

AUGUST

Hopefully, we've had some warm and sunny weather and just enough water to keep our plants and crops thriving – well, hopefully! You can now enjoy the fruits of your labours laid out in front of you and give yourself a pat on the back for your amazing achievements (hopefully, again!). Make sure to note anything you're not satisfied with – gardening is all about learning from experience!

WATER patio pots, once a day when the weather's hot and sunny, and keep deadheading flowers, both in pots and in open ground.

FEED patio pots and containers with controlled-feed fertiliser or tomato food towards the end of the month – the food in the compost will have been used up so more food is necessary to maintain plant health and keep the flowers blooming.

TRIM hedges to keep them looking tidy. If cutting grass, raise the mower blades so the grass is longer, which will keep it greener and help to retain the moisture. Short grass will turn browner sooner!

CHECK for blight on potatoes and tomatoes. Potatoes will start to develop darker areas on the edge of leaves, then on the whole plant, which can also infect the tubers themselves, resulting in purple and brown blotches on them. If this begins to happen, cut off the foliage immediately to stop the spores spreading underground and then wait a couple of weeks before harvesting them. Tomatoes infected with blight will also have patches but they are lighter and with a grey appearance. Remove the plant and discard. Blight spreads when tomato leaves are wet so make sure plants in the greenhouse are kept dry.

HARVEST regularly and when the vegetables are young, before they go woody and bitter tasting. Try to store and preserve gluts but don't worry if you can't – put them on the compost heap, which is also an important job to do in gardening.

MAINTENANCE

- Weed often – keep on top of them!
- Stop tomatoes by pinching out the tops at the start of the month to stop any more fruit setting. If left, more fruits will form that won't ripen due to lower light levels and temperatures as autumn approaches, so the energy left needs to be used to ripen the fruits that have set.
- Cut strawberry plants back or they'll quickly develop runners, unless you want to make new plants. Remove any mulch from the strawberry bed and destroy weeds.

JUNIORS' JOBS FOR AUGUST

Now the summer is truly here and perhaps you have more time to spend outside, why not try to make some **bug hotels** for the range of insects that live around us in our parks, gardens and even in hedgerows. They live in nooks and crannies where they can shelter from the weather and nest to breed. This will include crevices in trees and dead wood, in plant seed heads and the hollow stems of some plants, between rocks and large pebbles and in piles of leaves. Anywhere in fact!!

Trouble is, we are too tidy and sweep away or put these things in the bin, so they have fewer places where they can live. As gardeners, we need to nurture these creatures – woodlice eat up rotting debris in the garden, for example, and ladybirds feast on greenfly. So why don't you help them – build now before the autumn comes to help these creatures find comfy and safe homes. You need to build something that has lots of small spaces of different sizes lots of creatures can get in; you also need to use lots of different materials. Try to make the bug hotels that you build easy to place outside where they will just blend in – but make sure they are placed at least a metre above the ground.

So, what can you do? Well, first get books or look on the internet for 'bug hotels' You will find lots of information to help you, but let's look at how you might make a start.

- Get a 750ml plastic bottle and cut it in half – you will need adult help to do this safely.
- Now take some long strips of newspaper or corrugated cardboard (which has ridges and is easy to roll up) and cut them about 5mm shorter than your half bottle.
- Tightly roll the strips into tubes, leaving a 4mm hole in the centre – perhaps by rolling the paper or card round a pencil. Now pack them tightly into each bottle half so they don't fall out. Make sure the hollow ends of the tubes are facing outwards and that they are pushed just inside the bottle so they won't get wet.
- You can hang your bug hotel in a tree or shed or anywhere that the creatures can get inside and keep cosy. When you hang it, make sure it points down just a little so the rain won't get into the tubes.

You could use old bamboo canes if you have any at home or from friends – get help to cut them into the length of your half bottle (but 5mm shorter than the full length as you did for the paper tubes). Make sure the canes are hollow and not blocked (for example with soil if they have been used in the garden), then pack them in tightly so they won't drop out. Now hang them up as before.

Who might come to live in the hotel? Almost anything that can get in – such as ladybirds, lacewings and earwigs. Once you've started, look up how to make even bigger hotels using a wider variety of materials, such as bricks, pinecones, straw, bark and even logs or thick pieces of wood with holes drilled in them so creatures can creep in. In fact, log piles around your garden using fallen or decayed branches are an easy way to make bug hotels – so try out some ideas and keep a look out for who comes to live there!

