

# HUNTLEY & PALMER'S ALLOTMENT ASSOCIATION



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## Chairman's Chatter

### A better understanding of peat-free compost

There has been much talk about this "new-fangled" peat-free compost in the last few years and the fact that, as the suppliers learn more about producing it, the quality has improved each year.

As with many changes the level of understanding varies and in recognition of this the industry, and other interested bodies such as the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS), have set up the Responsible Sourcing Scheme for Growing Media. This aims to understand the concerns of gardeners and provide information including more details of the many peat-free composts now available on the market.

Their initial research found that:

*The need for more consistent and accurate advice was revealed in the independent research we commissioned, which revealed that whilst 67% of gardeners care about sustainable composts, only 30% say they consistently buy peat-free. This new guidance seeks to close this gap and make it easier for gardeners to make sustainable choices.*

The guidance has produced a website with more information about peat-free compost, which can be found here: <https://www.responsiblesourcing.org.uk/>

Their three key points for using peat-free compost are to use the compost wisely by:

1. **Checking Moisture Levels:** Peat-free compost can appear dry on the surface while remaining wet underneath. To avoid over-watering, check moisture by sticking your finger into the compost or lifting the pot to gauge its weight. If it is heavy or feels moist below the top 2 cm of the surface, it likely has enough water.
2. **Monitoring Plant Health:** Keep a close eye on your plants. Signs that they may need feeding include slowed growth, pale leaves, or fewer flowers. If you notice these changes, start feeding regularly with a balanced, all-purpose plant food. To be on the safe side you can use a mild liquid feed from two weeks after potting.
3. **Proper Storage:** Store your compost in a cool, dry place to maintain its quality and effectiveness.

As the Trading Shed is now peat-free we make sure that our compost stock is rotated. We are relatively small and cannot carry large amounts of stock so the compost you buy will not have been "sitting on the shelf" for too long.

In the mean time you can use the Responsible Sourcing Scheme website to look up any product, with or without peat, to learn a little more about it.

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## Talking seeds

For many years we have sold Suttons Seeds in the Trading Shed – probably in part because for 170 years they were based in Reading, and in later years had their trial grounds in Earley; around the site of the current Culver Lane allotments. It is, however, almost fifty years since Suttons left Reading and moved to Devon.

Recently, some members have been less happy with the packaging of the Suttons seeds and over the winter the committee undertook research to see what else was on the market and whether there might be a better option. After considering the design of the packaging, quality of the seeds and their price, we have switched to stocking and selling Kings' seeds.

Initial impressions of the Kings' seeds are good, but we won't really know if this was a good move until we reach the other end of the growing season. As ever, your feedback is appreciated. Details of the seeds stocked by the shed can be found here:

<https://hapaa.org.uk/Docs/Seeds.pdf>

## Annual General Meeting

Our AGM is an annual event where your committee report back on how your organisation is run. It is also your chance to ask questions, provide feedback or suggest how things could be different.

The AGM is booked for **19:30 Wednesday, 16th April, 2025** in the David Fuller Room at Radstock Lane, Earley, RG6 5UL - opposite the Earley Town Council offices.

*We look forward to seeing you there.*



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## Wednesday evening opening at the Trading shed

With the clocks changed and longer evenings the Trading Shed will now be open on Wednesday evenings in April and May between 17:00 and 18:30 for all the usual great-value supplies for your allotment or garden.

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## New committee members

Your committee helps run the association and makes decisions about the Trading Shed. It organises the annual social event and liaises on behalf of members with Earley Town Council

Due to people having to stand down there are a couple of vacancies on the H&P committee:

- **Secretary** - To be a committee member and take minutes at meetings and the AGM
- **Member without portfolio** - To bring ideas to the committee to make sure that the association meets the needs of its members

Last year, in addition to the AGM the committee met four times, each one lasting less than ninety minutes, so the commitment is quite modest.

If you would like to talk about joining the committee for either of these positions please talk to Richard Tredgett or drop him an email [handptradingshed@gmail.com](mailto:handptradingshed@gmail.com)

## New independent examiner

On a different note, as our current independent examiner is moving to the Inverness area, it would be good to find someone a little more local to take on the rôle.

An independent examiner, in the context of local associations, is a person who is independent of the group's management and administration, and is believed by the trustees to have the necessary skills and experience to competently examine the association's accounts.

If you feel you might be able to take on this once-a-year rôle please email [handptradingshed@gmail.com](mailto:handptradingshed@gmail.com) and Brian, our Treasurer, can talk to you and answer your questions.

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## Coffee club

A group of members have started a coffee club – getting together occasionally and talking about whatever they fancy – growing related or otherwise.

They meet in a local café, have a cup of something, chat with, and enjoy the company of, like-minded people. If this appeals to you please email [handptradingshed@gmail.com](mailto:handptradingshed@gmail.com) with some details such as your name and when you might be available and we can pass them on to the organiser. If you don't have access to email you can contact the coffee club by calling Julia on 07963278273.

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## Save the date - 2025 picnic

The association picnic is a very casual and relaxed affair when the main aim is to relax, chat to other members and enjoy what you and others have grown. Last year thirty members attended and had fun chatting and taking part in four friendly competitions for home grown crops and produce.

**This year's picnic will be on:**

**Saturday 6th September 2025, held between 12:30 and 15:00.**

Pop the date in your diary and then start growing some magnificent crops!

If it helps inspire the seeds you are sowing at this time the competition categories will be:

- Best fruit or vegetable
- Best box of six vegetables
- Best container of flowers
- Best produce using a home or allotment grown ingredient

The judging will be between 13:00 and 14:00 and is by everyone present.



## Growing cabbages

Cabbages are a good vegetable to grow. They provide crisp, leafy heads that are packed with flavour and goodness. Whether you prefer firm white cabbages, crinkly Savoy, or the red varieties, they are a reliable crop that can be harvested for much of the year.



Start seeds in modules and transplant once strong enough to handle. Cabbages thrive in firm, nutrient-rich soil with plenty of sun. Keep them well-watered and protect from pests like caterpillars and pigeons. With a little care, you'll enjoy delicious homegrown cabbages, perfect for salads, roasts, and hearty winter dishes.

Begin by filling modular seed trays with seed compost. This will provide a fine-textured medium for germination. Make sure the compost is moist prior to sowing. It is a good idea to soak the compost-filled seed tray by plunging it into a larger water-filled tray and letting the water soak all the way up to the surface of the compost where the seeds will be sown.

Sow one cabbage seed per module, this will ensure they have plenty of room to grow strong roots. Continue to keep the compost consistently moist. If available, use a mist sprayer. This will deliver a gentle mist that won't disturb the seeds.

Place the trays in a warm, bright spot to encourage germination. Keep them out of direct sunlight to avoid drying out. Once the seedlings develop their first true leaves or when the roots fill the modules, they'll be ready for the next stage.

Prior to planting out the seedlings will need hardening off. Over a 7-14 day period place them outside for a few hours each day, gradually increasing their exposure to wind and temperature changes.

To transplant; simply remove your seedlings from their modules and place them in larger pots or directly into the soil.

Club root is a common soil-borne disease that stunts growth and causes swollen, misshapen roots in cabbage plants. Choosing a naturally disease-resistant variety will help protect it and give it the strength to thrive even in affected soil.

Using brassica collars will help to deter root fly and netting will keep off insects and birds.

Kohlrabi is a tasty alternative to cabbage. This unique, crunchy vegetable offers a mild, sweet flavour and is perfect for adding variety to your allotment. It has a quick-growing cycle, is ideal for smaller spaces and can be harvested in just 8-10 weeks. It is also versatile in the kitchen; sliced or grated raw in salads, roasted or added to stir-fries.



## Growing Beetroot

Beetroot is a satisfying crop for any garden or allotment. It provides vibrant roots packed with flavour and nutrients. Easy to grow and quick to mature, it can provide a continuous harvest from summer into autumn. Use it by roasting, pickling, or fresh in salads (the young leaves make a good addition). Beetroot also stores well, which means it's possible to enjoy it long after the end of the growing season.



Sow seeds from now until mid-summer, thinly in drills. Some beetroot seeds, will produce 2-5 seedlings each and will need to be thinned to 10 cm apart once the seedlings are large enough. Other seeds will only produce a single seedling and will need no thinning.

Beetroot needs fertile soil. Adding an organic fertiliser a week or two before sowing will enrich the soil.

To reduce bolting, water regularly in dry periods

For a steady supply try successional sowing. Sowing small batches every few weeks from spring to late summer will keep the harvest going. This approach ensures a mix of young roots for salads and mature ones for cooking.

Companion planting is beneficial and will help to improve the growth, flavour, and health of your beetroot as well as keeping pests at bay.

Lettuce & Spinach - Low-growing greens provide shade, keeping the soil moist for beetroot.

Marigolds - Help deter pests like aphids and nematodes.

Onions & Garlic - Naturally repel common beetroot pests.

Dwarf Beans - Fix nitrogen in the soil, promoting healthy beetroot growth.

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## Recipe corner

April was often viewed as a part of the "Hungry gap" and this can be a difficult time of year for things to harvest - overwintering crops are running out, and we want the ground for this year's new ones.

One of the first things that you can harvest is rhubarb, so this recipe uses that great, relatively low-maintenance vegetable:

## Rhubarb and Orange Muffins

### Ingredients

- 150 g plain flour
- 1 level dessertspoon baking powder
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 1 heaped tablespoon ground almonds
- Zest and juice of 1 large orange
- 1 large egg
- 75 g dark brown soft sugar
- 50 g block butter, melted and cooled slightly
- 225 g rhubarb, cut into 1.5 cm cubes

### For the topping:

- 1 heaped tablespoon demerara sugar

### Method

1. Begin by sifting the flour, baking powder and salt into a bowl, lifting the sieve up high to give the flour a good airing.
2. Now, in another bowl, whisk together the almonds, orange juice and zest, egg, sugar and melted butter.
3. Return the dry ingredients to the sieve and sift them straight into the egg mixture. (This double sifting is crucial because we won't be doing much mixing.) What you now need to do is take a large metal spoon and fold the dry ingredients quickly into the wet ones - the key word here is quickly (i.e. in about 15 seconds).
4. What you mustn't do is beat or stir, just fold, ignoring the uneven appearance of the mixture because that's precisely what makes the muffins really light. Over-mixing is where people go wrong.
5. Next, quickly fold in the rhubarb - again no stirring.
6. Now divide the mixture between the muffin cases. Sprinkle on the demerara and bake near the centre of the oven for 25-30 minutes until well-risen and golden brown. Remove the muffins from the oven, and transfer them straightaway to a wire rack to cool.

*With thanks to Deliaonline.com*