

Tombreck Market Garden

Newsletter #10 December 2023

There were a few nice days of snow, but otherwise December has been rather dark, damp & dreary. Sometimes hard to find motivation first thing in the morning! The plants have definitely entered hibernation, with not much growth even in the polytunnel. Outside the frost-tender plants have finally given up the ghost (unfortunately including the field bean green manure sowing on plot #3 which we were hoping would last through the winter) but the root crops, brassicas and leeks have so far managed to shrug it off. In fact the parsnips and carrots are noticeably sweeter now, with improved depth of flavour. Overwintering broad beans were planted out in the polytunnel, the last sowing of the year, and the garlic was mulched with cut grass to keep it somewhat insulated, protect the soil surface and keep weeds at bay for when it warms up again. We managed to plant out another section of broadleaf hedge on the western side of the first growing area, again mainly hazel with some oak and rowan. It will be nice to see it come to life (hopefully!) in the Spring.

We're participating in a trial for making peat-free compost for use in propagation, with the idea being to create a mix that will hold together well enough to create soil blocks, thus avoiding the use of plastic in the seedling stage of the plant. Friend of Tombreck and soil scientist, Audrey came with the special 'aerobins' and helped us put everything together and get the process started. We used a mix of bracken, grass clippings, wool, wood ash, charcoal, wood chip, and one bin had farmyard manure and the other had green, 'ramial' wood chip. We're not sure the bins will get hot enough to compost the material in time for Spring/early Summer, but a worthwhile experiment in any case.



Otherwise, the Winter months allow for the admin work of planning for next year's season as well as evaluating the past year's successes and failures. While some crops have done surprisingly well considering the very sudden shift from pasture to cultivated beds, there have been a lot of disappointments if not outright failures, whether because of pests, soil acidity, low fertility, issues with the weather, irrigation etc. Establishing a customer base and other routes to market has been quite slow going as well, with sales considerably lower than predicted in our business plan. Judging from what others are saying around the country it is an exceptionally difficult time for small-scale growers in the UK at the moment. This is mainly due to the widening gap between rising costs on the one hand and an inability to increase prices on the other - most likely because everyone is feeling the pinch and looking to cut their own costs, with organic produce viewed, rightly or wrongly, as a luxury expense. Putting seeds in the ground and waiting for something to grow is always a gamble, but the odds seem to be worsening financially to the point where you could end up losing money even if all your veg grew perfectly and you sold everything down to the last kale leaf.

So apologies for the lack of Christmas cheer, but there has to be some basic honesty about these things... Thanks to all who have supported us in so many different ways during our first season here at Tombreck, and here's hoping for plainer sailing for everyone in 2024.



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