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## *Onion Oracle* Newsletter of the Reading + Oxford Community Agriculture Schemes



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**Weather watch** This has to be the subject of the year, even if you are not a farmer or gardener you will not have failed to notice how weird it has been. The weirdness goes back as far as mid winter, with very high temperatures and only 5 mornings of frost in January. All very nice to have a warm decent winter, nice for harvesting the field crops, no frostbitten fingers. But it was a regular damp, average rainfall but without the cold easterly winds to dry the land out. So the soil was sticky and never dried out enough to allow access for machinery to lift root vegetables. This increases the work-load with everything having to be carried off the field by hand and dug up with a fork! During the winter we harvest up to around 2000kg of vegetables each week.

Spring came early, we measure this with crop growth and what happens to the local flora and it was without any doubt the earliest ever here. We usually reckon to start picking our very first tomatoes by the last week of June, just the odd kilo or two, but this year it was four weeks earlier than the usual. So all the growers were getting excited at the thought of an early spring, the general consensus going around was that we were in for a long hot summer. Irrigation did start earlier than ever before as February and March were fairly dry but the big difference was with the high temperatures and strong winds that took what little moisture there was out of the soil.

Soil temperatures and sunlight are the biggest factor in influencing crop growth, so February, March and April saw rapid growth of all crops where we were able to irrigate. For growers without irrigation it was a slow start as for most the soil was as dry as one would expect to find at the end of summer. Plantings were failing to establish and many crops failed to get off at all. For us potatoes

planted in March usually take at least 5 weeks to emerge, this year they were up in less than three weeks, fastest I have ever known.

So by the end of April I was beginning to get a little suspicious, the weather was just too good to be true, how were we to pay for this glorious 6 months of weather?

As you may remember the rain started slowly mid May just enough initially to wet the soil and do some good, take the pressure off the daily grind of moving irrigation equipment around the farm. Then the rain came a bit heavier and heavier and then it became a down pour with a total of 144 mm rainfall the wettest May I have recorded here ever. June continued wet with only 5 days without some rain and July was as wet as May. In total over the three months we recorded 370mm this is around 65% of a whole year's rainfall and around three times more than the usual for this time of year.

By this time we were several weeks behind with planting and weed control, it became impossible to do much at all, even simple jobs such as weekly potato lifting became a miserable wet and very sticky job. Never in 30 years has it been so bad in summer that we have had to dig potatoes with a fork as it was too wet to take the tractor anywhere near the soil. If we had tried the machine would have become suck fast in the mud!

So for a while we just had to sit and wait for things to improve before we could tackle the backlog of weeds and plantings. July is the busiest month for crop planting and weed control, during this period we will be planting up the winter crops into the large field. Around 70,000 transplants are raised in the walled garden and removed to the field, for this we need dry ground as it is impossible to do the job when it is wet and sticky. In almost every year we have to irrigate the crops in to get them

established, this year was quite different from anything we have seen in the past 30. By mid July we were nervously watching the River Thames, it is just one flat field away from us.

Friday 20<sup>th</sup> July I was doing a presentation at a Soil Association event on Herefordshire-the theme was energy conservation and global warming! I almost didn't get home due to the flooding in Gloucester this was the heaviest two days rain of the year. A week after the floods of Gloucestershire the water got as far as us, mostly run off from the Chilterns and upper reaches of the Thames. The river came into the lower reaches of our garden, flooding courgettes, chard, beetroot, broccoli and tomatoes in a tunnel. Quite a large area of field also became either slightly under water or much waterlogged. Not exactly what we need in July, the Thames has flooded here on several occasions before but always during the winter, when the damage is far less. It took three weeks for wet land to dry out enough to allow us to carry on where we had left off over a month earlier.

The overall effect of the weather on our crops this year has been quite dramatic, it wasn't just the rain stopping us planting and weeding but also the low temperatures at night and especially damaging has been the low sunlight levels. Lack of sunlight affects some crops worse than others; all the tender crops such as tomatoes, cucumbers, and a host of others have performed particularly badly. You may have wondered why so few courgettes this year, well the flood damaged them but they were poor to start with due to no sunshine. Tomatoes were badly blighted by early July, which knocked the yield by 70%. Sweet corn despite three attempts failed to grow, the soil too wet, cold and no sunshine. Squash has become a major crop for us, last year we produced over 8,000 from 1600 plants. This

year we planted 2000 to ensure that we could have this valuable crop throughout the winter and next spring. Lack of sunshine and cold night have severely stunted the plants, we may just get 1500 small squash. From my conversations with other growers across the country we seem to have the only crop. Early potatoes were excellent they had high temperatures and irrigation, but from mid July we should have been lifting maincrop at around 25Tonnes per hectare, instead we have a pathetic 6 tonnes hectare. Onions are the same story, small and not good for keeping. We shall be out of these two important crops within a month. Other growers I speak to have tales of lost crops and low yields, many have faired far worse than we have. It has without any doubt been the worst growing season within our 30 years and we live forever in the hope that next year will bring a decent season to help compensate.

But not all crops have been a washout, some have done well, carrots although weedy have produced an excellent crop along with parsnips and all the brassica family have done very well so far. Winter cabbage was very late being planted but they seem to be catching up now and providing it stays mild will make a decent crop-we hope. I am told that every cloud has a silver lining, although it can be hard sometimes to see quite where this is. Perhaps the weather is trying to tell us something about the way we are behaving on this Planet, but then most organic people are trying to do what they can do save their little Planet piece. No longer can we ignore the signs of climate change; the need to make our holdings ever more resilient has to become increasingly a part of the whole system that we operate. Growing food is an uncertain craft at the best of times and we have to face the serious challenge that it could become a whole lot more challenging in the future. If climate change is to have the impact that we are told it will, and I tend to believe it probably will then we are going to have to work hard to develop organic horticultural systems with the required built in resilience. But whatever insecurities and hardships that we have to endure with weather there is one thing I do know for sure.

In this part of the world we will not starve due to lack of food

#### **Packaging**

The new paper bags have been well received and we are really pleased at the way you have been returning them we get lots back so keep up the good work. We would be most grateful if you could fold them along the original lines. They are wearing very well the real test will be wet winter veg. So many thanks for your co-operation with returning packaging. This is where you can make a really big difference.

#### *So please save and return your bags, paper and plastic*

We are not allowed to reuse small clear plastic bags for salad packs, so please don't return these.

#### **Potato free bag**

We have been wondering how we may offer a veg bag without potatoes for many years. We know that some of you don't like potatoes and would perhaps prefer a bag without.

So as from 24-25<sup>th</sup> October we are to introduce a large vegetable bag with no potato. The price will be the same as the regular large bag and we will make up the difference with a luxury item such as an avocado or fennel or ginger etc. The large bag contains the greatest variety of vegetables and is excellent value for money. The bag will be a paper and blue in colour.

#### **Salad packs**

As you will have discovered we are back into autumn and winter vegetables now, which means that salad packs are back in season.

These are always popular and much appreciated by our customers and good value for money. You will not find anything like this in your local supermarket, the salads that they do sell are usually a bland lettuce mix washed in a sterilised solution and then packed into a bag with pumped up air to make it look alive. We do not wash our leaves at all, so suggest that prior to use you rinse them in

cold water just in case there is the odd creature lurking in there somewhere.

The best way to use the salads is fresh; you may prefer to chop them up into smaller pieces. They could be used in a stir fry but only heat for a minute. This year we have a wonderful selection of leaf types and in any one pack there will nearly always be at least 5 different leaves.

These are mostly non-brassicae, and originate from Northern Europe

- Claytonia. Also known as miner's lettuce. Small heart shaped leaf.
- Red Amaranth. Red and green leaf strong flavour.
- Red chard this one called Bulls Blood
- Oriental Mustard. Frilly leaf, a red and a green one.
- Mitsuba. Tall thin long leaf.
- Lettuce. Different colours cut as a very young leaf
- Chrysanthemum, Like a wide oak leaf, strong taste

They are available as extras.

#### **Extras**

**Salad packs** 160-200g packs each£1.75

#### **White pots**

Tops for boiling! Also for baking, chipping and anything else.  
5kg £4.00. 10kg £7.00.

**Potatoes**-bakers Milva graded to baking size  
5kg £4.50. 10kg £8.00

**Red Potatoes** Excellent for roasting or baking  
5kg £5.00 10kg £8.50

**Carrot** The most popular of all extras. You tell us they are the best flavoured carrots of all time! 2.5kg -£3.00

**Apples** 2.0 kg £5.00

**Bananas** 2 kg £3.50

**Onions** 2.5kg £3.00