



## In this issue

Chairman's Chatter .....	1
Annual picnic .....	2
Strulch .....	3
Spring bulbs .....	3
Autumn compost and Manure scheme .....	5
Watering wisely .....	6
Change of name .....	7
Earley Wildlife calendar ..	7
Growing lettuces .....	8
Recipe corner .....	9

## Chairman's Chatter

### Was it me or was that a dry spring?

Like farmers, it seems gardeners are never happy with the weather: too wet, too dry, too hot or... well you get the idea.

By using the local weather station at the University of Reading we can confirm, or otherwise, our suspicions about the weather this spring.

Having looked at the meteorological spring (March, April and May) their weather station records they show the following:

	20-year average rainfall (mm)	2025 actual rainfall (mm)
March	41	8
April	50	16
May	44	25
Spring total	135	49
		<b>-64%</b>

Whilst it wasn't raining it seems the sun was certainly shining more than the average:

	20-year average sunshine (hours)	2025 actual sunshine (hours)
March	119	176
April	171	237
May	199	255
Spring total	489	668
		<b>+37%</b>

With only just over one third of the twenty-year average rainfall at this site, and thirty-seven percent more sunshine explains why your soil has been so very dry. The weather station is situated on the University's Whiteknights campus being only a mile or two from most of the gardens or allotments in the Earley/Woodley part of Reading. This means that it gives a fairly accurate representation of what we have each experienced.

You can see more records on their website:

<https://research.reading.ac.uk/meteorology/atmospheric-observatory/>

---

## Annual H&P picnic

All members are invited to the annual H&PAA picnic and friendly competitions to be held on Saturday 6th September 2025 between 12:30 and 15:00 in the car park at the Culver Lane site.

Everyone brings a picnic for their group plus a dish or salad to share and we sit, chat and get to know our fellow members a little better. Please also bring seats or a blanket depending on your seating preference.

As usual, there will be a range of competitions where the judging is done by everyone present; no external judges peering down their nose at my more than slightly wonky vegetable (phew!).

The 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

You can enter any, or all, of these categories. Please bring your entry to the marquee between 11:30 and 13:00 to register it and receive a number (all entries are anonymous).

Paper plates will be provided to display your fruit or vegetable.

Judging between 13:00 and 14:00 is by everyone present and the winners will then be announced. Prizes will be awarded as well as having the fun of taking part.

---

## Strulch

Mulching has long been a great way of both suppressing weeds and helping moisture retention, especially if there is less rainfall than you would like (see Chairman's Chatter). In the longer term, an organic mulch breaks down and improves your soil.

Over the years a range of materials have been used successfully as mulch: garden compost, wood chippings, processed conifer bark, leaf mould and even seaweed. (Have you ever been to the Lost Gardens of Helligan, which is conveniently close to the local beach?)

In the last year the Trading Shed has started to sell Strulch, a bagged, mineralised straw that performs as above but has the added benefit of deterring slugs and snails – *NOW you are interested!*



It is made of chopped pieces of wheat straw with added iron minerals. As with any mulch, the use of Strulch is mainly about preparation: weed the area, water well if there has been no recent rain, then apply a 3-4 cm layer onto the bare soil, leaving space around plants, then watering again to hold it in place.

A 13.5 kg bag of Strulch is available in the shed for £11.80 and will cover four and a half square metres (forty-eight square feet) of your plot or garden at the recommended application rate.

---

## Spring bulbs

### Autumn planting, spring-flowering bulbs

This autumn we will be stocking the following species (available from mid-September).

### Selection of bulbs

**New this year** – a selection pack of mixed, but matched, bulbs to create a stunning display at a great price. Presented in a strong paper bag and a colour display on the front showing what will grow and flower in the spring.

**Cottage Garden collection** - Ideal for beds and borders, the cottage garden collection will bloom from February to August with beautiful complementary blooms. Varieties of Narcissi, Tulip, Camassia and Alliums. 50 bulbs for £7.25

**Allium collection** - Ideal for beds and borders, this assorted variety Allium Collection will flower in May, June and July. Fifty bulbs from four different varieties give a big colourful display. 50 bulbs for £7.25

**Crocus Naturalising, Mixed** - A mix of crocus providing early colour and early food for pollinators - Contains 18 bulbs per pack for just £3.65.

### **Iris & Narcissi**

**Blue Note, Iris Reticulata** - produces spring flowers with blue petals with yellow and white crest and are ideal for garden fragrance. Great value early spring colour that will naturalise - contents 12 bulbs for £2.95.

Our usual selection of five different loose narcissi bulbs: Tête-a-tête, Verdin, Sweetness, Pueblo and Quail - £2 for ten bulbs.

### **Amaryllis**

**Red Velvet** - a single, large, scarlet-coloured bulb traditionally grown indoors for flowering at Christmas. It comes in a presentation box with a pot, compost as well as the single bulb. £6.90.

### **Onions, Shallots and Garlic**

#### **Shallots**

**Griselle** - This superb Shallot is ideal for Autumn planting and ensures high quality, large yields and delicious flavour. It will grow to 35 cm in height and spread to around 15 cm. £2.60 for 250g.

#### **Over-wintering onion sets**

**Radar** - The most popular variety for Autumn planting, which produces excellent yields of mild-tasting onions from late May onwards. Radar has good resistance to bolting and stores well. 85p for 250g.

**Senshyu** - This reliable main crop produces good yields of straw-yellow, semi-flat bulbs. 85p for 250g.

**Autumn Champion** - Bred to suit the British climate. Darker-skinned, semi-oval bulbs which are renown for excellent storage and intense flavour. 85p for 250g.



## Over-wintering garlic

**Topadrome** - A soft-neck garlic with white skin and cream-coloured cloves. Perfect for early harvesting, this fabulous variety stores well. £2.00 for 2 bulbs

**Germidour** - Forms large bulbs with a mild, yet rich flavour. This is a popular French soft-neck variety that is easy to grow here in the UK. £2.00 for 2 bulbs

**Messidrome** - This comes from French production and produces large, white bulbs with excellent flavour for all culinary uses. £2.00 for 2 bulbs

**Elephant Garlic** - Comes in a two-clove pack £2.20.

---

## Autumn compost and manure scheme

We are repeating the autumn compost and manure scheme that ran successfully in 2024.

This is to help members who wish to buy larger quantities of our usual manure and compost products at a reduced price, during the period September to November.

### The details are as follows:

Minimum purchase is five bags, which can be a mixture of compost and manure.

Payment is taken in advance when you place your order in the Trading Shed.

Delivery is early on a Wednesday morning and, ideally, you will come and get your order at that time as, collectively, we can load from the lorry directly into your car or wheelbarrow.

### The products available and scheme-only prices are:

Composted horse manure - large bags, £4.20 each

New Horizon compost - 50 litre bags, £6.90 each

Sylvagrow compost - 40 litre bags, £6.90 each

We will be in touch with you when we know your delivery is coming and will be able to notify you a few days in advance. Help with unloading and taking away your order is appreciated as we have limited storage capacity. Look out for the order form in the forthcoming email.

**Manure and Compost at the full price is still available to buy from the shed at the usual opening times.**

## Watering wisely



This year we have experienced an exceptionally dry spring and early summer. Conserving water whilst watering your garden or allotment is both environmentally responsible and can save money. Here are effective strategies to help you do this.

- **Water at the right time**

Early morning or late evening is best when it is cooler, which means less evaporation. Avoid midday watering as the sun and heat cause quick evaporation, which will scorch plants.

- **Use the right method**

A rose on your watering can may make the soil look moist but will only penetrate it by a few millimetres. This encourages shallow root development, which then causes more stress in plants and makes them less drought tolerant. Watering without a rose and directing the water to the base of each plant may take a little longer but will get much-needed water down to its roots, producing a stronger plant.

Using a watering can instead of a hose in your garden is more controlled and reduces overwatering.

Applying a mulch (e.g., bark, straw, compost) after wetting the soil will retain moisture and suppress weeds.

- **Localised watering**

Getting water deep down encourages stronger root growth and reduces evaporation and run-off. Sink a fairly large plastic flower pot in the ground so that its rim is level with the soil next to plants. By filling this with water it will keep the soil moist below ground level getting it to where the plants need it.

- **Harvest rainwater and use grey water**

Install a water butt and collect rainwater from roofs or sheds. For non-edible plants you can use grey water (e.g. from baths or washing vegetables). This is safe if the soap used is mild and biodegradable.

- **Improve soil structure**

Add organic matter (compost/manure) this helps to retain soil moisture. Avoid compacting the soil by reducing treading or by using raised beds.

### ● Be selective about what you water

Prioritise new plantings and thirsty crops (e.g., cucumbers, tomatoes) and group plants with similar needs together. Choose drought-tolerant plants that thrive with less water.

### ● Measure and monitor

Check the soil moisture before watering by using your finger. If it feels moist a finger-depth down it probably doesn't need doing.

Don't overwater – many plants do better with less frequent, deeper watering.

## What's in a change of name?

For many years Groworganic was one of our best-selling fertilisers. It has a range of applications such as feeding flowers, vegetables and lawns. It can also be used as a compost accelerant. As a new volunteer in the shed, I recall a member coming in and complaining he had used it as directed on his lawn, and was now having to mow it twice a week – a nice problem to have!

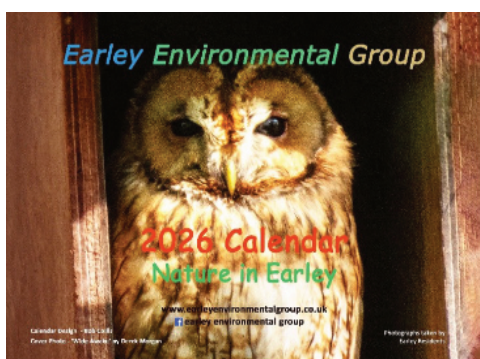
Groworganic production has now moved to Vitax and they, as these firms often do, changed the name to 6X although the bag's contents are still the same composition as Groworganic. The product still is six-times richer than farmyard manure and contains no peat or chemicals. It is a sterilised, weed and pathogen-free natural organic fertiliser making it safe to use on all plants.

**So please note that only the name has changed from Groworganic to 6X.**

Available now in the shed; £7.90 for a 15 kg sack.



## 2026 Earley Wildlife Calendar



As in previous years, the Trading Shed will be selling the Earley Environment Group nature calendar.

The cover features one of the Tawny Owls that have taken up residence in the Maiden Erleigh Nature Reserve, and each month shows local wildlife.

The 2026 calendar will be available from August until they sell out – priced just £6 each.

## Growing lettuces

Lettuce is a fast-growing, easy crop that thrives in beds, borders, and containers. With so many varieties to choose from, you can enjoy crisp, fresh leaves for months. Sow seeds little and often for a continuous harvest, keeping the soil moist. Lettuce prefers a sunny or partially-shaded spot. It benefits from regular watering as this prevents bolting and gives better flavour and texture. Pick leaves as needed or harvest whole heads for delicious home-grown salads.



### Getting growing

Begin by filling modular seed trays with seed compost. Put the compost-filled seed tray into a larger tray, containing water, allow the water to soak all the way up to the surface of the compost where the seeds will be sown.

Sow one seed per module, this will ensure that they have plenty of room to grow strong roots. Continue to keep the compost consistently moist by gentle watering or spraying to avoid disturbing the seeds.

To encourage germination, place the trays in a warm, bright spot, out of direct sunlight to avoid drying out. Once a seed germinates it produces Cotyledons or "first leaves" being the initial pair of leaves that emerge. These are followed by "true leaves", which have the characteristic shape of the mature plant. These emerge from the stem, above the cotyledons, and will continue to grow and develop. Once these appear, or when the roots fill the modules, they will be ready to harden off. Over a 7 to 14-day period place the young plants outside for a few hours each day. This will make them tolerant to wind and temperature changes.

### Transplanting

Simply remove the seedlings from their modules and place them in larger pots or directly in the ground.

When the soil is warm lettuce and salad leaves can be sown directly outdoors. Sow thinly 1 cm deep in rows 30 cm apart. Thin seedlings to 30 cm apart.

For a continuous supply in summer, sow a new batch every couple of weeks.

Lettuces thrive by using companion planting, providing natural pest control and improved growth. Chives or spring onions will deter aphids. Marigolds help keep slugs at bay. Radishes are fast-growing, break up the soil, and give lettuce more space to flourish.



## Baked ratatouille and goat's cheese

A tasty, vegetarian, ratatouille-style bake with a layer of cheese sauce. It uses vegetables that may be very successful at this time of year, and delivers three of your five-a-day.

### Ingredients (Serves 6)

4 tbsp olive oil	2 tbsp balsamic vinegar
2 red onions chopped	1 tsp soy sauce
2 garlic cloves finely chopped	500 ml passata (or a tin of tomatoes)
2 aubergines diced	200 g goat's cheese
2 red peppers seeded and diced	4 courgettes
1 tsp smoked paprika	

### For the cheese sauce

400 ml milk	50 g plain flour
50 g unsalted butter	80 g parmesan cheese (or vegetarian alternative), finely grated

### Method

- Heat 1 tbsp olive oil in a heavy frying pan and gently cook the red onion and garlic for 5 mins until just starting to brown. Scatter over the aubergine and red pepper and sizzle for another 4 mins, adding more oil if needed. Season well and stir through the paprika, then splash in the vinegar and soy sauce. Pour over the passata, then simmer for 5 mins until glossy and thick. Turn off the heat.  
*Can be made up to two days ahead and kept in the fridge.*
- To make the cheese sauce, heat the milk in a heavy saucepan until simmering. In a separate pan, melt the butter and add the flour. Stir to make a paste. Slowly whisk in the hot milk and simmer gently for 2-3 mins, stirring continually until thickened slightly. Stir in the parmesan and season.
- Tip the ratatouille into an ovenproof dish, then completely cover it with the cheese sauce. Crumble over the goat's cheese and arrange the courgette slices on top in concentric circles, alternating between green and yellow if you have them.  
*Can be assembled several hours before cooking.*
- Heat oven to 220°C/200°C fan/gas 7. Brush or drizzle the remaining oil over the courgette slices and season with sea salt. Bake in the oven for 25-30 mins until the courgettes are cooked through and starting to brown. Remove from the oven and allow to rest for 20 mins before serving.

**With thanks to the BBC Good Food website.**