SEPTEMBER – A GREAT TIME TO BE A GARDENER!

Mark Gatter and Andy McKee are on top of the harvest, but now is also a time to be ruthless and make space for the winter brassicas

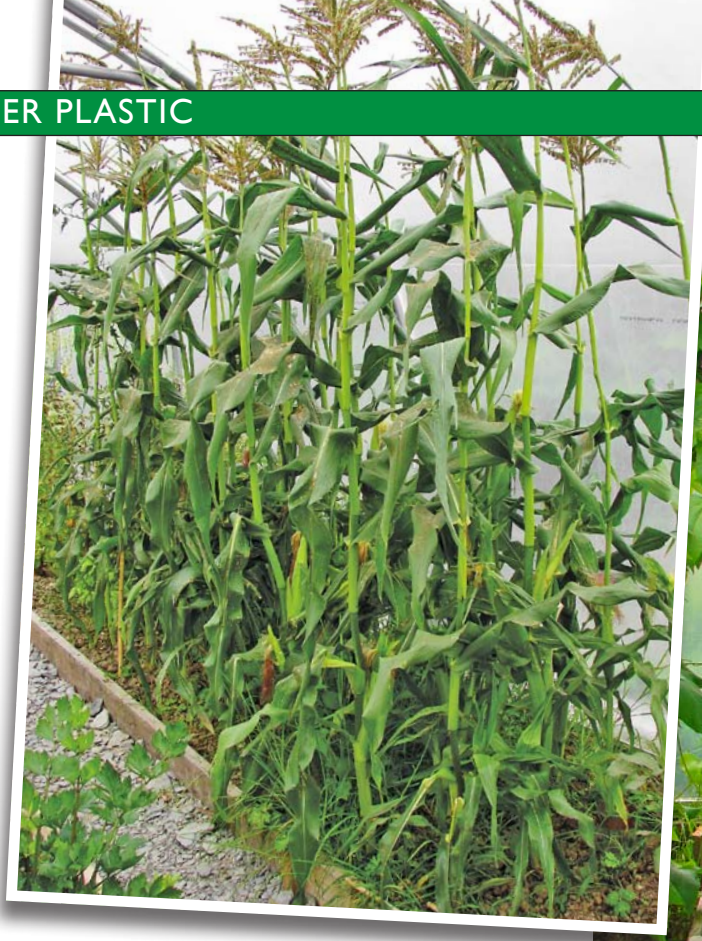
FOR MOST GARDENERS September heralds the beginning of the end for the growing season. The nights are drawing in, and while it's time to harvest some of the best crops of the year – melons and sweetcorn, for example – otherwise it feels like time to gradually wind things down and prepare to vegetate for the winter… but not in a polytunnel. Under cover, the growing season never really needs to come to a complete stop. Even in the depths of winter, everything just… stands there, waiting to be picked. It's a bit like a huge, walk-in larder in many respects.

Night-time temperatures take a serious dive in September, and there's much less chance of any of us throwing the covers back because we're too hot in bed! Add to this the decreasing daylight hours, and heat-loving plants will undeniably start to look a bit sad. Most plants *will* slow down now, and watering should be reduced, as they require less. If you have an automatic system on a timer, don't forget to adjust it or you may well swamp the beds, risking waterlogged or rotting roots.

Aubergines.

THE SEPTEMBER HARVEST

So, what kind of crops might be ready to pick in September? It's probably the best list of the year – a list of all the most anticipated, mouth-watering things a garden can produce, ▶



Sweetcorn.

▶ topped by melon, sweetcorn, peppers, sweet potatoes, aubergines and tomatoes. The sweetcorn and melons, in particular, might not have been ready before now, as they do both need quite a long season.

Melons climb readily and should be grown up supports rather than being left to trail all over the beds, where they take up far more room and are also likely to encourage rodents. Voles, in particular, love the high water content of melons (and cucumbers too) and will feast on them just before you are ready to pick – very disappointing! If the plants are grown up supporting strings the fruit will develop too high up for even the most adventurous vole to plunder, and so long as they are sited carefully they will not cast unwanted shade on other crops beneath. In fact, you can use this shade to your advantage – for instance, lettuce will bolt fairly quickly if grown in heat and full sun, but if grown in the shade it can stand for much longer.

Sweetcorn, another tall crop, can be 'companion grown' with climbing beans, which will readily use them for support. Both will benefit the other with no apparent reduction in either crop. And, if the beans aren't quite done when you're ready to harvest the sweetcorn, just pull off the cobs and leave the plants standing for a while longer.

Beware of leaving sweetcorn too late! Unless you know how to tell when it's ready, you might find you've allocated a big chunk of the polytunnel to starch production – very sad! The tassels start out green but turn brown as the kernels develop, and when they're about halfway between these two stages they should be ready to pick. To check, carefully pull back the leaves from the top of the cob and dig a fingernail into one of them. The juice should be slightly milky and sweet. If it is, pick it immediately! If you're lucky, it might make it back to the kitchen. If not… well, just eat it on the way. Raw sweetcorn on the cob is a very rare treat that only gardeners – and their fortunate families – will ever enjoy.

While some of the 'long season' crops may not have been ready to pick before now, others – aside from those already mentioned – should have been cropping for a while, including cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, celeriac, celery, chard, courgettes, cucumbers, fennel, kohlrabi, pak choi, rocket, spring onions, strawberries (the ever-bearing varieties, which actually produce two harvests – one in spring and a second in summer or autumn).

All in all, September is not a bad month to be a gardener!

BUT WINTER IS COMING…

September is also a good month for making decisions, and in this case the big question has to be, "What should I pull out of the ground in order to make room for winter/hungry gap crops?"

Anything planted in order to create a bumper summer crop for storage will now be past its best. Ask yourself if any of them – courgettes, for example – are still being productive enough to warrant all the space they take up. If not, be ruthless and remove at least some. Dig in some compost, and then that spot will soon be ready to receive the young seedlings you no doubt sowed back in July and August.

Aside from planting out those you have already prepared, there are still a few seeds that can be very productively sown in September. These include:

❋ **PEAS**
Round-seeded peas are much hardier than their wrinkled cousins, and so long as they don't sit through a prolonged period of frost, will survive the winter to give you a welcome early crop in April. Try to sow them in the first half of the month so that they can get a good start before the cold slows them down to a crawl. If you can find a round-seeded 'Snow' pea then so much the better – you won't have to wait for the peas to develop, as the entire pod is picked and eaten, meaning you could be enjoying them two or three weeks earlier than otherwise.

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Melon

Sweetcorn is wonderful, but the scent of a ripening melon will fill a polytunnel, and walking in it's just about impossible not to anticipate the mouth-watering flavour of what is probably the most delicious fruit you can grow in the UK. There are many types, from cantaloupe (earliest) to watermelon (latest), so depending on your climate you should be able to find something that will be successful, even in the North.

Melons of all types need support while developing, or the whole plant may come crashing to the ground while your back is turned. Some people advocate cutting off the growing ends after five side branches have developed, but this method was developed for commercial growers interested in harvesting everything at once. For the home gardener a long season is the aim, so just let your melon plants grow. Give them plenty of light, food and support and they will reward you accordingly. Happy eating!

- **SPROUTING BROCCOLI**
  Sown in succession through the month, sprouting broccoli will provide an overwinter and hungry gap crop. All the brassicas are hungry plants, and plenty of compost or well-rotted manure should be dug in beforehand. Many of them, such as sprouting broccoli, are also big and will need plenty of room.

- **CAULIFLOWER**
  As with sprouting broccoli, cauliflowers can also be big, hungry plants, although there are also compact varieties that can be grown much closer together. Brassicas, in general, don't like acidic soil, so if the pH level is too low, add a little lime.

- **CABBAGE**
  Some varieties of cabbage won't do very well if sown now, but a 'Sweetheart' variety can be started in the first half of the month.

- **CORIANDER**
  Amazingly enough, coriander can be picked fresh even when there's snow on the ground. Coriander needs nurturing while small, as new seedlings are very susceptible to slug attack, and after the recent wet weather you'll have to be on your toes! If you can get them past this stage, just leave them to get on with it – and don't worry if they bolt! You can continue to pick the evermore feathery leaves even when the plant is going to seed, and they just become more and more tasty. The taste of fresh coriander is a ▶

Cauliflower.

Coriander.

lovely way to add zing to a salad at any time of year, but it seems particularly luxurious in midwinter.

DAIKON – GIANT WHITE RADISH
These are amazing! If you've not tried them yet, you should. They have the same crunchy texture and radish flavour that you get from the smaller 'summer' crops, but they're HUGE – up to 50cm (20in) long and 8cm (3in) thick. They'll completely overwhelm a salad if you let them, so instead try cooking with them – slice them up, or dice them, and add them to a stir-fry. Great stuff!

MIZUNA
Mizuna is a crunchy brassica that's mild enough for you to add substantial amounts to a winter salad. Mizuna often bolts earlier in the year, but if planted now it will provide a very welcome addition to your winter crops – aside from being a delicate and rather beautiful plant.

Mizuna.

SPINACH
Another plant that can bolt earlier in the year unless kept cool and shady, spinach can do really well in a polytunnel over winter. Their fleshy leaves are delicious either cooked or raw, so make sure you plant loads!

TURNIP
Turnips (pictured above) are hardy and reliable, and their flavour is unique. While they do perfectly well outside for most of the year, try sowing seeds of several different varieties now in the tunnel. From the quickly developing 'Snowball' types, later 'Red Tops' and the huge 'Limousin' (from Real Seeds), turnips are likely to stay close to the top of your 'favourites' list of overwintering tunnel crops. 'Limousin' in particular is a great favourite of ours, as despite its size – up to 25cm (10in) across – it stays tender and tasty. Turnip leaves, if picked early, are also good when cooked – but if they're old enough to have a 'hairy' look, don't bother.

> "TURNIP LEAVES, IF PICKED EARLY, ARE ALSO GOOD WHEN COOKED – BUT IF THEY'RE OLD ENOUGH TO HAVE A 'HAIRY' LOOK, DON'T BOTHER"

Further Info

Visit Mark and Andy at: http://www.farminmypocket.co.uk for info on self-sufficiency.

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