

Canberra Organic



Spring 2008 : Vol 16 No 3

Birds, bees and worms
Artichokes & spinach
Growing & brewing hops
San Fran's community gardens



The **Canberra Organic Growers Society** is a non-profit organisation providing a forum for organic growers to exchange information and supporting the adoption of organic growing methods in the community.

COGS encourages the use of natural methods to improve our soils, promote sustainability and produce fresh, nutritious food.

For information about COGS and organic gardening, visit the COGS website www.cogs.asn.au

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MONTHLY MEETINGS

COGS meetings are held at 7:30pm on the fourth Tuesday of each month (except December and January) at the Majura Community Centre, Rosevear Place, Dickson.

Guest speakers, a produce and seed exchange and sales and the COGS library feature at each meeting. Visitors welcome.

MEMBERSHIP

COGS offers single, family, associate and overseas memberships for \$25 for one year (\$15 for concessions) or \$40 for two years (\$24 for concessions) for new members.

There is a membership application form in this magazine. Please contact the Membership Secretary or a COGS garden convenor for an information kit.

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COGS is run by a voluntary committee elected at the COGS AGM each March.

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President's report Spring 2008

With warmer weather just around the corner it's time to make sure our gardens are ready to burst into action.

COGS gardens

The COGS Committee has just finished its annual risk assessments of all the community gardens and it is pleasing to see they are generally in very good condition. I would like to thank all the garden convenors for the excellent job they do managing the gardens.

Most of the gardens now have waiting lists, so perhaps with the increasing cost of food more people are looking for space to grow their own. However, two of our gardens need more plot holders. If you live in the Kambah or Tuggeranong region and would like a plot without joining a long waiting list first, please contact the relevant convenor or email me. All plot holders are reminded that September is the month of the garden AGMs, the election of garden convenors and the garden committees. Plot fees must be paid by 30 September.

Water issues

Water is still an issue for gardeners and it looks like remaining that way for some time. As you will be aware, ActewAGL increased the price of water considerably on 1 July this year and it has indicated that we can expect annual increases in the future.

An unfortunate consequence of this is that it was necessary to increase the plot levy this year to accommodate the higher water costs. If you are a plot holder please read the notice about this increase elsewhere in this issue. Gardeners are reminded that we still have Level 3 water restrictions. The Bureau of Meteorology's rainfall outlook to the end of October is for about average rainfall in the Canberra area. Water storages are at about 47% of capacity at present, this is up a few percent on this time last year. Hopefully, this will enable us to get through the growing season without any tightening of restrictions.

Water conservation is an important topic for all gardeners. The last three talks at our monthly meetings this year are all relevant to the efficient use of water in our gardens. Each will deal with a different aspect of the topic. All members are urged to come along to these meetings to share their knowledge on how they deal with conserving water in the garden. In this way we all learn from one another and our gardens will be better for it.

Special Interest Group for climbing beans

This season our new Special Interest Group on climbing beans will be planting out about twenty different varieties of climbing beans after the frosts to test their performance in the Canberra region. We are fortunate to have not only Canberra gardeners participating but also gardeners from Braidwood to the Brindabella Valley.

If you would like to participate in this experiment there is still time to join the group by emailing me. I will send you all the details you will need to take part. We will dedicate one of the monthly talks next year to reporting the results and taste testing the various varieties.

Monthly meetings

Our monthly meetings have been relatively well attended lately. They provide an opportunity for non-plot holders as well as plot holders to meet and discuss matters of interest to organic gardeners.

As some of you know we now dedicate at least the first half hour of each meeting to general discussion. It is a forum to discuss any pest, disease or other problem or issue affecting gardeners.

If you know of people who you think would give an interesting talk at our meetings, please advise one of the committee members or send me an email. We are always keen to receive members' suggestions.

Finally, I would like to welcome John Grubb onto the COGS Committee. John is also the new Convenor of the Charnwood garden. What a tiger for punishment!

Keith

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Canberra Organic is the quarterly publication of the Canberra Organic Growers Society Inc.

It celebrates organic gardening, local produce, sustainability and information and social exchange in the Canberra region.

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EDITOR

Monica van Wensveen

CONTRIBUTIONS

We welcome submissions, ideas and feedback.

Contributions preferred in Word, Publisher or text format, on disk, as attached files or as clean typed copy.

Images should be sent as attached (not embedded) files, on disk or as original photographs or slides.

There are four issues each year - Autumn (February), Winter (May), Spring (August) and Summer (November). Deadlines for copy and advertising are 15 January, 15 April, 15 July and 15 October, respectively.

Please send contributions to

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ADVERTISING

Please contact Monica van Wensveen on 6255 4332 or email editor@cogs.asn.au.

Canberra Organic is a unique way to reach people in the Canberra region who have an interest in organics, gardening and the environment. Our circulation is around 400.

ADVERTISING RATES

Payment is to be made in advance. COGS members are eligible for the price in brackets.

Size	1 Issue	4 Issues
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Editor's note

Hooray for spring! It's not that I'm anti-winter, it's just that I'm pro-the-other-three-seasons. I am one of those bear like people who prefers to hibernate in the colder months and emerge into a warmer world of green buds, blossoms and gardening possibilities.

This issue of *Canberra Organic* is full of spring-heralding information. We report on all things winged and wriggly, with articles on bees, birds and worms. Our seasonal vegetables are English spinach and globe artichokes, one of our recent COGS speakers gives his tips and insights on growing and brewing your own hops, and we hear about San Francisco's Victory Gardens.

We take our seasonal tour around the COGS community gardens, share some great Q&A contributions from gardeners around the region - including preserving plums, growing strawberries and using coffee grounds.

Thanks to those who provided feedback on the magazine at the June meeting - your input and suggestions are greatly appreciated!

Top of the *Canberra Organic* reading list were the seasonal planting and harvesting articles, news and tips and the COGS planting guides, followed by speaker's reports, Q&A and library news. Most requested are features on water, soil, gardeners, sustainability, food and markets, and more 'how-to' guides.

It's never too late to add your thoughts to this list - please send an email or have a chat to me or one of the other committee members at the monthly meetings.

So, throw your hands (or gloves) in the air and welcome spring to your garden.

Monica



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Photos

John Bennett, Veronica Doerr, Steve Henry, Andrew Hodges, Richard Hodges, Tom Kaminskas, Rebecca Scott, Monica van Wensveen



Cover photos

Front cover: Watering can (Rebecca)

Back cover:

Artichoke sucker at Mitchell (Monica)

Rhubarb at O'Connor (Monica)

Lettuce at Cook (John);

Opposite page: Muddy gloves (Monica)

This page: Order & ornaments at O'Connor

Articles and photos by Monica van Wensveen unless otherwise stated

This issue of Canberra Organic is printed on recycled paper

Around the COGS Gardens

Cook

Winter has seen the forty-six garden plots at the southern end of Bindubi Street swathed in fog in the early hours on many occasions. Sometimes fog has been joined by frost but this has not prevented many gardeners successfully displaying thriving green leaf vegetables.

Others have been taking the opportunity, despite the shorter daylight hours, to tidy up after the last growing season and to prepare the ground for spring plantings. There has been plenty of activity.

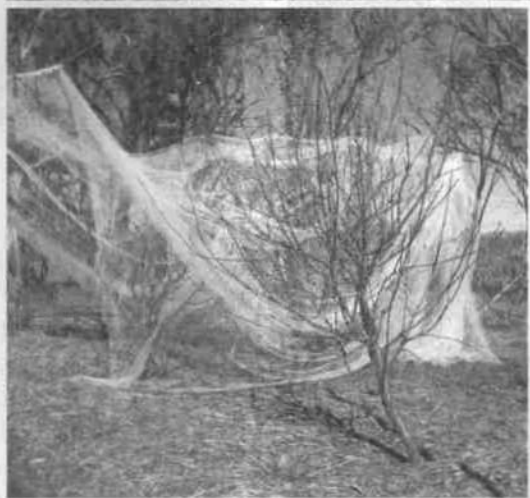
In addition, after a good crop from our fruit trees, pruning and mulching in the orchard area has been, we hope, good preparation for a great season again next year.

Cook Community Garden has been accepted as a participant in the 2009 Australian Open Garden Scheme. This will culminate in an open day in February. It will be a good opportunity to publicise the Canberra Organic Growers Society and to promote the advantages of organic gardens in general and community gardens in particular. There will be plenty of work ahead of us in the next few months to ensure we can present the garden to best advantage.

We have a waiting list of five at present wanting to join our productive group of gardeners!

Cotter

Not surprisingly, the early part of the winter months has seen little activity in the garden. A few gardeners have done some maintenance work on their plots in anticipation of spring planting, but it seems others are either waiting for rain or are content with other pursuits



Photos & words from John Bennett

suppressed weeds on paths between plots - hopefully in time all paths will be mulched, which will help cut mowing down.

The garden welcomes new gardeners Julia, Tim and Patricia. Currently there five single and two double plots available.

Conrad van Hest

at this time. The limited rainfall over the last few months (to early July) leaves some uncertainty about the future position with water restrictions which is a concern for our keen gardeners.

A thank you to those members who helped with a working bee in the garden in early May. We managed to tidy up the common garden beds and the area under the gum trees, and removed unnecessary regrowth and other unwanted shrubs from our site.

At time of writing two plots have recently become available and those on our waiting list will be given first refusal.

Roz and Trevor Bruhn

Holder

The garden is seeing feverish activity by some to get their plots ready for spring. Others are maintaining their plots year round and come down to enjoy the rather warm winter days and other plottolders have taken winter hiatus.

The orchard trees have been weeded, compost placed on the dry and depleted soil, covered with a fresh layer of mulch, given a much needed prune. In early spring they will be fertilised.

Other communal areas are slowly been attended to and hopefully everything will be done by spring. The garden has been fortunate to have wood chip mulch delivered - the first load was snapped up eagerly and second load is going as fast. Mulch has been used to

Kambah

Welcome to our new members Maxine and Jamie and to Evan and Kathryn and their children Keira and Henry. It is wonderful to see how quickly progress can be made in a garden plot by fertilising with enthusiasm and energy. We look forward to a great show of produce in spring.

Some winter picking is taking place in the garden with various loose-leafed lettuce, rocket, sprouting broccoli, green onions and leeks now starting to be harvested. Some smaller swedes have been pulled to make room for others to grow. Weeding is much easier after our recent rain and working out in the gardens is a great way to stay warm!

Following on from the last magazine comments on our trial of couch control on a vacant plot: the recycled clear plastic deteriorated quickly in the sunlight; the recycled black plastic is intact and so far has the best results; and the commercial weedmat is intact and in good shape but there is little evidence of the couch dying back at this early stage.

Continuing with our preference for reusing materials, we have commenced a second test site laying newspapers (still in their plastic wrappers) and stacking them flat on the ground to exclude sunlight. Hopefully, we will be able to reuse the newspapers on another site when the couch is more under control. From these early results it is clear that couch control will take six months or longer.

Happy weeding

Mary Coulson

O'Connor

Well, I missed our solstice gathering but heard it went well and that a sizeable fire was lit to remind the sun to return to us. Its almost a month since then and I always feel the month either side of the solstice is the real heart of winter. The days should get noticeably longer now and hopefully as the arc of the sun rises in the sky we will get some warmer days.

The winter gardens here look great - everyone's broad beans are looking really healthy and are very tall this year for this time so maybe that means they will fruit early!! I hope so, now that I have tasted the home grown product, they are one of my favourites.

Our English spinach was pretty average up till now but maybe with some compost and some warmth will come good. We are planning to put some new ones in soon and of course plant an August crop of broad beans to crop later!!

The calendula is spreading through our community garden - it's so cheerful looking with that glowing orange colour, it's no wonder they use it for winter blues. I put the petals in stews and salads and if we keep cutting the old flowers off they just keep coming on in numbers despite the really cold weather.

The whole garden is going really well for us all and the tennis court miracle continues. We are still pulling up bits of sidelines and the clay is slowly softening and breaking up with all the organic material we put on it. So, happy gardening everyone and spring will be on us soon, so its time to start thinking about all that. All the best to everyone

Philip Woodhill

Mitchell

G'day gardeners - I'm Will, the new convenor at Mitchell. I still haven't met all our plotheolders, but hope to at the next working bee!

Welcome to Kiri, who has recently joined the garden-nice job on the weeds. Welcome also to Dirk and Chikka, who are soon to get their hands dirty.

The Brassicas and Alliums are loving the cold. Lots of beds waiting for spring.

The recent risk assessment of the garden by the COGS committee identified a few issues for us to work on. In particular, any exposed star pickets that present a risk need covering and some issues around poultry are also under review, with a view to adopting national organic standards.

The garden is almost full, with Sammy waiting for a small plot.

Will Borowski

Queanbeyan

With winter upon us, most of our gardeners have let their plots rest. Those who planted winter vegetables are reaping the benefits with mainly cabbage, cauliflower and broccoli being harvested. One gardener is also doing well with a crop of potatoes despite all the doubters!

I must acknowledge the help we receive from Queanbeyan City Council. They kindly provided a truck and backhoe and all the accumulated rubbish is now gone...hopefully never to return.

We say goodbye to Charlie and Julian and welcome nine new gardeners. There is now a good mix of members including some younger gardeners who no doubt will keep us older folk on our toes and introduce a lot of innovative ideas.

We have no vacant plots

Maurice Price

In the news

Quench your thirst with a cold (green) beer

ABC News reports that the Department of Climate Change has awarded the Cascade brewery a 'greenhouse friendly certificate' in acknowledgement of its steps towards carbon neutrality. The Tasmanian brewer who launched Cascade Green earlier this year evaluates its processes from the planting of hops through to product disposal and has reduced its carbon emissions by 16% in six years.

Green marketing in spotlight

ABC News also reports growing calls for investigation of questionable 'green marketing' claims in business advertising. Experts are calling for a clear set of guidelines for green product labelling and there are calls for consumer watchdog ACCC to be given powers to compel companies to substantiate their environmental claims.

LA on the ball with water quality

The Los Angeles Times happily reported that its Department of Water and Power dropped the ball on water quality in its two major reservoirs in June. Thousands of floating plastic balls were used to protect the summer supply of drinking water from a carcinogenic mix of bromide, chloride and sunlight. The agency rejected a tarp (too expensive) and a metal cover (too long to install) in favour of the simple but effective balls.

RACV urges cheap rego for green cars

A recent analysis of vehicles used in Melbourne has revealed that inner city residents have embraced greener cars (such as the Prius), while four-wheel drives remain popular in outer suburbs. News.com.au reports that the RACV is supporting a plan for cheaper registration for green cars, ahead of a long-term scheme to replace fuel excise with a road user charge paid at the pump.

Driving around the bend

ABC Online reports the results of a survey showing that 68% of Canberrans drive to work or school - the second highest rate in the country. Commuters said that public transport was either unreliable (nearly 50%), unavailable (35%) or takes too long (33%). In another survey, Pedal Power ACT reports that at least 40% of car trips in Canberra are less than 5km, and that the majority of school drops are less than 3km - perfect for cycling.

Japan's smelly sacrifice

Japanese housewives are being asked to put up with the smell of dirty socks, pillow cases and underwear for the sake of the planet. According to The Age, a quarter of housewives separate their husband's clothes from other members of the family when they do the laundry, in order to maintain their high standards of cleanliness. However, the detergent maker who commissioned the survey has now advised against separate laundry loads on the basis of effort, energy and the cost to the environment.

Top tips for SPRING

1 Tap into water efficiency

With the weather about to heat up, spring's a good time to give the garden a water check-up. Check hoses and fittings for leaks and holes and replace any suspect pipes, taps and washers. And don't forget to mulch!

2 Garden buddies

Why not try companion planting this growing season? This old gardening tradition is about teaming together plants with natural affinities. Companion plants can act as decoys for harmful pests, attract beneficial insects, or provide soil nutrients or protection from the sun and wind.

Good teams are reported to include marigolds with tomatoes, leeks with carrots and chervil with lettuce. Relations are more strained between potatoes and the tomato family and onions alongside the bean family. There's a useful table on the COGS website, or make your own by observing and experimenting.



3 Bulbs away!

Reward your spring bulbs with some seasonal TLC. Deadhead and fertilise bulbs in mid-spring and cut foliage back when it dies off in early summer. Most bulbs only need lifting if they become overcrowded. Tulips, hyacinths and gladioli can be lifted and stored in a dry place each year after foliage yellows.

**"Spring has sprung - the grass has riz;
I wonder where the flowers is?
The bird is on the wing - absurd!
Of course the wing is on the bird."**

There is much debate over ownership of this seasonal gem - let's attribute it to that great poet, Anon.

Weather Watch

Here's what to expect over the spring months, from the Bureau of Meteorology's long term statistics for temperature and rainfall in the ACT region.

TEMPERATURE	September	October	November
Canberra airport	max 12.2	max 11.3	max 13.0
	min 0.9	min -0.1	min 1.0

RAINFALL	September	October	November
Canberra airport	41.1 mm	41.3 mm	46.6 mm
	5.7 rain days	5.9 rain days	7.0 rain days

(Rain days are days with more than 1 mm-rain; temperatures are degrees Celsius)

Seasonal forecast: August to October

- A warmer than average spring is predicted for most of Australia. For this period, the chance of above average maximum temperatures is around 70% for the ACT region and southeastern NSW.
- Average minimum temperatures are also predicted to be warmer across the country, with a similar likelihood as maximum temperatures (around 70% for this region).
- The outlook for rainfall in this period is neutral for southeastern Australia - the chances of being wetter than normal are about the same as the chances of being drier.
- Near-normal sea surface temperatures across the central and western Pacific Basin and warmer ones in the eastern Pacific indicate that there is little potential for the development of an El Niño event in 2008.

For more information and regular updates, visit the Bureau of Meteorology's ACT weather website: www.bom.gov.au/weather/act

Disease could bring Aussie bees to their knees

Honey bees play a crucial role in agricultural production in Australia, with economic importance estimated as high as \$6 billion each year.

The local bee and pollination industry is already dealing with lower numbers due to prolonged drought. However, Australia's honey bees are increasingly at risk from a swag of diseases that have not made it to our shores...yet.

At the top of the threat list is varroa - a parasitic mite that lives off the protein of the living bee and makes it more susceptible to disease.

Australia is reportedly one of the only countries *not* to have varroa. A recent discovery in PNG has the local industry nervous.

Estimates in the UK are that one in three of their 240,000 hives did not survive the northern spring. Varroa has been in the US for years, either causing or contributing to massive declines in honey bee numbers.

The varroa mite has also been implicated in the devastating Colony Collapse Disorder, (CCD) along

with everything from pesticides and climate change to viruses and mobile phone signals. A challenge for scientists is that the symptoms of CCD are empty hives and no bees - making analysis difficult.

Where some bees have remained, scientists have found indications of multiple infection, suggesting that the immune system may have been targeted and that there is more than one culprit at work.

A federal parliamentary committee recently tabled a report on the honey bee and pollination industry.

The committee recommended \$50 million be spent annually for biosecurity and research to guard the industry against threats such as disease.

Lindsay Bourke from the Australian Honey Bee Industry Council welcomes the recommendations, saying that this is an urgent issue for Australia's horticultural industries and for all consumers.

"One third of everything you eat is directly related to the humble honey bee."

Sources: ABC News, Radio Netherlands, Daily Mail.

Growing hops in Canberra

Our COGS speaker for May was Tom Kaminskis, who introduced members to the joys of home-grown hops. Tom agreed to share his gardening and brewing wisdom for *Canberra Organic*.

When and why did you start growing your own hops?

I've actually only just begun growing hops, so I'm no expert, but I learnt a great deal in my first growing season last summer. I've always enjoyed vegetable gardening and cooking, and brewing has become a major hobby (obsession) this last few years, so it was a obvious step and challenge to try growing one of the key ingredients in beer – hops.

I also love hoppy beers and wanted to brew with fresher, whole hop flowers, as opposed to mechanically processed pellets usually used.

It's not a very common crop amongst small gardeners – where do you go for guidance?

One day I visited my preferred specialist homebrew shop, Brew Your Own at Home, at Kambah Village, and Colin had a number of hop rhizomes for sale. I recalled a flatmate years ago trying to grow hops at home, so I thought I'd give it a go. With some initial advice from Colin, and a lot of research on the web (an amazing resource) I was on my way to my first hop harvest.

What does the hop growing cycle look like?

Hops are a hardy, perennial plant with a permanent root 'crown' which sends up shoots each spring. To initially establish a plant, source some rhizomes (a piece of root crown with propagative buds) and get them into the ground after the last frosts in September/October. A number of runners may shoot from a piece of root stock and usually one or two of the strongest are allowed to continue.

An incredibly strong and aggressive climbing vine, hops will wind its way up a trellis with amazing speed and vigour if the growing conditions are ideal. They are a very attractive plant, not dissimilar to a grape vine, with dark green leaves of three points with serrated edges.

In early to mid-summer small, small fuzzy buds will appear on terminal runners and develop into swollen, green cones. Different varieties of hops will have distinctively shaped cones, much like many vegetable varieties, for example tomatoes.

The cones will begin to dry out and take on a papery feel, and perhaps lighten in colour, when they are ready to pick in late March or early April.

The vine will die back over winter and shoot again the following spring. The first year often doesn't produce much (if any) harvest, though I was pleased to have a reasonably heavy crop. In subsequent years the more deeply established root stock will promote stronger growth and bigger yields.

What part of the plant do you actually use to make beer?

The cones (flowers) are used in the brewing process. They can be used straight away after picking, or more commonly air dried and stored in the freezer until needed.

Hop cones are boiled in specific quantities of water or wort (water sugared by the malt) for specific lengths of time to achieve bitterness in the beer, and sometimes added again at the end of the boil, after cooling, for flavour and aroma. A range of complex acids and oils in the cones produce these characteristics in the finished beer.

Use of hops in brewing has a long history, initially to aid as a preservative, and now a beer without hops in some form would be hard to imagine (and taste quite odd).

Are there any tricks or tips to growing hops? Anything specific to Canberra conditions?

Hops require long daylight hours, so aspect is very important. They like a nutrient rich (compost/manure), well-drained soil of pH 6.5-8, and generous watering.

A decent structure for them to climb on is essential to keep the vines from tangling too much, and for keeping a good airflow around the leaves to minimize the chance of disease such as mildew. Avoid overhead watering and trim leaves away from the first foot of vine above the ground as well.

Australia is naturally free of many of the pests and diseases affecting crops in places such as Europe and North America, where hops have evolved and been extensively cultivated.

What's your secret to brewing good beer?

No secrets, just good technique and ingredients!



Anyone can research this – though like any craft, expect contrasting opinions and little consensus on many issues.

I would have to say all malt (no sugar or boosters - unless a specialty style), add hops yourself (as opposed to using a pre-hopped malt extract 'kit' recipe), cool brewing temperatures, long fermentations (up to a month or more), cleanliness and patience.

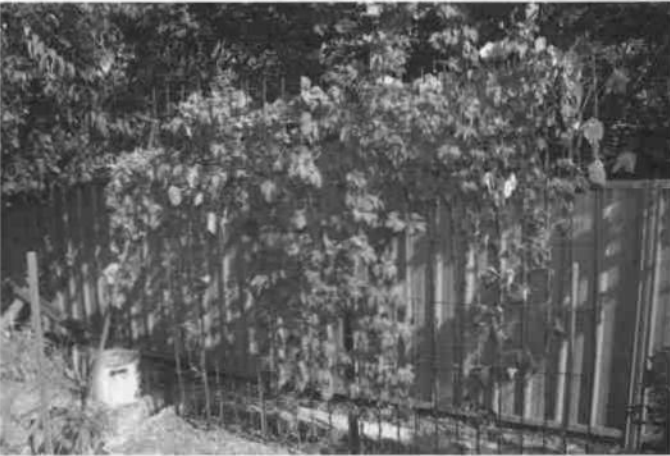
A journal of all recipe and technique variations is a must. I have many years of experience ahead of me yet, and I'm sure there's plenty of closet-brewers in COGS that could teach me a thing or two!

Can you taste the difference if you use your own hops?

Most definitely – very 'fresh' and aromatic hop notes. Unfortunately the variety I used (an Australian one) is more popular for bittering in many Australian commercial beers (enough said) but I hope to source other varieties in years to come. There are many varieties, all with different flavour/aroma/bitterness characteristics suited to different styles of beer.

The brew we prepared at the COGS talk turned out very well indeed – it used three types of hops.

Words & photos: Tom Kaminskis



Organic standards ready for comment

The Organic Federation of Australia's *Organic Update* reports that the draft Australian Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Products has been released and is available for public comment by 22 September 2008.

The draft Standard covers production from plants, animals and fungi as well as processed products such as processed food, cosmetics and skincare products.

A committee of key stakeholders developed the draft Standard, which sets out requirements for production, preparation, transportation, marketing and labelling of organic and biodynamic products.

Emphasis in the Standard is placed on farming and management practices that promote the use of renewable resources and conservation of soil, water and energy.

Access the draft Standard on the Standards Australia website at www.standards.org.au and click on Drafts for Public Comment.

COGS plot levy 2008-2009

The annual Committee/Convenors' meeting of 12 August decided to raise the plot levy for all COGS community gardens to \$1.20 per square metre for the next gardening year (1 September 2008 to 30 August 2009). This increase is necessary to cover an expected increase in the running costs of the gardens.

These increased costs are due to the rising cost of water. The cost of providing water for COGS gardens during 2008-2009 is expected to increase by about 60% over the same period last year, assuming similar weather.

One component of this cost is the increase in the price of water imposed by ActewAGL from 1 July 2008. The other factor contributing to the increase is the ACT government's decision to no longer pay for water used by the Mitchell garden. Because of the size of these increased costs the only option is to increase the plot levy.

Efficient watering is essential

Because water is such a large component of the cost of running COGS' gardens it is important that all plot holders use water as efficiently as possible so that future increases in the plot levy can be delayed as long as possible.

ActewAGL have indicated that water prices will increase annually in the future. Last year's water use was much lower than in the previous year. This was partly due to the weather but also many gardeners used much more efficient watering techniques.

Inefficient watering significantly increases our costs. If plot holders need advice on efficient watering techniques please contact your garden Convenor and/or attend the next two COGS meetings which will deal with methods of water conservation in the garden.

Plot levies due on or before 30 September

Plot holders who wish to continue use of their current plot are reminded that plot levies are due on or before 30 September 2008. Currently there are waiting lists for most of the gardens. Plots which have not been paid for by 30 September will be immediately re-allocated to those at the top of the waiting list.

Please don't miss out on retaining your plot by forgetting to pay your plot levy. Plot levies can be paid at the garden AGMs or alternative arrangements can be made by contacting your garden convenor. Each convenor will notify garden members of the date of their garden's AGM.

Keith Colls

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Spring harvest: GLOBE ARTICHOKE

Not only are artichokes the tastiest of thistles, they are also an attractive and vigorous addition to your vegetable patch.

The globe artichoke (*Cynara scolymus*) belongs to the thistle family. It is also known as the French artichoke and the crown artichoke, but is not related to the Jerusalem artichoke, which is actually a tuber.

The artichoke 'vegetable' is actually the flower head which is picked and eaten before it blooms. Only the heart and the fleshy base of the leaves is edible. The floral parts in the centre and base of the flower (the choke) must be removed before eating.

Site and soil

Artichokes need a bit of space to grow - a mature plant will end up about 1.5m high and across.

Because the plants are perennial and will stay in the same place in the garden for a number of years, the initial preparation of the soil is important. They prefer an open, sunny spot in the garden, with well-drained soil, improved with decomposed manure or fertiliser.

Planting

Artichokes can be planted from seed in spring, but it is far easier to plant suckers.

A mature plant typically has a main stem and a number of lateral suckers. Carefully separate the sucker using a spade, trim back any woody leaves or roots and plant in a suitable place in mid-late winter.

Cultivating

Water plants well until they are established and protect them from water and heat stress when young. Once mature, they are fairly resilient.

Build up mulch in autumn, and cut stems back once the leaves go yellow. Mature plants will appreciate a boost of fertiliser and mulch each spring.

Harvesting

It is recommended that you remove any flower heads as they form during the first year (generally 4-6 heads), so the young plants have a chance to grow and produce leaves.

From the second year on, pick the artichokes (generally 10-12 heads) once they are swollen, but before the scales have started to open. When harvesting, leave a few centimetres of stem. Buds harvested early in the season tend to be the best quality.

Problems

The major problem in this region is susceptibility to crown rot. This is unlikely to arise if drainage is good

and the soil has been well prepared.

Choosing and using

At the markets, choose artichokes that are heavy, fat and tightly closed. Although they can be bought fresh for around half the year, early spring is the best time to buy.

If you're not eating them straight away, cut an inch off the stalk and store in a plastic bag in the crisper - but only for a few days.

Artichokes are usually boiled, sautéed, stuffed or steamed, and young artichokes are delicious raw in salads.

To cook, trim the stem and pull off the lower spiky leaves. Cut and remove the uppermost part of the flower head - lemon juice will stop cut surfaces turning brown.

Boil for up to half an hour, depending on age. Pull the leaves off one by one, dip the base in mayonnaise, hollandaise or melted butter and lemon juice and scrape off the flesh between your teeth.

When you come to it, pull off the central cone in one piece, exposing the choke. Scrape out the choke with a spoon, leaving the delicious heart to cook with.

References and further reading

- From a la carte to zucchini (Anthony Barker, 1995)
- The Farmers Market Companion (Viking Books)
- Gardening Australia website www.abc.net.au/gardening



Spring planting: ENGLISH SPINACH

What was it about ordinary canned spinach that made Popeye's biceps bulge? Spinach is a nutritional powerhouse, and if you're willing to indulge its finicky nature, the rewards are great.

Spinach and other dark leafy greens like kale and silverbeet are packed with calcium, folates, vitamin K and iron. Spinach is also rich in lutein, vitamins A and C, fibre and carotenoids. So, not only did spinach make him super-strong, Popeye may also have been protecting himself against osteoporosis, heart disease, colon cancer, arthritis, memory loss and cataracts. Imagine if he'd eaten fresh spinach!

English spinach (*Spinacia oleracea*) is not silverbeet, as many greengrocers claimed in my youth. Spinach has soft leaves on slender stems, while silverbeet has firm crinkly leaves with well-defined ribs and veins. Spinach is native to south-western Asia and is an annual. Silverbeet is from the coast of Spain and Portugal and is biennial. It is also (somewhat strangely, given its heritage) known as Swiss chard.

Unfortunately, the other way to tell the two apart is that spinach is much harder to grow than silverbeet, but is well worth the effort.

Site and soil

Spinach likes good drainage, a rich soil with plenty of compost and will tolerate light shade. Try to remove stones and weeds and turn the soil well before planting.

Spinach is best suited to cool climates and (in the right spot) will be productive in Canberra throughout winter and spring. I use a cloche to protect young seedlings from frost in late autumn and to protect mature plants from the heat in late spring.

Planting

Spinach can be successfully grown from seeds or seedlings. Germination of seeds is possible in temperatures as low as 5°C, although 10-16° is preferable. Sow seeds 1cm deep either directly or in punnets. Each seed produces two or three seedlings and it is suggested that these clumps be planted together.

Seedlings should be planted or thinned to around 30cm apart. Spinach does not respond well to root disturbance, so plan your final position in advance.

Cultivating

Weeding and mulching are important to reduce competition and to create stable (cool and moist) growing conditions.

Spinach grown in poorer soils will benefit from application of organic liquid fertiliser or mulch enriched with nutrients, particularly nitrogen.

Harvesting

Pick individual leaves as you need them, from the outside of the plant, but make sure you leave enough for the plant to be able to photosynthesise. It is better to cut (rather than pull) the leaves to avoid damage to the root system. Alternatively, cut the whole plant once it's large enough to use. Harvest can usually start 4-6 weeks from planting.

Problems

The biggest problem with spinach is its tendency to bolt to seed as soon as conditions become even slightly unfavourable. This is particularly an issue in late spring when days become longer and temperatures increase. Spinach also tends to bolt under water or nutrient stress.

Mature spinach plants don't suffer from too many pests, but can be occasionally attacked by slugs and snails.



Choosing and using

Although spinach is available to buy all year round, it is best (and cheapest) in winter and spring.

When buying spinach, choose bright green, fresh-looking leaves. Use them as soon as possible after purchase, or keep them for a few days only in a plastic bag in the crisper. Don't wash them until you're ready to use them.

The leaves need very little water to cook and if you want to retain all the good Popeye-sustaining nutrients, cook them only until they are wilted and bright green. Baby leaves are great for salads.

References and further reading

- Organic Vegetable Gardening (Annette McFarlane)
- BBC Gardening: www.bbc.co.uk/gardening
- Botanica's Organic Gardening (Judyth McLeod)

Gardening in the heart of San Francisco

A few weeks ago I found myself standing on the steps of San Francisco's City Hall looking out across the hundreds of homeless people – and the hundreds of ripening vegetables in a bountiful organic community garden.

As I wandered through the Slow Food Victory Garden 2008 (VG from hereon in) I marveled at the varieties of corn, heirloom tomatoes, herbs, Asian greens, beans and flowers.

It was near the cucumbers that I met Robert Alvarado, one of the 200 volunteers who tends the gardens. It was Robert who told me about the history of this garden.

During WWII the American government encouraged the development of Victory Gardens across the country. In fact, between 1941 and 1943 there were 20 million Victory Gardens planted around America with a total of 41% of the country's total food produced in them.

This current VG now occupies one of the historical Victory Garden sites. Though this is hardly a coincidence. As the garden's founder, multimedia artist Amy Franceschini says, "This image of 20 million gardens being planted within two years gave me the fuel to imagine a new program with a focus on contemporary food issues."

"My intentions were set to revive not only a city-supported gardening program, but a personal revival to get politicized and radicalized about the current food crisis."

And "City Hall should be a place where city politics are visualized, demonstrated, and played out. If the city is supporting urban agriculture, of course there should be a garden in front of city hall demonstrating what they support."

And Mayor Gavin Newsom certainly demonstrates what he supports. In addition to leading San Francisco forward on same-sex marriage, he has been visionary on the role of urban gardens within his city.

As he says, "From protecting the environment, to supporting our local and regional economy, to ensuring we can provide access to wholesome, nutritious food for all San Franciscans, the Victory Garden has given us a powerful platform from which to make the case for more good, clean and fair food in this country."

And it seems Newsom is not being tokenistic when he supports the VG, for in conjunction with international chef and food activist Alice Waters, he is starting a community garden revival within his city.

Community groups are now submitting applications to City Hall to develop gardens and grow produce throughout the city's under-utilised public spaces.

What of the produce from the VG garden? It's also here that the VG is doing its part to raise awareness about another serious issue – that of urban hunger.



The produce is harvested on Monday mornings by VG volunteers then given to San Francisco's Food Bank who work with over 600 agencies to serve the city's 150,000 hungry citizens.

In fact within San Francisco 1 in 4 children, 1 in 3 seniors and 1 in 5 adults go hungry. And then there's San Francisco's homeless - the people I had come from Australia to learn more about.

One of the first things I did last week when I returned home to Canberra was wander through my garden. It was amongst the rocket and pak choy that I got thinking. Like San Francisco, Australia has its own food production and hunger issues. Like San Francisco we could do well to further politicize these issues and have our politicians take a lead. And taking the lead from San Francisco's Victory Gardeners, Canberra's Organic Growers could be tending its own Victory Garden on the lawns of Parliament House.

And it would be then that Amy Franceschini's words could also ring in our ears saying, "Victory"... is independence from a food system whose values we do not support. 'Victory' for the Victory Garden program

is reducing the food miles associated with the average American [Australian] meal by growing more food locally. 'Victory' is building an alternative to the American [Australian] industrial food system, which we view as injurious to ourselves, and to the planet."

For further information visit:

- www.sfvictorygardens.org
- www.slowfoodnation.org
- www.sffoodbank.org

Words and photos: Rebecca Scott

Rebecca is a Canberran who is keen organic kitchen gardener, a food lover, a former CSIRO science communicator and now the founder of Streat, a new homeless youth café and social enterprise being developed in Melbourne. She's particularly passionate about the issues of food production, urban agriculture, hunger and homelessness. She'd love to hear from others who share this interest and can be contacted on Rebecca.scott@apex.net.au



Who's on the wing in spring?

I am fortunate in that hard work in my garden rarely goes unnoticed. There is always a companionable and appreciative fluttering and twittering as the resident wrens and wagtails inspect my handiwork and tidy up after me.

Birds are part of the natural diversity and balance of a healthy garden environment. What do they do and how can we help them?

Beaked buddies

The best way to avoid pests and disease in the garden is to grow your plants well, look after your soil and keep weeds down.

However, despite our best efforts, most gardens are prone to insect attacks at some stage during the growing season. This is when you might start to notice the free, safe and effective pest control service provided by birds.

I still believe that my summer crop was almost single-handedly saved by willie wagtails during the locust outbreak in Canberra a few years ago. In the early mornings and evenings, I would see a battalion of these birds lined up on the garden fence, taking turns swooping and picking off their targets. At the end of the season, I had very little locust damage and a renewed respect for my feathered friends.

Not only do they clean up winged insects, there are specialist 'leaf cleaners' like the pardalote pictured here. They feed on insects (such as lerps and scale insects) that specialise in sucking the juices out of plants.

Some birds play an important role in pollination - mostly of native plants, but also of vegetables - and also in seed dispersal.

Because they are sensitive to changes in habitat, birds can also be a good indicator of environmental health. Losing a bird species from an area could indicate significant changes in a food or habitat resource on which the bird relies (eg reduction in key breeding habitat or the removal of a plant that provides nectar).

Conversely, the reappearance of birds to an area can signify that habitat restoration or replanting activities are starting to make a difference.

Even the birds we might think of as pests can be a mixed blessing. I have been known to curse the bands of choughs that mess up my mulch and scare my worms, but they're also aerating my soil.

How can we attract birds to the garden?

Some tips on protecting your existing avian residents and encourage others to visit your garden:

- Keep cats out where possible
- Protect any nests you find in the garden
- Don't use pesticides - they will travel through the food chain
- It is generally best not to provide food, but a continuous supply of water through warm months will be appreciated.



Different birds have different requirements for food, shelter and breeding. If you are designing or rearranging your garden, consider the following components:

- Trees of any size can provide shelter, nest sites, food and perches
- Shrubs of all descriptions provide shelter from predators, as well as food and breeding sites
- Ground cover is home to many creepy-crawlies that birds love to eat
- Fallen trees and branches aren't 'messy' to birds. They provide great wildlife habitat and are best left untidy if possible.
- Establish or retain what native plants you can. These are likely to be or to harbour tasty insects
- Variation in layers is important. You will not be able to provide the perfect conditions for each species, so variation is a healthy compromise

Who's out and about?

Spring is a great time for bird watching in and around the garden. Migratory birds, such as spinebills, are returning to Canberra now that the warmer weather is on the way.

Scrubwrens, thornbills and wagtails are returning to the gardens, following the first flush of insects. A theory I recently heard is that the wagtail actually uses its characteristic wag to flush small insects out of leaf litter or mulch.

Nectar-feeding birds such as honeyeaters are on the move as more spring blooms become available to them.

My resident fairy wrens are highly visible at the moment thanks to the males' distinctive bright blue breeding plumage they wear during the spring mating season.

Birds to watch out for include the crested shrike-tit and the spotted pardalote. The shrike-tit is easy to recognise - bright yellow body, strong black beak and black and white striped head - but thought to be decreasing in numbers.

Unlike the striated pardalote (pictured), which seems to do well across the country, the spotted pardalote is more sensitive and more localised. It has a yellow or red rump and a profusion of white spots on its black head and wings

Need more information?

The website of the *Canberra Ornithologists Group* (yes, that's COG) has all you need to know about birds in our region, including maps, photos and up-to-date observations on the more than 200 bird species found in and around Canberra suburban gardens, parks and open spaces. Visit www.canberrabirds.org.au

Greening Australia is a mine of information about designing landscapes for birds and of the impact on birds of revegetation activities in the region. In particular, *Bringing the birds back - A glovebox guide for bird identification and habitat restoration in ACT & SE NSW* is a fabulous resource for amateur birdwatching. Visit www.greeningaustralia.org.au

A couple of easy-to-use **field guides** are:

- *The Slater field guide to Australian birds*
Slater, Slater and Slater (Landsdowne Press)
- *Field guide to the birds of Australia: A book of identification*
Simpson and Day (Lifetime Distributors)

Photo by Veronica Doerr

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The wonderful world of worms

“The plough is one of the most ancient and most valuable of man’s inventions; but long before he existed the land was in fact regularly ploughed, and still continues to be thus ploughed, by earthworms. It may be doubted whether there are many other animals which have played so important a part in the history of the world, as have these lowly organised creatures.”

This quote from Charles Darwin in 1881 highlights what most gardeners already know - earthworms are one of the organic gardener’s best and most tireless friends.

Darwin was so fascinated that he devoted his last book entirely to earthworms and their activities in the soil. In it, he calculated that earthworms could carry and deposit as much as 40 tonnes of soil per hectare annually.

“It is a marvellous reflection that the whole expanse has passed, and will pass again every few years, through the bodies of worms.”

The working worm

There are a number of vital and fascinating ways in which earthworms help in the garden.

One of their most important jobs is to till the soil by burrowing through it. Earthworm burrows aerate the soil, improving drainage and increasing the soil’s water-holding capacity. In addition, plant roots are able to penetrate the soil more easily, providing a healthy growing environment and better access to water, air and nutrients.

Worms derive their nutrition from a wide range of

organic material, including plant matter, bacteria, fungi and decomposing animals. Without worms and other decomposers, this waste would not be incorporated back into rich soil and new plants.

Worms excrete an excellent soil conditioning material called castings or vermicompost. It improves the properties of the soil such as porosity and moisture retention, and provides a natural organic plant food..

Other behind-the-scenes work is mixing the top soil and lower soil layers together, allowing the nutrients from the top layer to reach the plant roots and releasing minerals from the lower layer to the surface layer.

Earthworms also break up thick layers of leaf litter, free root mats in pastures and increase microbial activity in soil. And if that’s not enough, the humble worm is also an important part of the food chain of a healthy environment.

From the inside out

And now for some slightly nerdy information. My very first anatomy class at university was on earthworms. Although I was a little disappointed at the time (I was hoping for something big and hairy), the elegant simplicity of earthworm mechanics has stayed with me ever since. These are some of the highlights.

Breathing Earthworms do not have lungs but still need to take in oxygen and release carbon dioxide to live. Breathing for earthworms happens through their skin. For the gas exchange to work, the outermost layers of skin are very thin and must be kept moist, which is where that slimy mucous is handy.

The need to stay moist means that earthworms are

mostly restricted to life underground, in damp soil. They only emerge at night, when the likelihood of evaporation is low, and tend to burrow deep underground when the weather is hot and dry.

Too much water also poses a problem. If their burrows become flooded, they can’t respire quickly enough and must move above ground until the excess water seeps away.



Moving The earthworm is an annelid - so named because of the 'little rings' or segments that make up its body. The body is filled with fluid. To move, circular muscles in the body wall contract against the fluid and change the shape of the segments, causing them to narrow and lengthen. Longitudinal muscles then contract to make the body short and thick and forcing the fluid-filled segments to expand outwards. Each segment can move independently, making movement well-coordinated.

Earthworms have no appendages except for the few bristles that exist on each body segment. The bristles are used to anchor the earthworm's body to its burrow.

Eating Most earthworms feed on dead organic matter, producing nutrient-rich castings and improving soil condition. They do this by passing soil through their gut or by eating organic debris such as leaves. For this, they don't need highly developed sense organs or food-catching appendages (which is lucky, because they don't have any).

Food passes from the mouth to the esophagus where excess calcium is excreted. The gizzard then grinds the food thoroughly. Food is digested by juices secreted from the intestine and then absorbed by blood vessels in the intestinal wall and distributed throughout the body. Soil consumed by worms is deposited on the soil surface as castings.

Regeneration Most earthworms can repair body damage caused by attack or accident. If an earthworm is cut in two, each half should be able to move about more or less like an intact worm. There is evidence to suggest that regeneration occurs more readily in tail than head segments.

Encouraging earthworms

If you already have earthworms in your soil, you're in good shape. The best way to increase this number is to add more organic matter to your garden.

Worms will eat just about any kitchen and garden scraps. Some scraps take longer than others to break down (eg nuts, egg shells, corn cobs) and some attract flies, wasps and pests (eg meat and dairy products). Worms don't like highly acidic, salty or spicy foods such as citrus, onions, curries or vinegar.

Worms can be bought from an organic worm farm or garden centre, but it will pay to make sure the soil conditions are suitable before release. Worms prefer a neutral to alkaline soil, so a neutralising agent would be useful for acidic soil. Worms prefer lighter loamy soils over heavy clay, so the addition of organic material or coarse sand may be useful. Worm farms are also very popular.



Did you know?

One of the largest earthworms in the world is the **Giant Gippsland Earthworm**, which is restricted to the Bass River Valley in south Gippsland. It has an average length of 80cm (but worms of up to 2m have been recorded), a diameter of 2cm and 300-500 body segments.

Earthworms are a very diverse group, with four major families and around **3000 species** around the world.

Fossils show that worms or their predecessors have existed since the **time of the dinosaurs**, and survived the mass extinction that killed them off around 65 million years ago.

Worms can **double their population** every 8-10 weeks.

Earthworms can **digest about half their body weight** in soil every day.

Need more information?

Worm Digest is a website devoted to earthworm biology. It's packed with information, research and news. Visit www.wormdigest.org

The Australian Museum has a great fact sheet on earthworms. You can download it from their website at www.austmus.gov.au/factsheets/earthworms

If you just can't survive without more information about worm physiology and biology, try any high school or university biology text book. I used *Biology* (Leland Johnson) and *Animal physiology: Adaptation and environment* (Knut Schmidt-Neilsen).

References for this article include:

- *Organic Gardening for the Australian gardener* (Judyth McLeod, 2002)
- *A slice of organic life* (Shezrade Goldsmith 2007)
- Gardening Australia www.abc.net.au/gardening

Photos: Steve Henry & Richard Hodges

What's new in the COGS library

We have some great new books in the COGS library - two are featured here.

Remember that if there are books you think the library should have, please let Alison Yamazaki know - either at the monthly meetings or by email (contact details are on page 2).

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: **Our year of seasonal eating**

Barbara Kingsolver with Steven Hopp and Camille Kingsolver, 2007

From the book's dust cover:

"Barbara Kingsolver, author of the internationally bestselling *The poison-wood bible*, opens her home to us, as she and her family embark on a year of eating locally, and mainly from their own back garden.

Including recipes for seasonal eating and tips on dealing with a deluge of tomatoes and life without bananas, Kingsolver makes a passionate case for putting food back at the centre of the political and family agenda."



Preserving the Italian way

Petro Demaio, 2006

The author is a Melbourne GP who was born in Australia, but whose parents and love food and cooking come from Varapodio in Calabria, Italy.

The book description from

Shearer's Bookshop in Leichardt:

"Petro Demaio has been collecting traditional Italian preserving recipes, and sharing them with family and friends, for a very long time. His book is a rich collection of these recipes, mixed with childhood memories and anecdotes from his travels.

Includes preserving vegetables and fish, making cheese and salamis, drying chillies, tomatoes and other produce, preserving fruit in grappa, baking bread, drying herbs and making soap.

A wonderful book for the enthusiastic cook and for anyone who appreciates the rich and varied tapestry that Italy is today."



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COGS SPRING PLANTING GUIDE

Spring is the main planting season in Canberra. The timing of some plantings may need to be varied depending on the particular year.

Be prepared to protect your frost tender seedlings, as harsh frosts can occur right through spring. Make your own cloches from plastic bottles with the bottoms cut out, or use row covers for larger plantings.

Using seeds

When direct planting with small seeds, eg carrots, bulk out first by mixing the seeds with sand. You can help the plants pre-germinate by keeping them in moist sand for about 4 days before planting out (do not let them actually germinate).

When planting out large seeds, eg pea or corn, soak overnight in a weak seaweed solution prior to planting; alternatively, keep seeds moist between 2 pieces of kitchen paper for 3 to 4 days until seeds germinate, then plant out carefully. This is particularly useful if you are not sure of the seed's viability.

Check your seed packets for their use-by date as poor germination may result from planting after that time, or plants may show a lack of vigour when the seedlings come up.

A seed should be planted at a depth 2 to 3 times its diameter, although it is better to plant too shallow than too deep.

Crop rotation

Remember to rotate the crops you grow in a particular garden bed. Crop rotation is a most important practice for organic gardeners. Successive crops should not come from the same plant families nor make the same demands on nutrients ie follow heavy feeders with light feeders.

Also, successive crops should not share the same diseases or attract the same pests - this prevents a build up of disease problems, and reduces losses from pests.

There are numerous crop rotation schemes used, but try to keep to at least a 4 year rotation period and **do not grow members of the same plant family** in the same bed in consecutive years eg tomatoes, capsicums, eggplants and potatoes are all from the solanum family.

Plant varieties

It is important with crops such as cabbage and lettuce to choose the appropriate variety for the time of year. Lettuce varieties best suited to early spring are Cos, Salad Bowl, Butterhead and Mignonette.

	SEP	OCT	NOV
Globe artichoke	T	T	
Jerus. artichoke	T		
Asparagus	S	S	S
French beans		S	S
Beetroot	S	S	S
Broccoli			S
Brussel sprouts		S	S
Cabbage	ST	ST	ST
Capsicum*		S	ST
Carrot	S	S	S
Cauliflower			S
Celery	S	ST	ST
Cucumber*	S	S	ST
Eggplant*	S	S	T
Endive			S
Leeks	ST	ST	T
Lettuce	ST	ST	S
Melons	S	S	ST
Onions	T	T	
Parsnips	S	S	S
Peas	S	S	
Potatoes	S	S	S
Pumpkins*	S	S	ST
Radish	S	S	S
Rhubarb	T	T	
Silverbeet	S	S	ST
Snow peas	S	S	S
Spinach	ST	ST	
Squash*	S	S	ST
Sweet corn		S	ST
Tomatoes*	S	S	ST
Turnips (white)	S		
Zucchini*	S	S	ST

S = seed sowing; T = transplanting

* When planting these seeds before November, the seed should be started in punnets indoors and the young seedlings kept in a warm sheltered place. Plant out the seedlings once the soil has warmed and the danger of frost has passed.

Q&A @ COGS

Q “Does anyone in the COGS network know the secret of **preserving plums** so they turn out like the prunes you buy commercially?”

A Hello fellow members. My name is Gordon Jarrott from Young. I was an organic farmer at Bribbaree before retiring to my 16 acre hobby hatch at Young in 1999. In 1996 I planted 200 De Agean prune trees for income, and also to home-dry for my own use.

The prunes (or correctly, sugar plums) ripen in the second and third week of February. Those I sell commercially are taken in big wooden bins to the drying facility at Maimaru, about 15km out of Young. There are two other dryers in the areas - Wirrimah and Kingsvale - Young is a big prune area.

To dry my own prunes, I use 250g of caustic soda in 12 gallons of boiling water. I put the prunes in a netting basket about 1kg at a time and dip them in the boiling water for no more than 2 or 3 seconds. I then put them out on a long sheet of builder's insulation material and dry them in the sun. It takes about 5-8 days to dry them and they need to be covered when storms or showers happen. They can be stored loosely indoors for the final drying.

To use the dried prunes, I rinse them in warm water, drain and then soak in warm water for a day or so till soft enough to eat.

An orchardist friend of mine from Prunevale says he just soaks them for one hour and then puts them in the sun for a while and sells them this way at the farmer's market in Young. I have tasted them and they seem OK.

When the commercial prunes are finally dry, they are stored in big wooden bins in a huge shed at Young, then trucked out as needed to various processors state-wide.

There is a processing plant at Young that turns them into the nice soft eating prunes you buy in the shops - Verity is the Young brand. This processing plant can be visited by appointment and you can also buy prunes there on weekdays.

For more information and advice, or to buy some of my sugar plums at a reasonable price, please contact me. If we get plenty of rain and an OK season, I am fairly hopeful of having prunes in early 2009.

Gordon can be contacted by phone on 02 6382 7642 or by mail at PO Box 1296, Young, NSW, 2594.

Q “Is it OK to use **coffee grounds** in my compost?”

A Not only is it OK, but many people have started collecting them from offices and coffee outlets for this very reason.

Coffee grounds are high in nitrogen and are reported to be great for redressing nitrogen balance in compost piles, as a mulch for fast-growing vegetables and to provide a boost for acid-loving plants such as camelias, azaleas and even lemon trees.

Additional suggestions for garden use include:

- Sprinkled around plants for a slow release of nitrogen
- Mixed directly into soil for new garden beds
- Placed around the base of plants to prevent pest attacks (someone suggested the addition of eggshells)

Q “Does anyone have sure-fire tips for **growing strawberries**?”

A Suggestions from COGS members include:

- Red Gauntlet is a popular, productive variety for Canberra's climate.
- A warm sunny location is best, preferably with slightly acid soil and plenty of organic matter.
- Don't crowd the plants - they should be 20-30cm apart to avoid competition.
- Use a good mulch (or black plastic) to keep the bed free of weeds, to conserve moisture and to keep the fruit clean.
- If your bed is prone to slugs and snails, try planting in barrels or hanging baskets.
- Only plant certified virus-tested varieties, which are available at most nurseries.
- Replace plants every few years. Replace all plants at the same time and move to a different part of the garden if possible.



Question on notice

“I've been having trouble growing **bush beans and borlotti beans** over the last few seasons. My climbing beans are always fine, but the bush beans keep dying when they reach around 10cm. What can I do?”

Please send Q&A@COGS questions or responses to editor@cogs.asn.au or to the COGS post box.

COGS NOTICE BOARD

Speakers

7:30 pm on the fourth Tuesday
MAJURA COMMUNITY CENTRE
ROSEVEAR PLACE DICKSON

A Plant Clinic will be held at all monthly meetings. Please bring any pest or disease problems for identification and share your experience with other gardeners.

23 September 2008
Efficient water use in the garden
Keith Colls

28 October 2008
Using greywater in the garden
James Travis

25 November 2008
End of year celebrations
Location TBA

Events

National Organic Week
11-18 October 2008

National Organic Week is an initiative of the Organic Federation of Australia and the Centre for Organic Resource Enterprises
For information and a list of organic events around the country, visit www.organicweek.net.au

Greening Australia ACT plantings
Sunday 7 September
Sunday 21 Sept (last planting for the year)
Lower Cotter Catchment
www.greeningaustralia.org.au

Drop-in Edible Garden Advice Sessions
Second Saturday of each month,
Starts 11 Oct 2008
Canberra Environment Centre, Acton
Gold coin donation
Contact 6248 0885 or
garden@ecoaction.com.au

ACTEW Stage 3 water restrictions apply in all COGS gardens

Handheld hoses with trigger nozzles, drippers, watering cans or buckets can be used 7-10 am or 7-10 pm on the odds and evens system.

No watering is allowed outside these hours

COGS plot fees due!

Plot fees for **ALL COGS plotholders** are due in September. Talk to your Garden Convenor for more info.

Canberra farmers markets

Northside: Saturdays 8am - 11am
Capital Region Farmers Market
EPIC (entry near Shell service station)

Southside: Sundays 9am—noon
CIT Southside Campus
Entry via Ainsworth Street in Phillip

Organic Gardening course

CIT Solutions
Beginners Organic Gardening

31 August to 21 September
& 9 November to 30 November

Weston Campus, Sundays 1-4pm

For information, call 6207 4441 or visit www.citsolutions.cit.act.edu.au

Don't forget to check the COGS website at www.cogs.asn.au for updates