

Things to do on the plot in January

Contributed by Behemoth

Start to plan, organise and dream of the coming spring and summer...

Outside

Work off your Christmas excess with some digging. Turn over the plot, remove potatoes, debris, perennial weeds and dig in compost or manure. There's still chance that a bit of a freeze may break them down further as well. Don't dig if it's too wet as you'll probably do more damage than good. And don't over do it. Mentally divide the plot into manageable sections and turn over a bit at a time if you can. You don't get a medal for digging the plot in one go, just a bad back.

On light sandy soils you can over cultivate and damage the soil structure so it may be best to just spread the compost or manure on the surface and let the worms do the rest. This is also the lazy man's approach. I am a lazy man. One advantage is that the inevitable weed seeds in the compost will make themselves known quite early and you can get rid of them before they become established.

If you are buying compost from garden centres watch out for bargains, they might not be all they appear to be. If the bags have been out in the rain since last August they could be very wet and have had all the nutrients drained out of them. They'll be good for bulking up the organic matter but not for feeding the soil. If they're under cover this shouldn't be a problem.

In a few weeks, yes a few weeks, steady there, you'll be sowing your seed. Now is a good time to get all your bits and pieces in order and give them a clean. You can disinfect your pots and stuff if you want although some don't bother. Don't hang on to any damaged plastic pots, once cracked they're no good and will only split further when it's most inconvenient.

If you haven't already, order your seeds. As we all know it's hard to say no to one more variety of something. Try to plan your purchases to give you as long a harvesting period as possible and remember and early variety sown late can give you a quick growing late harvest.

Check the date and location of your nearest potato day to pick up some unusual and tasty varieties.

Check your canes, useful sticks, mesh, fleece and cloches for damage. Repair or replace as required. Inspect raised beds and border edging, repair any damage. If it's not too wet you can make raised beds now and get them covered to warm up for the growing season.

Warm the soil. Cover areas that will take early sowings with permeable membrane, polythene, cardboard or plastic sheeting. Black polythene is ideal.

Prune red currants and gooseberries.

Mulch your asparagus. It pays to make sure this is as weed free as possible.

Dig a bean trench. 18 inches deep, lined with newspaper, fill with kitchen waste and cover with a little soil. It helps to do this where you intend to grow your beans.

Autumn sown peas and beans need checking to ensure they're doing OK, possibly needing a bit of support.

Now is also a good time to do structural stuff - move or put up your greenhouse, build a shed, lay paving (especially for those who took on a plot recently and maybe don't have a shed, paved area or greenhouse yet).

Under cover

While the tunnel or greenhouse is relatively empty give it a good clean. Collect litter and bits and pieces and give the walls a good clean and using a disinfectant won't hurt, the protected conditions in a tunnel or greenhouse can allow disease and infestations to romp away. Remember to give benches and other bits and pieces a good scrub too. However by if you go over board and kill everything you've probably killed natural predators as well, leading to an explosion of problems and no natural checks. Ideally you want to get a balance and this is a case where a little slovenliness may not be too bad.

In milder parts or for those with heated apparatus sow aubergines at the end of the month. They need a long growing season. If you have no heat choose an early variety.

Early lettuces and radishes can be sown as well.

Autumn sown beetroot will start to take off and early sowings can be made in pots undercover.

If you put some strawberry runners outside bring them in now if it's been cold enough. These will give you an extra early crop under cover. Plant into a layer of manure to give them a feed and retain moisture.