

short cold days and long dark nights.....

The winter months provide a good time to catch up with unfinished tasks and to prepare for next spring. Think about ordering seeds and seed potatoes, tidying out the shed, cleaning the greenhouse, collecting plastic water bottles to make mini-cloches, cleaning plant pots, repairing frames, and planning your crop rotation for next year.

VEGETABLES

Sow indoors

You can sow lettuce, radishes, round varieties of carrots, spinach, salad onions and turnips. Place them on a windowsill or in a propagator.

Plant outside

Garlic cloves can be planted, e.g. Thermidrome and Printantor.

Harvest

Jerusalem artichokes, perpetual spinach, brussels sprouts, winter cabbage, savoy cabbage, carrots, celeriac, celery, chicory (non-forcing and forcing varieties), endive, kale, kohlrabi, leeks, lettuce, parsnip, radish, salsify, scorzonera, spinach, swede, turnips.

FRUIT

- * Plant rhubarb crowns
- * Cover established rhubarb to force early shoots
- * Cut down canes of autumn-fruiting raspberries which have finished fruiting and burn to prevent fungal diseases spreading.
- * Plant bare-rooted fruit trees and bushes this month.
- * Check that young trees are supported with stakes and ties.
- * Winter prune young apple and pear trees.
- * Place grease bands around tree trunks to prevent winter moths from climbing trees and laying eggs (see over).

Pesticide residues - the hidden extras

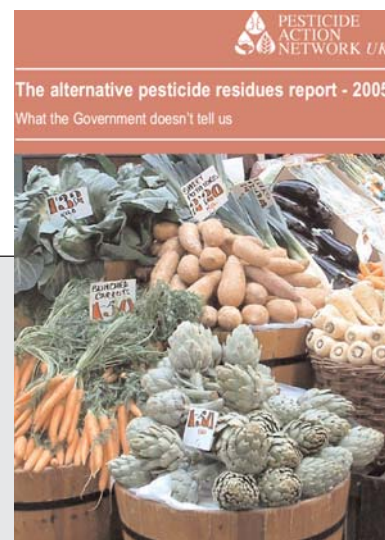
A small fraction of the pesticides sprayed on crops remains on the produce after harvest. So every year the UK government test a selection of fruit and vegetables sold in our shops for the presence of pesticides. In 2005, they tested 37 different food types (3,787 items in total) for between 13 and 118 different pesticides publishing a summary of their results. These showed that in 2005 almost a third of samples tested (31.9%) contained traces of pesticides and a number of these 1.7% had levels of pesticides above the Maximum Residue Level (MRL). That means that on average 17 out of every 1,000 pieces of fruit or vegetable that you eat will contain residues above the legal limit, not an appetising thought!

Bad though this may seem it is not the full story. The MRLs which the government use as their standard in these studies is not set according to human safety levels. Rather it means that if a farmer adheres to 'good agricultural practice' their produce should not contain residues above the MRL. The Pesticide Action Network UK have now carried out a study to determine whether these legal limits are above or below human safety levels. They took seven of the foods most likely to contain pesticide residues and looked at the 36 pesticides that are found regularly or which most frequently exceed the MRL. The research suggests that, of these 36 pesticides, 19 have MRLs that are NOT set below the safety level for one or more of these seven foods. This indicates that even where pesticides are found below the MRL in many cases the levels found will still exceed human safety levels.

Consumers can avoid eating pesticide residues by buying organic, or growing their own organic produce. The PAN UK website also indicates which foods are most important to buy organically (<http://www.pan-uk.org/Projects/Food/index.htm>).



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GENERAL TASKS

- * Continue digging over the ground incorporating manure. Don't dig when the soil is wet such that it sticks to boots and tools.
- * Cover bare ground with leaves, weed cloth, straw or similar to prevent soil erosion. Beds to be dug first in spring can be covered with polythene so prevent them from becoming waterlogged. This will allow them to be dug earlier.
- * Collect fallen leaves and store. Leaves break down to form leaf mould, an excellent soil supplement.
- * Collect remaining crop residues or other organic matter and add to the compost heap.
- * Put out bird seed and fat balls to feed birds through the winter.
- * Cover compost bins to keep the rain out and heat in.
- * Set up water butts to collect rain water from roofs.
- * Remove yellowing leaves from winter brassicas.
- * Check stored crops removing any showing signs of rot.
- * If your pond freezes over frogs can be deprived of oxygen. Floating a small ball in the pond will keep a small area clear.
- * Protect the curds of cauliflowers to keep them white and delay their opening by bending or tying the inner leaves over them.
- * Net winter brassicas to protect them from pigeon damage.
- * Earth up spring cabbages to anchor them better in high winds.



Winter moth

Winter moths (*Operophtera brumata*) are unspectacular in appearance. The males are grayish brown and about 10 mm long with 25 mm wingspans. The females have almost no wings. They survive through the summer and autumn as pupae in the soil with the adult moths emerging between November and January. The wingless females climb up the trunk of fruit trees (and other deciduous trees) to mate and lay their eggs. These eggs hatch into caterpillars which grow up to 25mm in length and are pale green with paler lines running lengthwise along their bodies. They move with a characteristic looping action due to the fact that they only have two pairs of clasping legs on their abdomen. From late March the caterpillars feed off tree leaves, completing their feeding by early June when they drop down to the soil to pupate.

Damaged tree leaves initially have small holes and are loosely bound with silk threads. Damage becomes more noticeable in mid-summer when the leaves are fully expanded and the holes have enlarged due to leaf growth. Blossom and developing fruitlets can also be damaged. At least two other moths, the mottled umber moth (*Erannis defoliaria*), and the March moth (*Alsophila aescularia*) have wingless females with a similar lifestyle but the winter moth is most significant as a garden pest.

Although significant commercial losses have been recorded trees can tolerate some leaf loss. In fact, established trees can lose up to 25% of their leaves and still bounce back. However, it is more important to protect young trees.

Winter moth damage can be reduced by taking a few relatively easy precautions.

- ◆ Grease bands should be placed around the trunks of fruit trees before the adults begin to emerge in November (don't forget to place them around tree stakes too). They should be about 45cm (18in) above soil level and will trap the females as they climb. Winter moth activity declines after January but some species with wingless females are active until April, so grease may need to be reapplied from time to time. Ready-prepared sticky papers can be used on smooth barked trees while a ring of grease can be applied directly to trees with fissured bark. Both products are available from many garden centres or by mail order from companies such as The Organic Gardening Catalogue (0845 130 1304), Agralan (01285 860015) and Growing Success Organics Ltd (01722 337744).
- ◆ From November through January in the evenings you may find the wingless females with a cloud of male moths around them. Remove any you find.
- ◆ Look inside buds and leaf clusters for eggs or caterpillars and crush any you find.



Pesticide Action Network UK (PAN UK) is an independent non-profit organisation working nationally and globally with individuals and organisations who share our concerns. PAN UK projects enable us to work effectively towards specific targets to enable us to:

- ❖ Eliminate the hazards of pesticides
- ❖ Reduce dependence on pesticides
- ❖ Promote alternatives to pesticides

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