



Bishop's Waltham Gardening Club

Newsletter; Early Spring 2024

How we yearn for the better weather, and the spring flowers.



The **Snowdrops** give us a clue that plants are on the move, and we can't wait until the daffodils bloom and the sun gives us some extra warmth to remind us of good times ahead.

Nothing is perfect in Nature, of course, so expect some rain, colder days and even frosts, but the overall feeling is of SPRING and all its blessings. After November, the Festive Season and the dull days of January, most of us gardeners are, as with the dormouse, seemingly hibernating and waiting for better times.

Even Santa Claus couldn't rouse us with his jolly reminder to "Hoe, Hoe, Hoe"

However, just one nice day in February and we are ready to go and visit the local Garden Centres with our credit cards at the ready and thoughts of the year ahead. The summer bulbs, plants and tubers such as Begonias, Agapanthus, Gladioli etc., are beckoning to us to 'buy, buy, buy' and we just can't resist! Hold on a minute, though! It's much too early to plant them out, so we must buy some compost, pot them up and keep them slightly warm until the end of May, when any chance of frost has gone. Then we can plant them in the spaces where there are no spring bulbs. It's better than taking 'pot luck', jabbing the trowel in the soil..... and coming up with half a bulb that was waiting for warmer weather!

Having a propagator or a sun-lounge really helps, otherwise it's the window ledge -but , beware, that

radiator underneath will make it too hot, and the plant will grow too quickly, too early. So, try and be patient – a word that's anathema to a gardener!- and either keep the packet in a cool place or just wait as the Garden Centre won't sell out overnight. After all, why give the plant optimum treatment and then plant it out into cold soil? Patience in gardening really IS a virtue.



My **Rhubarb** have not yet got 'off the blocks' and I wonder if it was the lack of frosty weather. Unlike most other plants, they need frost to stimulate them. A clue is that the USA is the biggest producer, and in winter-cold states. Rhubarb is grown widely, and with [greenhouse](#) production it is available throughout much of the year. It needs rainfall and an annual cold period of up to 7–9 weeks at 3 °C (37 °F), known as 'cold units', to grow well. Looks as if I might be right -it does happen now and then!!

To give your plants a boost as they are appearing, I am informed that **Growmore** is a useful fertiliser as it stimulates green growth which is what we want to see. At the end of the year it is NOT needed as that soft green growth will get hit by colder weather, but in the early spring it's really handy. I am mixing mine with equal parts of **Bonemeal** (plus some **Fish, Blood and Bone** that I have found in my shed!) so that the plants also have a slower release fertiliser as well, to take them through the next few months -and also it saves my back by doing it all at once! All are available at the Shop and in handy containers or by weight. Don't overlook the **Chicken Pellets** and the large bag is especially great value. A bag will go a long way, and keep your plot fertilised for months. One of our members used nothing else, spreading the pellets around in March

and not doing anything else, as the plants are encouraged to grow better roots and they, in turn, reach into the soil for natural goodness. Indeed, Bishops Waltham in Bloom purchases several bags to boost the flowers in the beds for the whole summer and we enjoy the benefit.

Of course, one can always spread the bulk of horse manure -available by the barrow load from the Shop- as this is a really natural product, at a ridiculously low price, and will bulk up your soil and encourage all those nice things that improve your soil, including our best friends, the worms!

On the subject of Garden Centres, don't we get all excited when we see those lovely plants, all flowering and in so many colours? There is a conundrum here, though. Buy them and it's probably too early to plant them out, visit later when they *should* go out, and they have all been sold!! So, you need some protection, whether it be the greenhouse, sun lounge or one of the 'plastic' greenhouses with the green covers. They are good but can get very hot when the sun is out, and very cold on certain nights so you'll still need some fleece or something similar to protect them on those nights.

If you are moving **Raspberry plants**, make sure that the soil is well prepared, with plenty of bulk and friable, too. Don't plant them where Raspberries have grown before -they just don't like it! I suppose the previous ones took all the nourishment. They are shallow rooters so a layer of horse manure and ensuring they don't dry out -will anything after the deluges of recent weeks???. Maybe that Growmore will also get them off to a good start, whether early, mid season or Autumn varieties are planted. Is it my imagination, or do the Autumn ones taste better and are larger?

Strawberries



They should be starting to 'leaf up' now and you need to weed around them to give them space to flower and stop the weeds taking the nutrients. Many people use straw to place round the plants to lift the fruits off the soil. A good idea, but it does give slugs and snails a good, warm, moist hiding place, so put some organic pellets down first.

A fairly recent innovation is STRULCH, advertised as "**Probably the best garden mulch ever made**".



Strulch ® is a light and easy to use **garden mulch** made from wheat straw for organic gardening. A patented process developed by Dr Geoff Whiteley at The University of Leeds, is used to 'preserve' the straw so that it lasts for up to two years and gives an earthy brown colour. Strulch has a neutral pH and can be used throughout the garden on borders, raised beds, around cultivated fruit and on vegetable plots. The following is taken from their website; **Why Strulch is beneficial?** A Strulch mulch reduces weed growth by up to 95%. Strulch mulch helps retain moisture around plants. Strulch mulch enriches soil and its structure. Strulch mulch is suitable around flowers, shrubs, fruit and vegetables. The **mulch** lasts up to two years, spreading the cost, saving water and fertiliser, making your plants grow healthier and stronger and giving you more time to relax. The mulch together with the embedded minerals deters slugs and snails.

One thing they don't tell you is that it is relatively expensive but, gardening is a hobby and costs don't always come first. I might well try it this year but need to look for local stockists first.

....And not forgetting the flowers..... You have probably pruned your roses by now and their buds are swelling ready for the 'off' so give them encouragement with manure (to keep moisture in the soil and also cooler) and a long-lasting (slow release) fertiliser (see earlier comments). I found starting Sweet Pea seeds was easier by placing them on a moist layer of kitchen roll in a saucer. They often need that moisture to germinate -some people soak them for several hours- and they can be potted up when the seed germinates and shows a shoot.



Hopefully, the **Dahlias** will have survived the Winter – I leave them in the soil and put an extra layer of our ‘Soil Improver’ (also available from the Shed at a very good price) to protect them. I may lose one or two, so replace with ‘ready-made’ tubers. These can be placed into a pot with mixed compost (again with grit to aid drainage) and grown on and then planted out or, for even more plants, the shoots can be cut off –make sure it’s with a bit of the tuber- and planted in pots separately. This way you will get several plants from one tuber. Maybe flowering as bit later, they will still be great for that Autumn colour, and with our later, milder Autumns, could last well into November.

Great news for those who -as with so many- can’t get to the bank (if there is one within about 50 miles!!!) or cash machine, is that the Shop at the Shed now offers ‘pay by card’ for several types of card. The reception isn’t great there -hence the service has not been available until now- but a few pirouettes, standing on one leg, and leaning sideways whilst holding the card machine at an angle of 39.5 degrees to the sun usually cures the problem!!



Thanks to Anthea and Larry for giving the Shop a great start with plenty of stock at very fair prices. The Shop deserves your support as it is for the (approx.) 300 members.

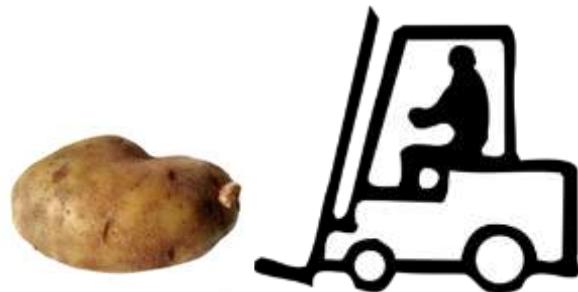
Have you entered our POTATO COMPETITION

YET????*

Massive cash prize -winner takes all!

Just 50p buys you a potato to plant, grow and nurture until mid-summer when the crop will be weighed. *N.B * Whilst stocks last only.*

I am always experimenting, so this year I am actually **PLANTING** my potato into a pot to grow on and then transplant into well-prepared soil when it’s really warm enough. Rather than just ‘chitting’ by placing it in an empty egg box and planting later, it will be interesting to see what happens. It might mean that, next year, I do the same for all my spuds. Such great value at the ‘Shop at the Shed’ where I can just buy the exact number I need. My vision of my successful experiment.....well, you never know!!!



Mid March should let you start planting out those potatoes you’ve had chitting. If you want some really early potatoes, start some in a black polythene sack in the greenhouse or tunnel. Punch drainage holes in the sack and use a multi-purpose compost.

Maybe it’s time to think about later crops. Much too early to plant/grow -unless you have a propagator or heated greenhouse- but why not start to give the soil a bit of help by protecting with a polytunnel or fleece or a black sheet of reusable plastic?

To hold down fleece without tearing, save plastic 2 litre milk containers and fill with sand or water although water tends to leak. The smooth surface will weigh down the fleece but not damage it. It’s surprising how just a layer of fleece can raise the temperature of the underlying soil.



March is the right time to [establish an asparagus bed](#) if you are starting from crowns. Do make sure you get it in the right position as it will be there permanently. It's probably worth consulting the Internet for advice as a wrong move will affect the crop for years.

Lots of advice from the Allotment Garden Newsletter courtesy of John Harrison

Things to Sow

- Beetroot
- Broad Beans
- Early Peas (but they may do best started in a gutter in the greenhouse then slipped into a trench or in seed trays)
- Brussels sprouts - early varieties like Peer Gynt will be ready in September
- Kohl Rabi
- Leeks
- Lettuce
- Radish
- Parsnips
- Spinach Beet
- Early Turnips

Under Cover in Greenhouse, Coldframe and Polytunnel

Sow in Heat

Windowsill or a propagator in the greenhouse will come into use now to start off your [tomatoes](#), [peppers](#), [aubergines](#) and [cucumbers](#).

Under Cloche

Many of the crops you can sow directly will also benefit from cloching, especially as you move northwards or started off in modules in a cool greenhouse or coldframe and then planted out later.

Fruit

Planting & Pruning

There is still time to finish planting bare rooted fruit trees and bushes, especially raspberries and other cane fruits.

Early this month you can still prune apple and pear trees while they are still dormant. There is also time to prune gooseberries and currants. With currants shorten the sideshoots to just one bud and remove old stems from the centre of the bushes.

They'll benefit from some compost spread around the base as well or some general purpose fertiliser like fish, blood & bone. Trees will appreciate some wood ash spreading under them.

Harvest

Any leeks left standing should come up now - you can freeze them for use in soups and stews or make concentrated [leek & potato soup](#) to freeze and thin out when used.

Parsnips too should come up in early March before they try and re-grow. They'll store for a month or so in damp sand but the plant knows it is growing time again. If you turn them into a mash, perhaps with carrots, they'll freeze well taking up little room

You may have spinach beet and chards available, the last of the late Brussels sprouts, winter cauliflowers, kale, swedes and scorzonera.

Don't forget to keep checking the purple sprouting!

General Jobs on the Plot

Have a good tidy up and finish those odd construction jobs because you are going to be busier still later in the year!

See also: [Polytunnel Growing in March](#)

See the latest news for Members

and much more at

www.bwgc.org.uk

and from our facebook page.



and remember, always

ENJOY YOUR GARDENING!!

N.B PAGES 7-8 ARE INTENTIONALY BLANK

Grow Bag News. Now there's a choice.

We now stock 'ready-made' Gro-Bags and also top quality peat-free multi compost. The latter would be ideal if you wanted a re-usable Gro-Bag.

These details are via Harrod Horticultural from the Allotment Garden Newsletter where there is a code to obtain a 10% discount.

This tough, Reusable Growbag is made from strong woven polyethylene material and can be used year after year thus reducing the plastic waste generated when disposing of your one-use standard growbag.

- *Tough, heavy-duty woven polyethylene construction*
- *Can be used year after year. Measures 84cm L x 33cm W x 15cm H*
- *Perfect for patio or greenhouse growing or where a standard growbag would be used. No plastic waste to dispose of after use.*
- *Holds 41.5 Litres of soil*
- *Ideal for patio crops such as tomatoes, peppers, aubergines, beans and peas*

Another new product is our seed compost which has perlite for good drainage. Ideal as we start a new 'seed season'.

Are Parsnips a Pain?

Don't use last year's seeds; they need a minimum temperature of 20c; place three seeds together as the germination is never reliable..... and so it goes on. How we ever manage to grow them is a mystery, but we do! Certainly, the soil temperature is important and by all means put three seeds together, but you will need to be extra careful if two or three germinate as just

pulling them out can affect the root of the one you want to keep. So, carefully and with a two-pronged fork or similar tool, place it over the one you want to keep whilst removing the others. This would also be useful for another root crop -carrots- as they are sown even closer together and more disturbance means more of a 'whiff' for the dreaded carrot fly.

I know that 'Peat' is a dirty word, but if peat pots are for sale, they are legal. Maybe placing a parsnip seed (or any other 'difficult' seed) in a peat pot, filled with 'Peat-Free' Compost, and placed in a warm spot will overcome the traditional difficulty. However, in the limited use I have made, they do seem to need to be constantly damp, otherwise the roots won't penetrate and the whole idea is a waste of time.



Don't miss our monthly article in the Parish News for extra tips and items of interest.

Although the Gardening Club is not represented, I see that an **ECO FAIR** will be held at the **Jubilee Hall on Saturday 23rd March** and **Angela Palmerton** will give a talk about; **Sustainable and Natural Gardening**.

For details see local posters.

At the Grass roots.

(Or maybe not!)



We do our best to keep the mowers in good order – at a cost to the Club - but you need to help us. When the grass is long, RAISE the mowing height, trim the long grass, then lower the height and go over it all again. By mowing long grass with a low setting, you will jam up the mower, stall – *AND POSSIBLY DAMAGE*- the engine and then have to clear the blockage. Also, a lower setting means that hidden stones (and even frogs!) get mowed with consequent damage to the blades (and the frog's livelihood!) meaning we have to get them sharpened....again! Finally, try to mow in DRY conditions as the cutting will be better, with less jams. So, please be **MOWER FRIENDLY**, and give the machine a good clean when returning it to the shed. Thanks, and always be 'Health & Safety' conscious, especially when mowing, clearing jams, and cleaning. Guidance is available if in doubt.

Forthcoming members meetings, advance notice;

Wednesday 27th MARCH
Planting & Growing
Summer Bulbs

Tim Woodland

Also; Members Spring Show

Wednesday 24th APRIL
Roses Grow on You!

Elizabeth Sawday

Wednesday 22ND MAY
Garden Lepidoptera
(Butterflies and Moths)

Stephen Pakes

Wednesday 26th JUNE
The Gardens of Russia

John Baker

Also, Members June Show
Roses; Sweet Peas; Shrubs

All will be held at The BW Junior School, Ridgemede, SO32 1EP where there is ample parking. Doors open at 6.45 for a prompt 7.00 start. Members free, Visitors £2; Refreshments

