regrettably by hand-weeding initially) to grow crops. Then another strip and another. Meanwhile the rest of the plot will be free of weeds so the neighbours will not be annoyed by clouds of weed seeds while you work a portion of the plot.

### **The Most Important Tools**

Which are the most important tools on the allotment? I would rate the hoe as number one. If you can catch germinating weed seeds soon after they emerge from the soil that will pay immense dividends. It does not take very long to work through the entire plot with a hoe.

Which is the second most important tool? Surprise, surprise. In my opinion it is the brick. I use netting, fleece, landscape material, impervious black polythene sheet and impervious clear polythene sheet all over my allotment for various purposes and to weigh them all down I use a great many bricks, preferably full bricks. They are just the job, being easy to lift but heavy enough to weigh things down. I am an avid collector of second-hand bricks from a whole variety of sources and use about 280 on the allotment. So start collecting bricks now!

### **Multiple Crops from Globe Artichokes**

My globe artichokes were well established, but once I had taken the crop in June/July that was it for another 10 months. However, I found that if I then cut the flowering stem right down to the ground – but leaving all the leaves undisturbed – I had another crop in a couple of months. If I then repeated the exercise I had yet another crop, just as prolific as the first one. Three crops per year rather than one!

I should add here another idea which is not mine but is important. Young globe artichoke plants are prone to dying in the first few winters because they do not like having their roots too wet whilst the plants are dormant. The answer is to cover the plants with clear impervious polythene sheet, well

weighted down against the effects of strong winter winds. This keeps the rain away and the sheet can be removed when the plants start growing vigorously again in the spring.

### Runner Beans

Watering runner beans and climbing French beans is a huge chore. I do not water beans. I cover the patch every three years with a two- to three-inch layer of farmyard manure to enrich the soil and reduce evaporation of the precious water. Being a no-dig gardener I do not dig a trench and fill it with decaying material to provide moisture and nutrients as many gardeners do, but my mulching with manure fulfils the same purpose. But there is something else I do, which is entirely my own idea. This occurred to me when faced with the difficulty of weeding between two rows of canes when the weeds were obscured by the growing bean plants.

Before erecting my two rows of canes across the allotment, and before planting out the bean plants, I slightly slope the soil from the centre of the double row towards where the canes are to be inserted. I then spread out a roll of impervious black polythene sheet and weigh it down with a few bricks. I insert the canes along the edges of the sheet and plant out the plants. Then, when it rains, all the rain is directed to where it is most needed – to the roots of the plants. And no more weeds between the rows to rob the soil of water and nutrients. And the sheet keeps the moisture in as well.

### Asparagus

Similarly to the above, and for similar reasons, I stretch out a roll of black impermeable polythene sheet about two feet wide in between my asparagus plants (I have four rows across the allotment) and weigh it down with bricks. This means no weeds in that area to rob the soil of moisture and nutrients. The sheet also keeps the moisture in. But the asparagus roots grow close to the surface right across the bed and need rainwater. Therefore it would be best to use porous landscape material, but that is expensive. So I go along my impervious sheets with a garden fork and make lots of holes so that the rainwater can percolate through to the roots of the asparagus.

### White Asparagus

I had seen white asparagus on sale in France and thought it was a different variety to my conventional green asparagus (“asperge d’Argenteuil”). Then I chatted to a commercial grower in the south of France and he let me in on a little secret. (I cannot claim originality for this idea but you are probably reading it here first.) For that section of the market which prefers white asparagus, and for a premium price, he simply covers part of his (green) asparagus bed with impermeable black polythene sheet to keep out the light and, hey presto, white asparagus! I cover selected plants with large black plastic buckets with bricks on top to achieve the same result.

### Seakale

It is quite a chore to dig up seakale roots in winter, put them in large black plastic buckets then place them in the garage with an upended bucket over and a black bin-liner over the top to force the seakale. The results are great – delicate white/yellow shoots in the middle of winter/early spring when fresh produce is scarce. Seakale is so rare and really good when cooked like asparagus and served hot with Cheddar cheese. I have never seen it on sale anywhere and never seen it on restaurant menus. However, it is a chore to force. Here is another way.

In early February cover the row with impermeable black polythene sheet, weighted down with lots of bricks. Up will come the seakale, forcing the sheet up. The quantity of crop is much higher than with the former method. One can use black buckets with bricks on top to cover individual plants as an alternative.

### Potatoes

A big problem with growing potatoes is slug damage. Even red-skinned varieties such as desirée can suffer. Having clay loam soil on top of clay makes the problem much worse for me. Also, earthing up potatoes is quite a chore. How can we greatly reduce the slug problem and avoid earthing up?

Since 2000 I have grown potatoes in the same plot, because I am a no-dig gardener and I do not wish the soil disturbance associated with digging up potatoes to affect the entirety of my allotment as it would if I practised crop rotation. However, the following method would work even with crop rotation. I put down permeable landscape material over the whole potato patch, make holes at the usual spacing and plant **all** my potato tubers at the usual depth in mid-March each year. The landscape material helps to reduce evaporation of water from the soil and eliminates the weed problem. I then cover the potato patch with fleece until the end of May. The fleece protects against frost and produces a warm environment which in turn causes the potatoes to produce their crop earlier (7<sup>th</sup> June for earlies in 2008). My aim each year is to dig up the crop in mid-August before the slugs have emerged from the damp clay down below. They do not like dry soil, and usually rise out of the depths when we have significant rain in September. Bringing-on my potatoes early greatly reduces the slug damage problem. The landscape material avoids the need to earth up – but I do place a small mound of soil immediately over each tuber when planting out to lessen the danger of having green potatoes. Any green potatoes which are found are used as seed potatoes for the following year, if they are large enough.

I have successfully used these methods since 2000. I should add there is a possibility my overall crop is smaller than it used to be. Nevertheless I feel that the great reduction in slug damage, the avoidance of the need to earth-up and the elimination of weeds make my method worthwhile.

### Strawberries

I grow strawberries in an identical fashion to the potato method described above, with the landscape material helping to ensure clean strawberries as well as keeping away weeds and retaining moisture. I have permanent beds with the plants at the usual spacing and cover them with fleece in mid-February. Instead of having the first crop on the 4<sup>th</sup> July, as I used to, I commence picking in the latter half of May (19<sup>th</sup> May in 2008). The method had two main advantages. Firstly, we have strawberries much, much earlier when there is no other fruit but rhubarb available. Secondly, the fleece keeps the birds off.

But what about pollination? The fleece keeps the bees and other pollinating insects out. I have to say that after many years of using this method, pollination has always been perfect. The wind causes the fleece to wave up and down, and that in turn causes the air under the fleece to move around and carry the pollen from plant to plant. The bees are redundant!

### Greenhouse Pests

I have never suffered from greenfly or blackfly in my greenhouse. However, I used to suffer badly from whitefly and reckoned that aubergines were magnets for whitefly. The whitefly infested my peppers as well (but never my tomatoes). I always had marigolds growing in the tomato border, but that did not seem to deter the dreaded whitefly. Then, about 2003, I ceased to be troubled by them. This coincided with the accidental introduction of oxalis into the permanent tomato bed soil (the corms must have escaped when re-potting an indoor oxalis plant). I now put my absence of whitefly down to the presence of the oxalis plants, or to a combination of oxalis and marigolds.

I have tried to identify the exact species of oxalis. Mine grow to about 6 inches high. They have leaves which are on delicate stalks, are about 2 inches in diameter, have three leaves per stalk like clover and have a beautiful purple colour. The flowers are small and white with a touch of purplish pink. From gardening books I think they are either oxalis regnellii or oxalis purpurata variety bowiei. They are perennial and spread enthusiastically in my greenhouse soil. I tolerate them since they are

dwarfed by the tomatoes and are very pretty. I cannot say for certain that they repel whitefly but their arrival coincided with the departure of the enemy. It is worth a try for a non-chemical solution to the whitefly menace.

Good gardening!

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