

Practical Gardening Training Notes: Looking after your plants

Weeding – A common practice to allow the “wanted” plants to grow well by removing “unwanted” plants. Hand weeding, hoeing and mulching are the most common organic weed control methods. A list of most common, perennial garden weeds are included at the end of this note.

Thinning - A technique to remove plants that are too close to give the rest of the plant adequate space to grow to their full potential. It should be done when a plant has at least 2 - 3 true leaves. With careful sowing, little thinning should be necessary when the seedlings are very young.

Earthing up – A technique of drawing up the soil around a plant. Earthing up helps to avoid wind damage to tall growing crops like sprouting broccoli, Brussels sprouts and sweetcorn, while in the case of potatoes, it is necessary to earth up to avoid sunlight affecting potato tubers.

Mulching – a technique of covering the surface of the soil with organic and non-organic materials which reduces watering requirements and controls weeds. The most common organic mulching materials are: straw or any dried weeds without seeds, garden compost, leafmold, bark chippings and manure.

Watering – Watering early morning or evening helps reduce the water loss through evaporation. Watering needs depend on the stages of plant growth; in the case of mature plants, it is better to water enough and leave for a couple of days instead of watering little and often.

Feeding – Main nutrients required for vegetables are – nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium. If we follow a crop rotation practice and apply adequate organic materials while preparing the soil, it should not be necessary to use a supplementary feed. You can make a liquid feed using comfrey and nettles (please see the notes below on how to make comfrey feed) for especially hungry plants.

Plant support – Climbing plants such as beans and peas need support which can be made of locally available natural materials such as willow and hazel.

Protecting from birds, animals and frost – Netting is essential to protect brassicas and chard from birds. Likewise, the use of cloches or fleece is needed to protect plants- such as potatoes, courgettes, cucumber, tomatoes, beans and sweetcorn - from frost if planted out before the end of May.

List of common perennial garden weeds

"Self heal"
Prunella vulgaris



"Lesser trefoil" *Trifolium dubium*



"Creeping Buttercup" *Trifolium repens*



"Field Thistle" *Cirsium arvense*



"Ragwort" *Senecio jacobea*



Nettle



"White Clover" *Trifolium repens*



"Greater Plantain" *Plantago major*



"Ribwort Plantain" *Plantago lanceolata*



"Catsear" *Hypochaeris radicata*



"Yarrow" *Achillea millefolium*



Couch grass



MAKING LIQUID FEEDS FOR PLANTS



Comfrey



Nettle



Making Comfrey Tea

Nettles and comfrey grow abundantly round compost heaps and a comfrey tea 'brew' can be started in a plastic dustbin, with a lid (see picture above).

Comfrey leaves and stalks need to be submerged in water for 2-3 weeks (maybe less if it's nice and warm), where they rot down and produce an evil-smelling but oh-so-good liquid which is rich in potassium. The dustbin was 3/4 filled with the plants then enough water added to cover them. The plants have a tendency to float so they were weighed down using a plank of wood and a brick.

When it's ready the 'tea' needs to be strained to remove plant bits. Then it can be stored in the dustbin until needed. About half a pint of tea is simply added to a watering can full of water to make a rich liquid feed. A potassium-based feed will promote flowering and fruiting and is especially useful at this time of year for beans, tomatoes, squash etc.

It is handy to keep a jug beside the dustbin for measuring directly into your watering can. Do be sure to replace the lid. One whiff will remind you why!

The same process can be used to make nettle tea. The plants do not need chopping as they rot quickly. Use leaves, stalks and roots if that's how they come. Nettle tea needs straining and diluting in the same way as comfrey tea. It is high in nitrogen which promotes green leafy growth. Your brassicas and salads will thank you for it!

You can make these liquid feeds at home too in an ordinary household bucket, filled with comfrey or nettles which are weighed down with a brick or similar and covered in water. This amount will give you lots of liquid feeds for several weeks in your garden. You might want to use something with a lid though, to contain the pong! You could have a stirring stick next to the bucket and a dedicated jug, which stays outside.

Enjoy a bountiful harvest.