

THE E.M. TRIAL

organic measures will be taken from pre-war methods, others from up-to-date ideas. The reason I don't want to use chemicals is because I think they erode the natural micro-organism balance of the soil, and eventually cause it to become almost sterile.

So, back to my plot. It is basically a wedge shaped ten-pole plot on top of a windy hill with one long side facing north, the other south and sloping towards the east. There will be two distinct areas, one for vegetables and one for fruit, salad and herbs. My shed is at the far east end with my brick cold frame in front facing south. My hot house will be built on the southwest corner of my shed, where I get the hottest sun for most of the day. It is also close to my roof water store.

The plot is situated in Northamptonshire, and I am telling you all this so you can make comparisons with yours. I thought I would show you this picture of what it looked like before I cleared it. Thankfully you can't see any rabbits because the ground became so root bound that they had to move to an easier burrow site. Ron, my allotment neighbour, is pleased the rabbits have gone. He once put up a fence to keep them out, only to find that they were already living on the allotments, inside the fence line.

My plot has been worked only once in several years and is very weedy, which is why I am up here now in the depths of winter, pulling the roots out by hand after pushing my rotavator up and down making trenches on a north-south axis. I cleared all top growth in December because I don't need to put any more nitrogen back into the soil, as the millions of stinging nettles bore testament to because they grow best on fertile soil.

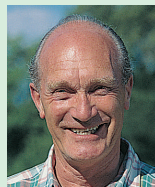
The other reason for making trenches, other than exposing roots, is to learn where the rainwater runs. If I know how my plot drains and where any dry spots are, it will save time watering in the summer and help me plan my planting. I don't want to put my potatoes in too wet a spot, but courgettes, for example, will love a damp area just like my tomatoes do.

Clearing these roots is warmer work than a session at the gym. I will let you know how I get on next month. Bye for now.

Q&A



If you have a kitchen garden query and could do with some expert advice, Sue Stickland (vegetables and herbs) and Peter Blackburne-Maze (fruit) are here to help.



Write to: Reader Advice, Kitchen Garden, 12 Orchard Lane, Woodnewton PE8 5EE. Please enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

Don't forget you can also tap into the experience and knowledge of other KG readers by posting your query on our website Readers' Forum at: www.kitchengarden.co.uk

Unhappy fruit trees in a polytunnel

I planted eight self-fertile columnar fruit trees in my polytunnel in November 2001. In 2003 all produced fruit, except a 'Beurre Hardy' pear. This year there was fruit on three apple trees, a few shrivelled cherries on 'Cherokee', two gages on one tree but none on the other; and four 'Concorde' pears, but still no 'Beurre Hardy'. How can I encourage normal fruiting?

MB, Launceston, Cornwall.

All are perfectly hardy fruits and varieties in the UK and they need no protection at all, especially in the mildest county – except from the wind. In fact, all hardy plants need a certain amount of winter chilling to operate properly and this is especially true of those grown for their flowers and/or fruit.

The two gages you mention, 'Denniston's Superb' and 'Oullins Golden Gage', are naturally shy bearers – beautiful flavour, but you have to pay for it.

I would move them all outside before the end of winter. Unfortunately this will mean another check to their development, but they will be far happier in the open and there should be no further problems, once they have settled in. It will also free some valuable under-cover space.

– Peter

Why were these squashes so bitter?

This year I grew squashes for the first time. The first one was delicious, but the second was unbelievably bitter. Should I have removed the male flowers, as you do with cucumbers?

WC, Nottingham.

I think the reason for the bitter fruit is simple: the varieties in the packet you sent us are classified as gourds, which means they are intended to be ornamental – not necessarily edible. The French phrase on the packet 'Potiron décoratif' confirms this.

The bitterness of *Cucurbita pepo* is a genetic trait – it does not depend on pollination. Some varieties of the species are very bitter, but on the other hand most edible summer squashes (including our familiar courgettes and marrows) belong to this same species, so it is not surprising

that one of the fruits that you picked was good to eat. However, I fear many of the rest may turn out to be bitter.

You definitely shouldn't remove any flowers – the male flowers are needed for pollination and fruit set.

The packet says 'fruits', but not for eating...

