

The good life

How Wokingham is going Green with Vivienne Johnson



IN THE GARDEN



National Garden Gift Vouchers

At last, colour comes to the garden

MAY is a blooming lovely month – plants are beginning to flower and show their true colours and inspire us to get out into the garden a little more.

But it's not just the May sunshine that is inspirational. Not only is there possibly the best flower and gardening celebration in the world taking place this month, in the form of the RHS Chelsea Flower Show (May 19-23), but Cultivation Street is up and running and looking for community gardening projects to enter their annual competition www.daviddomoney.com/cultivation-street.

Cultivation Street is helping to bring back front gardens and revitalise our streets while at the same time encouraging people to take up gardening and grow their green skills.

The front garden is often overlooked as a growing area – with a solitary tree planted and not a flower in sight.

Gardening myth of the month is that you can't plant flowers under trees – a myth that's not founded in fact as all as flower beds can actually help keep trees healthy.

They are also more sustainable than grass in the long run because flower beds require less water.

Choose perennials to minimise soil disturbance, and choose the smallest plants possible for the same reason.

Carefully work them into the soil that's there, rather than adding more soil or compost for planting, and choose colours that tone well with your tree foliage.

Early colour comes this month from the popular pelargonium, commonly known as the geranium. Pelargoniums flower from spring right through to late autumn.

If you protect them from frost during the winter months they will continue to thrive for many years and so long as they have a bit of sun, they can be grown pretty much anywhere.

Pelargonium fan Baroness Floella Benjamin OBE is an ardent admirer.

She said: "When I see pelargonium my heart sings with joy. They are one of my favourite plants and they are such an easy patio plant to grow.

"I particularly love the vibrant flower colours that look stunning against their dark green foliage.

"Their scents are irresistible and fill the air with hints of rose, lemon, mint, fruit, nut, and spice".

There are seven different types of pelargonium – Angel, Decorative, Ivy-Leaved, Regal, Species, Scented Leaf and Unique.

May is the month when everything gets busy in the garden and even the most relaxed of gardeners gets going.

Watering and weeding are both key, as is sowing and planting out, depending on regional weather.

It's also time to get back into the swing of mowing the lawn.

Jobs for the month

Here are some top jobs for this month from the Royal Horticultural Society and National Garden Gift Vouchers ...

- Watch out for late frosts and protect tender plants
- Liquid feed containers every two to four weeks
- Plant out summer bedding
- Collect rainwater and look at ways to recycle water for irrigation
- Regularly weed
- Open greenhouse vents and doors on warm days
- Mow lawns weekly
- Sweet peas need training and tying in to their supports
- Watch out for greenfly and black spot on roses
- Plant hanging baskets

■ National Garden Gift Vouchers can be bought and redeemed at more than 2,000 outlets in the UK, with more than 90,000 garden plants and products on offer. Visit www.thevoucher garden.co.uk to see the outlets that accept them.



Deeply dippy about asparagus

The growing season is starting to see its first fruits – head to The Chequers at Eversley Cross where you can dip in to the first British asparagus. VIVIENNE JOHNSON takes a taste

THE asparagus season is upon us for a few precious weeks and The Chequers at Eversley Cross are making the most of the tasty British treat.

The asparagus used by the gastropub is grown on Barfoot's Farm in Botley, Sussex, where the microclimate allows John Barfoot, farmer, to pick the crop early.

The Chequers have been serving asparagus on their Specials menu for three weeks and are halfway through the six-week season which will be over by the end of May.

"Asparagus is quintessentially British and this is the best of British," said Ray Brenner, chef at The Chequers.

"As much as we can we use local ingredients", he explained, quickly rattling off a list that shows his food miles are as low as they can get – and their suppliers are names you'll have heard of.

LOCAL

He said: "Free range eggs come from Stokes Farm, Wokingham. West View Farm in Hampshire supply amazing rhubarb. It's a small farm and we buy the whole crop. They also grow medlars and unusual heritage varieties of apples.

"We get mozzarella cheese from Laverstoke Farm made with water buffalo milk"

Buying local, and ensuring the food is as green as can be is important to The Chequers as general manager Jordan Marr explained:

"The ethos of The Chequers is that we buy ethically sourced, local ingredients," he said.

"We don't use air freighted stuff and we support the local economy as much as we can."

The team of seven chefs, three kitchen porters and 10 waiters out front have worked hard to make The Chequers a success. Ray is in the final three of the shortlist for the Pub Restaurant of the Year Head Chef, a prestigious award given by the Guild of Chefs.

"It's the Oscars of the chef world," Ray said.

The ceremony takes place in June at Park Lane Hilton, where for once, someone will be cooking for him.

■ For more on The Chequers, call 0118 402 7065 or log on to www.thechequerseversleycross.co.uk



Roy Brenner, head chef at The Chequers with some of his asparagus dips Pictures: Vivienne Johnson

Go on, dip your own!

THE Chequers has a fun and unusual way of serving its asparagus – 'Dip Your Own'.

The asparagus is cooked quickly and served whilst still firm in a terracotta plant pot.

Using your fingers you pick up a spear of asparagus and dip into a pot of home-made Hollandaise sauce and then with the sauce dripping off the end of the spear, you dip into a pot of grated egg and Parmesan.

Now, take a bite off the end of the asparagus and repeat.

The soft free-range eggs with the sharpness of the Parmesan mixed with the

hollandaise and, of course, the asparagus make for a fantastic flavour combination.

Each serving comes with its own board and dainty pots with a strip of artificial grass to give it a quirky twist.

It's hard to eat without getting into a mess; sticky fingers and bits of grated egg and cheese lie all over the table.

"That's part of the fun of it" said Ray. "Once you've tried it, you won't be able to stop dipping!"

He added: "Don't delay – Dip Your Own is only available at The Chequers from now until the end of May."

■ The Chequers' head chef Ray Brenner shares his secrets for great tasting asparagus:

Break the ends off the asparagus, don't cut them. They will snap where they're ripe, which is usually about three-quarters the way down the stem.

Add to boiling water for about three minutes. If you leave them in the pan for much longer the water in the vegetable will be replaced by the tasteless pan water and you will lose flavour.

Add them straight to another pan with just a knob of butter, salt and pepper.

Asparagus tastes at its best when it is still a little bit firm.