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## Chairman's chatter

For many of us our allotment is a great way to get out in the fresh air, meet like-minded people and grow crops where you are fully in control of what goes into them.

Three contrasting stories tell of how change is happening for some allotment holders:

### Sad news

It has now been confirmed that the Henley Road allotment site in Caversham will be closed by Reading Borough Council in the next two years. The land will then be used to extend the Reading Crematorium burial site.

This was always a possibility as this 'temporary' allotment site has only been used as such since 1928; it will close on its centenary. If you have had an allotment there for many years it is likely to still be a massive shock and disappointment.

The council are offering all plot holders an alternative site. Of course, this might mean starting again with



clearing the site, improving the soil and making new friends. Sadly, the site closure also means the end of the Caversham Allotment Holders & Gardens Association trading shed that, like our trading shed, provides seeds, potatoes and much more to local gardeners.

### **Better news**

In Basingstoke the local council has announced it will spend just under £300,000 to help improve allotments across its 42 locations. Whilst only just over £7,000 per site, this is welcome; given the many financial challenges facing local authorities and is recognition by the council of the importance of allotments to local communities.

Allotments usually only make the news when bad things are happening (good news rarely makes a story) such as vandalism or, more worryingly, closure of a site.

The good news is that allotments are protected by law. Under the Allotments Act 1925, councils must get approval from the housing, local government and communities secretary, and then statutory allotments can only be sold where this is absolutely necessary and where the legal threshold has been met.

In practice this sometimes means, as in Caversham, that the allotments go but an alternative is provided. The scale of the issue is perhaps smaller than the media and politicians would like us to think. Official government data shows that in the five years preceding 2024 (the latest available) 42 allotment sites were closed across the country. The RHS estimates that nationally there are approximately one third of a million individual allotment plots.

### **A different way**

I have written before about the commercial allotment provider: Roots. They now operate 20 sites across the country, hosting over 5,000 plot holders on their no-dig only sites.

Providing an alternative to council waiting lists there only seems to be two catches:

- With only 20 sites across the country, unless you are very lucky, they are unlikely to be local so may require a car to get to your plot
- It is a commercial operation and their prices range from £110 for 12 m<sup>2</sup> to over £550 a year for what most of us would recognise as a full plot.

To be fair, that price includes seeds, training sessions, and communal tools to share. You might think of it more as a gardening package rather than just renting a piece of land.

## Get a local allotment in Earley

If you want an allotment more locally and at a reasonable price, the Culver Lane site still has a small number of plots and raised beds available for the 2026 season. These are open firstly to Earley residents but at the moment people from outside the Earley Town Council are also being accepted.

For more information, or to add your name to the waiting list please contact Jade at Earley Town Council on 0118 986 8995, email [bookings@earley-tc.gov.uk](mailto:bookings@earley-tc.gov.uk) or drop in to the Help Shop at the Council offices in Radstock Lane.

## Prices for 2026

Raised Beds: £15.00    Flat Beds: £15.00

3 Pole: £36.00    4 Pole: £43.00    6 Pole: £54.00    8 Pole: £63.00

So even the largest (full) plot is less than £1.25 a week.

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## AGM

Like many organisations we have an Annual General Meeting (AGM) each year so that those who run your association can:

- Meet you in person rather than just in the shed or in passing.
- Share how the last year has gone, including the way we have managed your money.
- Seek your ideas on what we might do better or just differently.

Please do come along and listen and tell us what you want from your association. It will be great to see you there.

## AGM

To be held at  
19:30, Wednesday,  
1st April 2026

David Fuller Room,  
Radstock Community  
Centre, Radstock Lane,  
Earley RG6 5UZ

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## New treasurer needed

Brian, our honorary treasurer, has decided to retire after several years looking after our money. We therefore need a new volunteer to take on this important role.

The good news is that with the card reader taking all payments in the trading shed, this income arrives automatically in the bank account so there is no need to count cash or visit a bank branch to pay money in.

The main requirements of the job therefore are:

- Issuing cheques to pay expenses and suppliers.
- Producing a monthly summary of the finances.
- Attending around four committee meetings a year, currently on a Wednesday evening.

If you are interested then the next step would be to chat to Brian to answer any questions you may have. You can contact him by emailing him on [handptradingshed@gmail.com](mailto:handptradingshed@gmail.com) or talk to him when he is volunteering behind the counter in the shed.

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## Trading Shed opening on Wednesday evenings

Each Wednesday evening in April and May we will be open between 17:00 and 18:30 (nine evenings in total) and Saturday and Sunday mornings between 10:00 and 12:30.

With the clocks changed the evenings are so much lighter. A midweek visit to the plot might be just the thing to get ahead of the weeds and the gardening game more generally, or just a way to relax after a day at work.

**Pop in and see us - avoid the weekend rush.**

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## H & P Coffee Club

The Coffee Club is a chance to meet and chat with fellow gardeners. You can share gardening ideas, or whatever is on your mind, over a cup of coffee and maybe a biscuit.

We will be meeting again on Wednesday the 18th of March between 11.00 and 12.00 in the trading shed. Bring a drink of your choice and come and meet like-minded gardeners. All are welcome.

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## Pop-up Trading Shed on Reading Road site

As in previous years, we are running a pop-up shed on the Reading Road Woodley allotment site for members with an allotment there.

The event will be run next to the Launchpad charity food site between 10:00 and 12:30 on Good Friday, 3<sup>rd</sup> April. Come along for a chat, renew your membership if you haven't already and stock up - we will have seeds, compost, fertiliser and other supplies as well as being able to chat with you.

**Unfortunately, this is only available to members with a plot at Reading Road as the event is inside their secure site.**

## March / April Jobs

### Parsnips

If the soil is warm then sow into a shallow drill 1 cm deep. Water the base of the drill first.

### Fruit bushes

Finish pruning bushes before mid April. Remove no more than 20% of growth, cut away some of the oldest wood to create an open-centred plant. Remove weak, damaged or diseased growth. Add a 7-10cm layer of well-rotted compost or manure around the base of bushes to help feed them and retain moisture. Keep a clear area around the main stem.

### Soil protection

Try to not to dig in wet weather. If working on wet ground is unavoidable, stand on a plank of wood laid on the ground to avoid treading directly on the bed and compacting the soil.

### Potatoes

At the end of March and into early April, plant chitted, early, seed potatoes 30 cm apart outside in a sheltered, sunny site. Protect young shoots with horticultural fleece if frost is forecast.

### Tomatoes

Prick out tomatoes, aubergines and peppers into individual pots of peat-free, multi-purpose compost once they have their first true leaves. Grow on in a bright, warm place, such as a sunny windowsill or warm greenhouse.

### Carrots

Choose a site in full sun with light and well-drained soil. Remove stones and rake the soil to a fine tilth. Sow carrot seed thinly in rows, 1 cm deep. Cover the crop with insect-proof mesh to deter carrot fly.

### Prepare seedbeds

Weed and rake the ground to a fine crumb-like texture. Once the weather warms and weeds begin to grow, sow seeds such as carrots, beetroot, radish and peas outdoors in shallow drills.

### Onions and shallots

Finish planting in the first half of April. Gently push sets into loose soil or position in shallow drills and cover with soil, so the pointed tip is just showing. Space 5-10 cm apart, in rows 25-30 cm apart.

### Cucumbers, squashes courgettes and marrows

Get courgettes, marrows, pumpkins and squashes started. Sow indoors 1 cm deep in 7-9 cm diameter pots. Place in a heated propagator or on a sunny window sill, grow on and plant out in early summer.

**Grow salad**

Direct sow short rows of beetroot, lettuce, spring onions and radish every couple of weeks for a continuous supply. Sow thinly in a shallow trench, cover with soil and firm in.

**Fruit in containers**

Planting in pots is a good way to add fruit to a small space or garden or to grow on cuttings. Use a large container, 45-50 cm diameter, and peat-free John Innes No.3 compost.

**Herbs**

Sow now for a continuous supply of fresh leaves, sow small batches of coriander and dill every three or four weeks. Sow directly in the ground or in pots of peat-free compost.

**Weeds**

Tackle them when small, before they become established or seed.

On dry days, hoe around crops and hand-weed between young veg plants to remove competing seedlings. Use a fork or trowel to dig out perennial weeds.

**Sweetcorn**

From the middle of April, sow seeds 1 cm deep in individual pots or modules kept at 18-21°C. Place in a bright place, water well and plant out in late May or early June.

**Split existing herbs**

Make new plants from established clumps of chives, mint or tarragon. Lift the plant using a fork and gently separate the roots by hand, cutting those of mint and tarragon if necessary. Replant and water well.

**Asparagus**

With established crowns, once young spears reach 15 cm tall, they're ready to harvest. Cut just below the soil with a sharp knife. Keep the bed free from weeds.

**Brassicas**

Sow Brussels sprouts, calabrese, cabbage, cauliflower and broccoli in module trays or outdoor seedbeds, ready to plant out from June. Grow different types so you have a varied harvest for autumn and winter.

**Jerusalem artichokes**

Plant in a sunny or partially shaded location in ground improved with homemade compost. Plant them 15cm deep and 30cm apart, allowing 1.5 m between rows. Water in well.

## Pile-it-high orange and rhubarb meringue pie

The flavour of orange zest does something quite magical to the flavour of rhubarb, and this light, fluffy meringue pie is a perfect dessert for your new crop of rhubarb.

### INGREDIENTS

#### For the meringue

3 large egg whites (minimum)

175 g (6 oz) golden caster sugar

#### For the pastry (or cheat and buy from the shop)

40 g (1½ oz) softened butter, cut into smallish lumps

40 g (1½ oz) softened pure lard, cut into smallish lumps

175 g (6 oz) plain flour, plus a little extra for rolling out

#### For the filling

700 g (1 lb 8 oz) rhubarb

3 oranges (grated zest and juice)

75 g (3 oz) golden caster sugar

3 large egg yolks

3 tablespoons cornflour

### Method

- Pre-heat the oven to 190°C, 375°F, gas mark 5. Pre-heat the baking sheet as well.
- Begin by making the pastry: rub the fats into the flour and add enough cold water to make a smooth dough that leaves the bowl clean. Wrap it in a polythene bag and leave in the fridge for 30 minutes to rest and become more elastic.
- Meanwhile, wash and trim the rhubarb and cut it into chunks, place in a shallow baking dish and sprinkle in the grated orange zest, followed by the sugar.
- Take the pastry from the fridge, roll it out to a round on a lightly floured surface (giving it quarter-turns as you do so) and use it to line the tin, pressing it up a little way above the edge of the tin. Next, prick the base all over with a fork and use some of the egg yolks to paint all over the base and sides to provide a seal.
- Put the tin on a pre-heated baking sheet on a high shelf in the oven and put the rhubarb on the lowest shelf. The pastry should take about 20-25 minutes to brown

and crisp, and the rhubarb about 25-30 minutes to become soft. Then remove them from the oven.

- While you're waiting for that, you can pour the orange juice into a small saucepan. Use a little of it to mix the cornflour to a smooth paste in a bowl, then bring the rest up to simmering point. Next, pour the hot orange juice on to the cornflour mixture and pour the whole lot back into the saucepan. Whisk over the heat with a small balloon whisk till it becomes very thick indeed, then remove it from the heat.
- Now strain the cooked rhubarb over a bowl, then add the rhubarb juices and the remaining egg yolks to the cornflour mixture and, still whisking, bring it up to the boil again. Remove from the heat, tip the strained rhubarb into the bowl and stir the cornflour mixture into it.
- Now, for the meringue, put the egg whites into a large, roomy, clean bowl and, using an electric hand whisk, beat them until they reach the stage where, when you lift the whisk, little peaks stand up and just slightly turn over. Next, beat the sugar in, 1 tablespoon at a time, whisking well after each addition.
- Pour the rhubarb mixture into the pastry shell, then spoon the meringue mixture over, making sure that it covers the edges of the pastry with no gaps. Then just pile it on top.
- Place the pie on the centre shelf of the oven, at the same temperature as before, and bake it for 25 minutes or until the outside of the meringue is golden. Remove it from the oven and leave for about 2 hours before serving.

**With thanks to Delia Smith's website**

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