



go on a course

Knitting for beginners

There's no better way to spend a damp autumn morning than with a cup of tea, some homemade shortbread and the clicking of busy knitting needles. If you're a novice, of course, it also helps to have an expert like Alison Ellen on hand, ready to resurrect every dropped stitch – or three.

This one-day course at the Weald & Downland Open Air Museum began with a talk – illustrated by a collection of samples – on how different stitches and directions can alter the fabric and construction of hand knits.

Although entitled 'for beginners', this session catered for anyone, from those who've never picked up a knitting needle (me) to 'improvers' asking mind-boggling questions about knitting with two colours and the amount of wool required for a

jumper. Far from the dizzy heights of egg cosies, let alone jumpers, I was learning a surprisingly simple way of casting on, and I was off: knitting and purling my way to a 20 by 20 stitch square. I'd chosen my wool colour carefully, an icy blue, and worked out that it would require 224 squares to produce a beautiful throw for my bed. What felt like 224 dropped stitches later, Alison told me to give ribbing a try (knit two, purl two), while she began to explain the principles of reducing and expanding (creating a looser or tighter knit), and getting some of my more experienced classmates to give it a go. By the time I'd begun some moss stitch (alternating knit and purl on every row), my square was not only almost the right shape, but had taken on a variety of textures. At the

end of the day, I found myself knitting furiously to try and finish off a couple more rows before being shown how to cast off. We placed our efforts side by side, and I was amazed by the range of work, from coaster-sized circular knits to a two-tone pocket. My blue square is currently sitting optimistically on my bedside table – just 223 more to go, and I'll have that throw. CATHERINE BUTLER *Knitting for Beginners costs £45, including refreshments, and is held at the Weald & Downland Open Air Museum, Singleton, West Sussex (01243 811363; www.wealddown.co.uk).*



natural news

Fungi watch

The colourful waxcap once flourished on Britain's grasslands and, although there are more than 40 types, many are becoming increasingly rare as its favoured habitat disappears. Throughout the autumn, The National Trust will be asking visitors to look out for the waxcap and log sightings at www.nationaltrust.org.uk/waxcaps. Spot them from October to December on cropped lawns and old grassland where fertiliser or soil improvers haven't been used, but don't touch unless you're sure of the type, as some fungi are poisonous.

The back-garden smallholder:

● **SEPTEMBER IS A BUSY PERIOD FOR** harvesting. You'll most likely have far more than you can eat, so it's time to think about storing and preserving. Potatoes will keep in sacks in a cool, dark place, pumpkins and squash can hang in nets, while carrots store well kept in sand. Tie onions into strings or place in wooden trays and place in a cool, airy place where they should last until spring. Chutney is a great way of making the most of the inevitable courgette and runner bean glut.

● **BY NOW, MOST PURE-BREED HENS** will be moulting and looking rather dishevelled. With feathers hanging off and dropping from pretty much everywhere, your beautiful preening birds of a month ago are barely recognisable. It is also a sign that your guarantee of eggs for breakfast is soon to run out, as hens stop laying during or just

after the annual moult, as the days shorten. Good layers tend to moult later (but start laying later in the spring, too) and hens in their first season don't usually moult at all (some hybrids barely do either). So if you want to reduce your egg-free days, it is a good idea to build up your small flock a few at a time so you always have some young pullets (hens under a year old) and to keep different breeds. 🐔



Thinking of starting a smallholding? Visit www.countryliving.co.uk