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Chairman's Chatter

Happy New Year

Another new year - is it me or do they come around faster each time?

If you, a friend or family member, are looking for a new outlet or hobby then you might be interested to know that the waiting list for allotments at Culver Lane is currently short. According to the last meeting of the Earley Town Council Amenities & Leisure Committee ground plots, raised beds and troughs are available.

This means you, or someone you know, can apply to take on a growing space with a reasonable chance of starting this year. As most of us know growing crops and plants has a number of benefits:

- Improving your physical health with varying degrees of exercise, depending on whether you operate a no dig approach or more traditional ways of managing your soil (lots of digging).
- Social contact, fun and of being out in the fresh air each week.

- Mental health including stress relief, and a strong sense of achievement from growing your own fresh, healthy, and often organic food.
- Saving money on groceries while reducing your carbon footprint and knowing exactly what has gone into the food you feed your family.

Maybe you already have a plot, or a raised bed, at the Culver Lane site and would like room to grow more crops. You may have a ground plot that is too large and something smaller would suit you better so now might be a good time to approach the council about a change before you have too many crops in your current plot.

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 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

Plots: 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.

Annual General Meeting

The 2026 H&P AGM will be held on Wednesday, 1st April 2026, starting at 19:30, in the David Fuller Room at the Radstock Community Centre, Radstock Lane, RG6 5UL. Come along and have a say about the running of your Association.

January potatoes, onion sets et al.

The Trading Shed will reopen on Saturday, 17 January 2026

Potatoes, onions, shallots, garlic, peas and beans will be available when we re-open. There will be pre-booked time-slots for the collection of potato orders.

Onions, shallots, garlic, peas, beans and gardening supplies will be on the shelves.

Potatoes 1 kg - £1.15, 3 kg - £3.30

First Earlies

Red Duke of York	Deep red and more vigorous than Duke of York. Wonderful flavour. Good for chipping, baking, roasting and mashing.
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Foremost	Waxy Russet skin colour. Good scab resistance. Boils and bakes well.
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Swift	Very early. Short Stems and good in pots. Good disease resistance.
Organic Maris Bard	High disease & pest resistance. White tuber. Bountiful early harvest.

Main Crop

Desiree	Red skin colour. Fairly waxy. High Yield. Drought resistant. Boils, bakes, roasts, chips and mashes well.
King Edward	Part red skin colouration. Good flavour. Boils, bakes, roasts, chips and mashes well.
Maris Piper	Uniform in shape and size. Good yield. Good flavour. Boils, bakes, roasts, chips and mashes well..
Picasso	Waxy. Stunning red eyes. Massive yields. Mild taste. Stores well. Some resistance to blight. Boils, bakes and roasts well.
Cara	Red eyed, high-yielding and disease resistant. Stores well. Good all round.
Java	Improved Sarpo Mira variety. White flesh, good for all round use. Disease resistant.

Salad

Charlotte	Reliable, high-yielding. Waxy. Long light-yellow tubers. Good flavour Boils well.
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Salad - Pack of 6 tubers for £1.05

Heidi Red	Red skin and flesh which retains colour on cooking. Waxy tubers good for salads and boiling.
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Main Crop - Pack of 6 tubers for £1.05

Organic Sarpo Mira	A late red skinned potato with fairly floury flesh. High-yielding and less attractive to slugs. Ideal for baking and roasting.
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Onion Sets 250 g - 70p

Stuttgart Giant	A flat shaped yellow skinned set with good yield and keeping properties. Plant in February. RHS Award of Garden Merit.
Sturon	A round onion which stores well and has high yields.

Turbo	A glove-shaped type with good yield and keeping properties. Slow to bolt and strong growing with golden yellow skin.
Red Baron	A red skinned flat-round onion. Plant later. Good in salads. RHS Award of Garden Merit.

Shallots 500 g - £1.50

Golden Gourmet	Yellow with mild flavour. Good for pickling and can be planted from February onwards. RHS Award of Garden Merit.
Red Sun	Perfect for salads, mild with good storage characteristics.

Garlic price £1.00 for one bulb

Germidour	Forming 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.
Messidrome	This comes from French production, producing large white bulbs with excellent flavour for all culinary uses. We are not stocking Cledor, Flavor or Picardy Wight as we don't sell as much as we used to in the Spring.

Elephant Garlic £2.20 for 2 cloves

Elephant	Elephant Garlic produces big corms with fat cloves. Grow it as you would any regular garlic. One clove at planting produces around four cloves at harvesting.
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Runner Beans 125 g - £2.60

Enorma	Short-jointed plants producing an enormous crop of very long, smooth, slender beans of excellent shape and colour. RHS Award of Garden Merit winner.
Achievement	Heavy yields of long, smooth, slender pods with a delicious flavour. Red flowering variety.

Climbing French Beans 45 Seeds - 65p

Blue Lake	Produces an abundant harvest from early summer of pencil-thin, stringless, green beans with a fine, sweet flavour. The last few pods can be left on the plant to dry for white haricot beans to store. An heirloom variety from 1885.
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- Cosse Violette** A variety that thrives in warmer weather, when runner beans struggle to set and produce beans. Striking lavender flowers and purple-veined leaves. Produces a heavy crop of beautiful, deep purple, tender, stringless pods which turn dark green on cooking. Pick regularly to produce crops from July to October. Protect from frost and provide support as for runner beans. Good for freezing.
- Sunshine** A warm, sunshine-loving bean that excels in production. An attractive variety producing stringless, reliable, high-quality crops. The pods have a sweet mild flavour. Picking every few days will enable cropping to last from July to October. Good for freezing. Protect from frost and provide support as for runner beans.
- Blue Lake** An equal mix of these three varieties that look stunning growing together. Producing tender stringless pods from July to October with regular picking. Protect from frost and provide support as for runner beans. Good for freezing.
- Cosse Violette and Sunshine Mixed**

Broad Beans 125 g - 75p

- Masterpiece Long Pod** Excellent length of pod and table quality. A fine, green-seeded broad bean. Excellent for freezing. RHS Award of Garden Merit winner.
- Aqua Dulce** A long-podded, white-seeded, tasty broad bean that is early to mature. Recommended for autumn and winter sowings throughout the UK for the earliest crops the following spring and summer.

Peas 125 g - 70p

- Kelvedon Wonder** Thin-shelled pointed, narrow pods in pairs. Heavy-yielding and of fine flavour. It is also resistant to mildew and suitable for March-July sowing. RHS Award of Garden Merit winner. Early variety.

Peas 125 g - 85p

- Meteor** A very hardy, dwarf variety which will crop well even in exposed locations, also ideal for containers. One of the first to crop in the season with a superb flavour. Very versatile for spring and autumn sowings.

Need something that the Trading Shed does not sell?

The shed is a finite size and we will never be able to stock all the gardening and growing items you might need. However, there are two places you might find great prices for that rare seed, wheelbarrow or particular gardening tool:

- The Suttons seeds website with a discount code. Look on the Suttons' website, or pick up a catalogue from the Trading Shed and see if they sell what you want. Then use the code SUGS189P to get:
 - 50% off packets of seeds
 - 20% off all other live products such as plants, bulbs or other growing items.

This code is valid until 31 August 2026 and can be used on the website, by telephone or on the order page in the catalogue.

- The K G Loach catalogue. Their huge, wholesale warehouse holds a wide range of items that we don't have the space to stock. Come into the Trading Shed, browse their catalogue and choose, then place and pay for an order. It will arrive on our next delivery; usually less than a month's wait. Loach don't yet have a website so their catalogue, with many photos, is the best place to see what is available.

Trees for our local nature reserve

A huge thank you to everyone who donated trees in the last year. At the end of November forty-seven trees of many different species were handed over to Ashley Prior, the Earley Town Council Park Ranger.

These trees have been planted across two sites: Redhatch Copse, alongside the site of the former Sibley Hall student accommodation and the nature reserve at Maiden Erleigh Lake. In both cases the locally grown trees are used to fill gaps caused by woodland management, humans or mother nature and were planted during National Tree Week.

I will be running the scheme for a third year in 2026 and this is how it works:



Here are this year's donated trees.

- You find a young tree growing somewhere you don't want it – say in the middle of your carrot bed.
- You dig it up and pop it in a pot (there are usually spare ones on the racks in the car park at Culver Lane) with a little soil or compost.
- Leave it on the swaps table outside the Trading Shed.
- Richard looks after it until November next year, then hands it over to Ashley, the Earley Town Council Park Ranger, in time for the annual national tree week run by the Tree Council.
- Ashley and the volunteer team plant them in Redhatch Copse and Maiden Erleigh Nature Reserve where you can visit them for the next one-to-two hundred years!

With thanks to all the local squirrels and birds that collect tree seeds, bury them on your plot or in the garden, and then forget where they left them!

January Jobs

OUTDOORS

Protect plants from frost

Cover vulnerable plants with biodegradable fleece or clôtches. Group containers in sheltered spots, such as a near house wall. Insulate greenhouses by lining inside with reused bubble wrap.

Mulch hellebores

A layer of bark chips applied now will keep flowers of Christmas roses clean from mud splashes. Remove any leaves that have round black spots, which may be diseased.

Tidy acers and birches

Do essential pruning this month as cuts can bleed once the sap starts to rise. Ideally, leave unpruned to avoid spoiling the shape, or limit pruning to removing small branches and deadwood.

Take hardwood cuttings

Propagate deciduous shrubs and trees such as buddleias, philadelphus and willows. Cut 15-30 cm stems and insert the bottom 2/3 into a trench, or deep pot, of peat-free compost. Keep moist and leave until next autumn.

Stay off lawns

Avoid walking on frozen or waterlogged turf to prevent damage. Frozen grass can be crushed and wet soil compacted resulting in bare patches and poor drainage. Wait for better conditions before carrying out maintenance.

FRUIT AND VEG**Prune apples and pears**

To keep them productive, freestanding trees should be pruned in winter. Cut out dead, diseased or crossing branches to maintain an open centre, pruning no more than 20% of the canopy.

Harvest Brussels sprouts

Pick regularly from the bottom up when they are firm, tightly closed and walnut -sized. Remove lower leaves as you go to encourage airflow and improve access for picking.

Cut back grapes

On cordon vines prune growth to two or three buds from a permanent framework. If grown in rows on posts and wires, remove last year's spurs and tie in two new horizontal branches.

INDOORS**Look after tools**

Clean, sharpen and oil secateurs and loppers ahead of winter pruning. Use dedicated sharpening tools for best results.

Spare blades and replacement parts are available for some models.

Check greenhouses

Remove faded flowers and dead foliage from any plants overwintering in greenhouses or conservatories. Open windows for an hour or two on mild days to allow air to circulate and help reduce fungal infections.

Get ready for seed sowing

Now is a good time to clean pots and seed trays with warm soapy water so you are ready to sow seeds. This reduces the risk of diseases such as a damping-off in seedlings.

Keep house plants healthy

Place them in good light, away from cold draughts and radiators. In warm rooms, group them together or use damp gravel trays to boost humidity. In cooler rooms, reduce watering. Stop feeding altogether.

Order seeds

Use the quieter winter gardening days to look through catalogues and choose plants to grow next year. Ordering early ensures you get the best choice.

GREENER GARDENING

Leave compost heaps

Avoid disturbing grass snakes, slow worms, frogs and hedgehogs by leaving heaps unturned for now. Wait until spring to turn the compost when these hibernating residents will have moved on.

Give wildlife a drink

Place a shallow dish of water in your garden to help keep birds and other animals hydrated throughout the winter months. Clean and top it up regularly and defrost using a warm water if it freezes over.

Install water butts

Collecting rainwater from your house, shed or greenhouse roof will help water the garden next year. Use a diverter to channel water from downpipes and link multiple water butts together with connectors.

Prevent ponds from freezing

Use a float to discourage ice formation on the water surface. Keeping some of the pond ice-free allows wildlife access to drinking water. If your pond freezes over, place a hot pan on the surface to melt some ice.

Feed birds

Use high energy foods such as fat balls, peanuts and sunflower hearts to top up feeders and help birds in cold weather. Clean feeders regularly with hot soapy water to reduce risk of diseases.

Recipe

Aubergine and Pumpkin Parmigiana

A tasty vegetarian dish providing a hearty meal. Serves six.

Ingredients

½ Medium pumpkin or squash, peeled and deseeded to give 650 g flesh
180 ml Olive Oil
2 Large aubergines, about 650 g
3 x 125 g Balls of mozzarella, drained and thinly sliced
85 g Parmigiano Reggiano, finely grated

For the tomato sauce

2 tbsp Olive Oil
1 Onion, finely chopped
2 x 400 g Cans chopped tomatoes (I use Mutti Polpa)
2 tsp Dried oregano
Pinch sugar

Method

- First make the tomato sauce. Heat the olive oil in a saucepan, add the onion and fry over a medium heat for about 7 minutes until softened. Add the tomatoes, oregano, sugar and seasoning. Leave to simmer over a gentle heat for about 25 minutes until thickened. It should taste quite intense.
- Preheat the oven to 200°C, gas mark 6. Cut the pumpkin or squash into 1.5 cm chunks, then put in a roasting tin in a single layer mixed with 2 tbsp olive oil. Season and roast until golden and tender, about 20-25 minutes, turning over the chunks a couple of times.
- Cut the aubergines lengthways into 0.5 cm slices. Grill both sides till lightly browned.
- Spread a little of the tomato sauce on the bottom of a 2 litre baking dish, then put some of the pumpkin or squash on top. Dot with some mozzarella, sprinkle over the parmesan and top with more tomato sauce, then add a layer of aubergine.
- Continue layering, ending with a topping of mozzarella and parmesan. The vegetables don't have to be in any particular order, but it's important to spread the distribution of the tomato sauce and cheeses so that you don't run out before the top.
- Bake for thirty minutes at 200°C, gas mark 6 or until the cheese has melted and taken on a golden colour. Remove from the oven and allow to rest for ten minutes before enjoying.

With thanks to Waitrose Recipes