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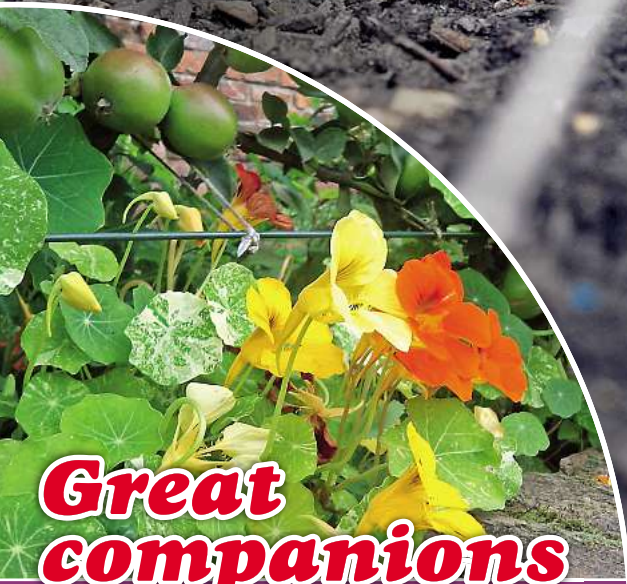
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WELCOME



April is my favourite month in the fruit and veg garden. The weather may not always be perfect, but growth is evident all around and you can't help feeling that if you were to drop a seed into the ground, it couldn't help but grow. Of course nature often conspires to make things a little more challenging, but to help you get the very best from your early sowings this issue is packed with great advice from our experts.

For example, ace veg grower Benedict Vanheems brings you a four-page sowing guide, while lifelong veg gardeners Joe Maiden and Andrew Tokely have all the advice you need to grow great parsnips and runner beans. TV gardener Toby Buckland invites you to share in his love for growing pumpkins and unusual squashes, while Lucy Halliday has some great top tips to get you started with asparagus.

If, however, after the wettest winter on record you simply want inspiration from some truly great veg gardens (or maybe you are about to book your hols) turn to page 62 where we visit some of the most magnificent productive gardens of France – all just a 'Channel hop' away.

Steve

Steve Ott, editor

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Your experts in this issue include:



BEN VANHEEMS

Gardening writer Benedict specialises in promoting home-grown fruit and veg. He tends an allotment near his home in the Cotswolds. In this issue he brings you his top tips for sowing success.



ANNE SWITHINBANK

Anne trained at Kew and worked in horticulture for 12 years before becoming a gardening presenter, writer and broadcaster. She has been a panellist on Gardeners' Question Time for 20 years.



JOE MAIDEN

Joe is BBC Radio Leeds' gardening expert. Once responsible for many of the parks in Leeds, Joe now concentrates on his writing and plant nursery. This month he trials a range of colourful and tasty runner beans.



JULIE MOORE

Julie Moore is a keen biodynamic gardener and chicken addict. She enjoys practical projects using green ideas and upcycling, but this month takes us on a tour of some of France's best kitchen gardens.



CHARLES DOWDING

Charles has been growing organic veg for over 30 years, using a no-dig approach. His fertile beds produce year-round salad leaves and a wide range of vegetables, sold in local shops and restaurants.



LUCY HALLIDAY

Professional gardener Lucy works at Knights Hayes in Devon. This month she looks at the theory behind companion planting as well as offering some top tips on growing tasty asparagus spears.

SAVE ££s: FOR MONEY-SAVING OFFERS & GIVEAWAYS – SEE PAGES 57, 98 & 100

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WoodblocX raised bed voucher, Rolawn top soil, Heat Holder socks, Neudorff products, Exeter Festival tickets.

100 READER SAVERS

A free 50-plant salad collection worth £14.88, plus young vegetable plants.



JOBS THIS MONTH...

JOBS TO CARRY OUT ON YOUR PATCH AND UNDER COVER IN APRIL

10 MINUTE JOBS

- Buy or make yourself a garden line in preparation for sowing.
- Sort out your seeds into the months you intend to sow, so that nothing gets missed.
- Order or buy any seeds you may be missing, but would like to grow.



- Order strawberry plants for planting in new beds or pots.
- Make sure you have a stock of slug and snail killer or deterrent handy in preparation for sowing.
- Finish your seed bed preparations, but stay off of the soil if it is still wet.



TOP TIP

Weeds will start to grow quickly now and should be kept in check with regular hoeing and hand weeding where necessary.

Time to sow



FRENCH BEANS

Both dwarf and climbing French beans can be sown now inside on a sunny windowsill or in a frost-free greenhouse or polytunnel. The seeds are best planted with the scar facing downwards as it is from here that the first root will appear. Sow into deep trays or homemade paper pots and water well. Harden off to outdoor conditions before planting out once the frosts are over in your area (the end of May in southern districts). Sow direct outside next month under cloches. Aim for a month later in the north.

SUMMER LETTUCE

By sowing regularly and choosing the right varieties it is possible to have fresh lettuce nearly all year round. Sow summer types now in small batches every two weeks to ensure a succession of harvests from May to October. Seeds can be sown direct into well-prepared soil in drills 1cm (1/2in) deep. You can also sow between slow-growing crops to make the best use of space.



SOW CABBAGES

Cabbages are a reliable staple crop and not difficult to grow providing you can keep the pests at bay. Last season was one of the worst in memory for cabbage white caterpillars so don't contemplate growing the crop without giving thought to protecting the plants from attack. The most effective way to do this is to cover the crop entirely with insect control netting making sure there are no gaps. In addition you will need to take precautions against slugs and snails.

Sow now selecting a summer variety such as 'Greyhound', 'Hispi', or 'Stonehead' and/or winter type such as 'January King' (see page 48). In common with broccoli and cauliflower sow direct into the soil or alternatively sow into cell trays, one seed per cell and grow on under cover out of the reach of pests until the plants have developed four to six true leaves. Then plant in well-drained, fertile soil. Firm the soil before planting.



SOW NOW

Aubergines*, peppers*, tomatoes*, carrots, peas, broad beans, French beans, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cauliflowers, celery, celeriac, kale, endive, kohlrabi, leeks, salsify/scorzonera, Florence fennel, cardoons, summer/winter cabbage, oriental cabbages, beetroot, chard/leaf beet, lettuce (summer), parsnips, radish, spinach, spring onions, bulb onions, turnips, asparagus, salad leaves, land cress. (*Indoors)



PLANT NOW

Asparagus, onions /shallots, second early /maincrop potatoes, artichokes (globe/ Jerusalem/Chinese).



HARVEST NOW

Asparagus, chard/leaf beet, winter lettuce, broccoli, spring cabbage, late Brussels sprouts, winter cabbage/Savoy, winter cauliflowers, forced chicory, forced seakale, rhubarb, endive, kale, leeks, spinach, radish, turnip greens, salad leaves.

...ON THE VEG PATCH

CUT ASPARAGUS

The unique taste of asparagus is just wonderful with a poached egg and some béchamel sauce. But this seasonal treat is very expensive in the shops. If you would like to grow your own then plant now (see page 36), but if you already have a bed start cutting as soon as the spears reach 10-13cm (4-5in) high, cut them with a sharp knife 7cm (3in) below soil level. Check and cut over the bed every day.



KG TOP TIP

Earth up early potato shoots to prevent them from being damaged by the night-time frosts which are so common at this time of year.

BROCCOLI

Long-term crops such as broccoli represent a big investment in space since they won't be harvested until late winter, but they do provide a tasty harvest when there is little else. Sow thinly 1cm (½in) in nursery rows, scattering some animal-friendly slug pellets over the soil and covering with cloches or netting to keep off the birds. Plant out once established.



KOHL RABI

Like broccoli this is a member of the cabbage family, but grows much more quickly, harvesting within eight to 12 weeks of sowing. Sow a short row every few weeks from now until July for harvesting from June to November. Harvest while still young and tender and grate raw into salads or boil until tender. Take precautions against flea beetles that will nibble tiny holes in the leaves.



CAULIFLOWERS

As with lettuce it is possible to harvest cauliflowers for much of the year by choosing your varieties carefully. Subsequently winter varieties are cutting now, while at the same time summer types can be sown. Sow in nursery rows as for broccoli and plant into firm, fertile soil once 15cm (6in) high. Full or partial sun is preferred.



SPRING ONIONS

Spring onions are easy to grow and crop six to eight weeks from sowing given good soil. Sow from March onwards every three weeks or so. Sow thinly in rows, harvesting the largest plants first. 'Ishikura' can be earthed up and left to develop a leek-like stem.

More quick jobs

CLEAR SPROUTS

Brussels sprouts will come to the end of their useful lives in March and April and can be removed. Crush the tough stems with a hammer prior to placing into the compost bin to speed rotting.

BUY IN CANES

Climbing crops such as climbing French, runner beans and peas will soon need support. Check your supplies of bamboo canes or hazel rods and top up if necessary.

MAKE CLOCHES

Early sowings often benefit from the protection of a cloche or fleece. Of course you can buy many easy-to-use models from your local garden centre or online specialists. But you can also make your own using canes and cane connectors or bent wire hoops to lift a protective layer of fleece or polythene from your crops.

SOW ARTICHOKE

Globe artichokes (and their close cousins cardoons) can be sown this month. Both produce attractive large plants and big, thistle-like purple-blue flowers. In the case of artichokes it is these that are harvested while still buds. With cardoons it is the blanched leaf stems that are eaten after cooking. Both plants are a delight in the flower border for their architectural shape.



JOBS FOR THE FRUIT GARDENER

WATCH FOR PESTS

Soft fruits such as black, white and red currants and also gooseberries are often the first into growth in the spring and the first to attract pests and diseases. Watch out for early attacks of aphids (greenfly) which, on currants, may cause a distinctive blistering and reddening of the leaves. Spray or rub the pests away before they can spread viruses.

Blackcurrants sometimes suffer from a tiny mite – big bud mite – which lives in the buds, causing them to swell abnormally. These mites also carry a virus that can greatly affect yield. Pick off swollen buds, but plants which are badly affected should be lifted and replaced.

The early growth of gooseberries may be affected by American gooseberry mildew which if left will later spread to the fruit, covering it in a mealy white layer. Spray at the first sign of attack and prune to keep an open centre to the plant and to thin overcrowded wood. Replace badly affected old plants with a mildew-resistant variety such as 'Invicta'.

FEED SOFT FRUIT

Maintain the vigour of cane fruit such as blackberries, loganberries and tayberries and also currants by feeding with a general fertiliser such as Growmore or pelleted chicken manure followed by a top up with well-rotted manure or weed-free garden compost.

PRUNE CHERRIES

Cherries and other stone fruits can be pruned now that growth is underway with less chance of spreading silverleaf disease and bacterial canker. Remove dead or diseased shoots and any crossing or overcrowded growth. Tie in the shoots of wall-trained trees to their wires.



PLANT NEW STRAWBERRIES

Strawberries are a real delight and very simple to grow. Young, virus-free plants will be freely available from fruit specialists and some garden centres now and will grow away very quickly after planting.

Choose a site in well-drained soil which has not grown this crop for at least three years to avoid the possible spread of diseases and viruses to your new plants. Dig over removing weeds and incorporating some well-rotted garden compost

or manure. While raking to level add a little Growmore or pelleted chicken manure and cover with a good soil covering fabric or black polythene to keep down weeds and prevent any runners from rooting and causing overcrowding.

Cut a cross shape in the covering through which to plant, spacing the crosses 45cm (18in) apart and the rows 70cm (28in) apart.

Do not bury the plants too deeply – ensure that the crown (growing point) of the plants remains above soil level. Firm gently and water in.

Some gardeners prefer not to crop plants in the first year instead removing the flowers.



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Top jobs for April

- Keep sowing for summer crops and start some winter ones
- Pot on young plants before they are root-bound
- Open doors and ventilate on warm days
- Prepare ground for planting tomatoes
- Protect against cold nights
- Harden off plants that are to be grown on without any extra heat

There's often a big difference in growing conditions between the beginning and end of the month and it's important to keep on top of the jobs in between. This can feel like the busiest month, but work done now will set the foundations for bumper crops in the months ahead. Don't panic, don't stress, but do be organised and try to keep pace with the tasks that April brings.



Prepare beds in the greenhouse and polytunnel for planting.

...IN THE GREENHOUSE

WITH JOYCE RUSSELL



Pictures by Ben Russell.

TIME TO SOW SWEETCORN

Sweetcorn can be grown outdoors in warmer areas, but for those of us with a less certain climate it's worth growing this crop under cover. Stick to one variety, to reduce risk of cross-

pollination, and choose a variety that is sweet and grows well in cool conditions – 'Lark' and 'Swift' are favourites of mine.

Sow seeds individually, 2cm (¾in) deep, in deep pots or Rootainers; the roots grow long even while the leaves are small and this plant hates being root-bound. Water lightly and cover with polythene to prevent the compost drying out until the seeds sprout. Germination takes five-10 days at 20°C (68°F). The temperature can be reduced to 15°C (60°F) once the first leaves are through.

Make two sowings, three weeks apart, if you love sweetcorn and want to stagger the timing of the crop.

OTHER SOWINGS

- Cucumbers and courgettes grow fast from April sowings.
- You can still sow tomatoes and basil.
- Sow French beans and courgettes for summer crops.
- Pumpkins and fennel can be sown in pots at 15°C (60°F).
- Sow broccoli, kale, cauliflower etc. for planting outdoors.
- Salad leaves can be sown every three weeks.

TIME TO POT ON OR PLANT OUT

- Tomatoes should be hardened off before planting out round the end of April.
- Cucumbers can be hardened off during the day, but provide some heat at night until the weather is settled and warm.
- Pot on melons and aubergines if they outgrow their pots.
- Lettuce, spinach etc. should go in the ground as soon as plants are large enough to handle.



PLANT TOMATOES

Tomato plants start to outgrow their pots towards the end of April and the leaves will turn purple/yellow if they run out of nutrients. You can move plants into 25cm (10in) pots if that is their final home, but I like to get my tomatoes into the ground.

Dig manure into the bed if you have it, then dig 25cm (10in) wide holes, 45cm (18in) apart, in rows that are 75cm (30in) apart. Fill the holes with water and let this drain before filling and draining again. Do this until the subsoil is saturated.

Push a cane or long stick into each hole – supports must be firm if they are to bear the weight of a laden plant. Fill the hole up with compost. Rake the soil back over the top and the bed is ready to plant.



Soak the subsoil before planting tomatoes.

Tomato plants should be around 15-20cm (6-8in) tall with dark green leaves and strong stems. There may even be a few flower buds showing. Water the roots when planting, one plant by each support, and firm the soil with your hands.

COVER CROPS

The propagator can become overcrowded with growing plants and you can start to harden off some of the less tender ones. I move courgettes, French beans and tomatoes into a large plastic box as a halfway house. If this is covered with bubble wrap on cooler nights, the contents stay warm enough, and on warmer nights the bubble wrap can be left off.



TEND TO PEPPERS

These plants grow slowly when small, but they do need potting on in order to keep them moving as fast as possible. If leaves start to curl, look for greenfly in the folds. It's safest not to use a spray on such small plants, but you can rinse the leaves under a cold tap or squash the bugs between finger and thumb, while taking care not to damage leaves.

Problems to watch out for this month

- Cutworms are caterpillars that live just below the surface of the soil. They come out at night and crawl along the surface eating through the stems of any suitable plants. Lettuce plants seem to be a favourite. If young plants collapse, then dig around in the soil with a stick and you will probably find a fat greyish caterpillar that is the culprit.
- Cucumbers are prone to root rot and stem rot if they are grown in hot soggy compost. What seem to be large healthy plants can collapse overnight. Be vigilant and take care how you water large plants in pots. It can be a balancing act to keep compost damp enough for growth but dry enough to avoid root rot. Once cucumbers are planted out and have a larger root run, this disease is less of a problem.
- Protect vulnerable plants on frosty nights.
- Slugs are in their element now; use good organic controls to reduce the problem.



Water cucumbers carefully to avoid root and stem rots.

HARVEST EARLY VEG

The first mangetout peas should be ready for picking this month and it's important to harvest while the pods are tender and sweet. The more you harvest, the more pods will grow, but if pods are left to ripen seed, the plants will think their job is done and will stop cropping. Keep pea rows watered to get the most pods.

In a hot spring, there may be some ripe strawberries on early varieties. Enjoy the few and anticipate the larger crop to follow over the coming weeks.

It's possible to be eating early carrots and potatoes this month, but only if plants were kept warm enough after December sowings. Both will be small and only a hint of the larger crops to come, but the early treat is delicious.

Eat spring cabbage before plants take over the tunnel or greenhouse; plants can grow to enormous proportions in a protected space.



VENTILATE PROPAGATORS

It's surprising how many people remember to open doors and windows on hot days but forget about the propagator. Small plants are vulnerable to temperature swings and there is no way a propagator can cool itself if the sun raises temperatures above the setting on the thermostat. Temperatures can rise to 40°C (104°F) or more. Compost will dry out, young plants will flop and they may never reach their full potential after such early mistreatment.

Open the propagator on any bright day and close it up again at night. Young plants cope with a slight chill better than a heat wave.

SALAD DAYS

The easiest crops for anyone to grow from children to experienced gardener are salad leaves. They can be grown virtually anywhere and are so nutritious and delicious, but also offer value for money since the seeds are relatively cheap, quick to germinate and can be cropped several times if cared for.

Patio tubs, window boxes or deep trays are all fine for this job. Drill plenty of drainage holes in the base if they are not already provided. Then simply fill with a cheap multi-purpose compost or growing-bag compost. Level the compost and tap gently on the floor a couple of times to settle and then water well before sowing your seeds lightly over the surface. Sieve some more compost over to just bury the seeds and water once more.

There is a wonderful range of crops and flavours to try including many themed mixtures. Favourites include lettuce, spinach, mustards, oriental leaves, sorrel, claytonia and chard.

IN THE BAG

Don't have a veg plot but want to grow potatoes? Well you can. As we proved in KG last month spuds grow surprisingly well in large pots and bags. But if you are not too concerned about appearances you can simply grow them in old compost bags. Turn the bag inside out and roll the polythene down by half. Place 7-10cm (3-4in) of compost in the base and put a seed tuber on top of this. Cover with more compost and water well. As the shoots grow, unroll the bag a little more and fill with more compost to cover the shoots. Repeat this until the bag is full of compost. Maintain watering to help the tubers swell. Once the plants produce flowers, or when the top growth slows, dig carefully into the top of the compost to see if the tubers are ready for harvesting. Simply lift as required or tip the bag out and harvest clean, pot-ready spuds.



...CONTAINER CROPS

BLUEBERRY DELIGHTS

Although it is too late to plant bare-rooted fruit trees and bushes now, pot-raised specimens can be planted at virtually any time.

Blueberries were just made for growing in pots and thanks to their white spring flowers, attractive berries, autumn leaf colours and red new stems, look good virtually all year round.

They do require a lime-free (ericaceous compost) to thrive. This is available from any good garden centre. They also like plenty of water in summer, so place a large saucer under the pot and keep it topped up during dry spells.



PERFECT PEAS FROM POTS

Fresh-picked peas are what veg gardening is all about, but how do you grow them if you have little space? Well, these natural climbers can be positioned at the back of a sunny border in the flower garden, but will also grow well in a large container on the patio providing they are watered regularly (peas hate to dry out and will quickly sulk and die if they do).

Choose a well-drained pot at least 45cm (18in) in diameter, preferably more, and fill with your chosen compost. Multi-purpose or potting compost is fine and a loam-free one will be lighter to move around, but if you are worried about drying out a loam-based John Innes' mix will hold more water.

Having filled your pot to within an inch of the rim erect a wigwam of six to eight canes, pushing the ends deep into the compost. Tie together at the top and either run a circle of string around this to provide extra grip for the tendrils or add some twiggly sticks between the canes for the plants to cling to.

Sow two pea seeds either side of each cane and one between each pair burying them about 2.5cm (1in) deep. Water well and keep in a sheltered spot in the garden until germinated - against the wall of the house, for example. If mice, birds or squirrels are likely to try foraging in the pot, wrap with a layer of fleece until the plants are 7-10cm (3-4in) tall.



HOT TOPICS

NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF GROWING YOUR OWN FRUIT AND VEG

PINT-SIZED PLOTS ON SHOW

Community groups across the country are being given a unique opportunity. They have been invited to showcase their work on their own small scale plot at the prestigious Harrogate Spring Flower Show this April.

The 'Pocket Garden' competition is open to any community-based organisation (including schools, gardening groups, societies and charities) and each group will be given a 1m x 1m plot to showcase their work for up to 60,000 show visitors and exhibitors.

The plots will be judged for gold, silver and bronze awards and there are prizes of up to £150. "Gardens have always been a great way to tell a story and we hope that our Pocket Gardens will give a wide range of community groups a new opportunity to reach thousands of people during the show. The competition could also lead to bigger things for some groups, who might like to go on to build full-sized

gardens in the future," said Harrogate Flower Shows director, Nick Smith.

The show is staged at the Great Yorkshire Showground and as well as the competition, there will be large-scale feature gardens, over 100 leading plant nurseries, expert talks, demonstrations and the UK's biggest exhibition of flower arranging and floristry.

The *Kitchen Garden* team will be there throughout the duration of the show. Do come along and meet the team, including Steve Ott and Emma Rawlings, who will be there to meet readers and answer your gardening questions throughout the four days of the show.

Tickets for Thursday-Saturday are £14.50 when booked in advance and £17 on the gate. Tickets for Sunday are £12.50 in advance and £15 on the gate. Under 16s go free and parking is also free. Visit www.flowershow.org.uk for further information.



PIPPA GREENWOOD AT THE EDIBLE GARDEN SHOW



Regular *Kitchen Garden* contributor and Gardeners' Question Time panellist, Pippa Greenwood, has announced her return to the Edible Garden Show (March 28-30 at Alexandra Palace, London).

In a series of talks scheduled throughout the weekend, Pippa will be sharing her advice and knowledge. Veg growing made easy and how to grow pest free crops are some of the topics the TV and radio presenter will be tackling.

Don't miss out on Pippa's expert knowledge. Tickets are available now and are priced at £12 in advance and £16 on the door. For more information on the show or buy tickets visit: www.theediblegardenshow.co.uk

SUPER START SWEETCORN

Two new sweetcorn varieties have been specially developed with gardeners in mind by D T Brown for the 2014 season.

With a naturally occurring 'Super Start' gene, the two new F1 hybrids have several advantages over existing varieties - even if their names don't exactly trip off the tongue!

ACX SS7403RY is early and ready from August onwards and ACX SS7078Y matures two to three weeks later.

"The cobs were filled to the tips and stayed sweet on the plants for weeks, with no hint of starchiness. They have so much flavour and sweetness, too" said Tim Jeffries commercial director of D T Brown. Both varieties are offered as seed (£1.99 for 35) and as young plants (£5.65 for 16), despatched from May 2014) from www.dtbrownseeds.co.uk ►



DO YOU HAVE SOME HOT STORIES FOR OUR NEWS PAGES? SEND THEM TO SOTT@MORTONS.CO.UK

LITTLE GREEN SPROUTS HELPS SCHOOLS

A new fundraising scheme has been designed specifically for primary and junior schools. 'Little Green Sprouts' – which is launching soon – will help schools to fundraise, provide a central resource hub for teachers and a one-stop shop for schools to buy their gardening necessities.

Devon-based Suttons Seeds will be helping schools along the way and for every £10 that parents spend, the school earns one sprout. Sprouts can be redeemed against a list of products that have been designed to meet the needs of the national curriculum.

Don't miss out on this fantastic opportunity for your little ones. Register to find out more at www.littlegreensprouts.co.uk



Did you know?

The natural sugar in an apple is more potent than the caffeine in coffee? So next time you're falling asleep, go for a healthy apple instead of a brew



NORTHLEW REMEMBERS THE FIRST WORLD WAR

During the First World War, the small Devon village of Northlew lost almost one quarter of enlisted men; the highest number in the UK. In remembrance, Northlew is building a Memorial Store and creating a 20 mile long poppy avenue.

The longest of its kind in the world, the avenue will be in two sections; a seven mile road to the nearest town, Okehampton and a three mile lane to Ashby train station – the route the young men took

on their way to war. Suttons Seeds has donated the seeds needed for the avenue – 330,000,000 seeds – as they say that it is the perfect way to remember the brave men.

See your garden bloom in a sea of red and support the cause by purchasing a pack of Northlew Poppy seeds from Suttons Seeds. For every packet sold, Suttons will donate £1 to the Northlew Memorial Store Fund. www.suttons.co.uk

VINTAGE TOMS ARE TOPS BUT UNDER THREAT

Tomato lovers searching for the classic flavour lost in mass produced supermarket types, are, in record numbers, choosing to home grow specific types, some originating from before the First World War.

Sales of tomato seeds were up significantly in the 2013 season according to figures from The Organic Gardening Catalogue, which has specialised in supplying seeds to organic gardeners for 50 years. Some of the most popular tomato varieties driving the demand include the 'Harbinger' (introduced in 1910), 'Golden

Sunrise' (1896) and 'Ailsa Craig' (1925) in an ever-expanding range of over 50 colours, shapes and sizes.

Michael Hedges (inset picture), managing director of Chertsey-based The Organic Gardening Catalogue, commented: "Tomatoes remain the most widely grown crop for home growers in the UK, and there's been a

trend towards finding a better taste.

We're seeing an increase in interest in the old varieties, ideally suited to home garden growing, and typically characterised by thinner skins, rich flavour and a long

harvest and ripening period. It would be hard to find anything like these in the supermarket."

Michael warned however: "These older 'heirloom' varieties of British seeds are under threat however, due to the proposed EU Plant Reproductive Materials Regulation. This threatens the existence of many historic and favourite seed varieties since in many cases it would not be economic to register them, making it illegal to sell them or even share home saved seed with friends. Biodiversity will suffer as a result and the European seed market would be controlled by a handful of large seed companies. This regulation is ill conceived and needs to be resisted."



TOP 10 TIPS FOR NOVICE EXHIBITORS

Two leading vegetable exhibitors and long-time members of the National Vegetable Society, Gareth Cameron and Ian Stocks, have given KG their top tips for those thinking of showing vegetables for the first time this year:

1. Start at local shows rather than going straight to national ones.
 2. Grow veg the household enjoys to deal with any surpluses.
 3. Go to lots of shows and seek out tips from exhibitors.
 4. Buy varieties recommended for exhibition use.
 5. Get your soil right – it can be more important than plant feeding.
 6. Read the show schedule carefully to avoid disqualification.
 7. The condition of the veg is usually judged above uniformity.
 8. Good presentation can win a tie-breaker, so make the most of your displays.
 9. Allow plenty of time to arrange your exhibit.
 10. Have fun and enjoy the whole process, from sowing to showing.
- To learn more about the NVS visit: www.nvsuk.org.uk



Stories edited by Jemma Page

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HULA HOOP COVERS

For years I have struggled to grow carrots due to carrot fly. I tried interplanting, spraying and even built a large vegetable cage covered with fly mesh. Somehow they still managed to get in and destroy the crop. So as a last ditch attempt I decided to try cloche tunnels.

I made the cloche hoops out of plastic hula hoops. Cheap enough to buy new but I bought mine at a car boot for 50p each. Cut in half and a short length of 1/2in pipe inserted in each end makes a good rigid hoop. To make the carrot seedbed I loosen the soil to a depth of 9in with my Canterbury fork (best tool I ever bought). Then I work in some old growing bag compost. I broadcast the seeds full width of the tunnel, then lightly cover and water well. To cover the tunnels I use a heavy quality fleece and peg down.

When they need weeding I do it very early in the morning, then cover as quickly as possible. As a further deterrent and to confuse the fly even more, I sow about a square yard of seed in open ground to distract them from the tunnels. Result juicy, maggot-free carrots.

Mr I Robinson, Goole, East Yorks



HAVE YOUR SAY

CONTACT US WITH YOUR LETTERS AND TIPS: ERAWLINGS@MORTONS.CO.UK

CARROT SUCCESS

I could never grow carrots but I found that if I watered the drills before sowing (recent weather conditions excepted), sowed the seed thinly and then covered the drills with about half an inch of multipurpose compost firmed by a piece of board, they rarely failed.

Of course you have to keep an eye out for slugs and protect against carrot fly, but I think it is the multipurpose compost on top that does the trick because it doesn't form a crust.

*Janet James,
Taunton, Somerset*



RECYCLED BOXES

I collect my old plastic biscuit boxes ie those about 10 x 9 x 4 1/2 in. Using a pair of heavy duty garden scissors I cut them into garden labels. It is a good idea to first mark out with a garden label pen into 5 x 3/4 in strips. Having cut them out, snip the ends to make a point. Gather into bundles and wrap with a rubber band, (usually found outside your local post office!)

A bundle of these labels with a marker pen makes a welcome gift for your gardening friends.

Personally I find the red or orange coloured boxes best to use since the labels show up very clearly in the ground.

Hubert Cole, Ludlow, Shropshire



The editor says: Turn to page 84 for more home-made label ideas

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Beetroot tip

After boiling and peeling your beetroot, use an egg slicer for even slices and cleaner rounds.

Mrs S Wardle, Huddersfield



WATERING SOLVED

I use flower pouches around the garden mainly for trailing flowers but also 'trailing' tomatoes with great success. Watering can be a problem so to make sure the water gets right down to the bottom I insert a piece of plastic pipe drilled at intervals so the water can leak out and get to the roots.

Rob Ramage, Midlothian



AS THE OLD SAYING GOES

When weeding, the best way to make sure you are removing a weed and not a valuable plant is to pull on it. If it comes out of the ground easily, it is a valuable plant.

Julia O'Hagan, Rutland

CLEAN POTS THE EASY WAY

To do the plant pot washing, I use a black plastic dustbin filled with water and Jeyes Fluid, just drop the pots in after use and leave until needed.

Roger Chamberlain, Poulton le Fylde, Lancashire

RECYCLING BENEFITS ALL

On page 16 of the March issue, Linda Scully was asking if she could buy back garden waste?

Living in South Derbyshire, we must be lucky because our recycling centre sells recycled garden waste in prepackaged bags at a reasonable price. Everyone wins, we the gardeners and the council.

Thank you again for a great magazine. *Kitchen Garden* incorporating *Grow It* is a great combination of two magazines, something for everyone. My old copies are recycled to my granddaughter's school, which has a thriving garden club.

Brian Jenkin, Swadlincote, Derbyshire

MIXING GRAIN AND LEGUME

After reading your article on growing corn, squash and beans together (KG March 2014), I thought how interesting it is to see that many traditional dishes from around the world contain a legume (pea, bean or lentil) and a grain (rice, corn, wheat).

There's corn and beans, which North American first peoples call succotash, baked beans on toast or dahl (lentils) and rice from India. There's the Italian rice and green peas (risi e pisi), Greek hummus and pitta bread or black beans and rice from Louisiana.

These dishes may have added fruit: squash with succotash, a grilled tomato with baked beans, a green sweet pepper with black beans and rice. Green vegetables may take part, as in dahl and rice with spinach or fenugreek. Seeds are often added. Hummus may contain tahini, made from sunflower seeds; curried chick peas with fennel and coriander seeds may be eaten with bread or rice. All varied and tasty, and all containing a good mixture of essential proteins. I'm certainly going to try growing the Three Sisters.

Alisoun Gardner-Medwin, nr Newcastle upon Tyne



Kitchen Garden

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QUESTION TIME

GOT A FRUIT OR VEG PROBLEM? ASK KG FOR HELP



with **BOB FLOWERDEEW & ANNE SWITHINBANK**

WRITERS & CONTRIBUTORS TO RADIO 4'S GARDENERS' QUESTION TIME

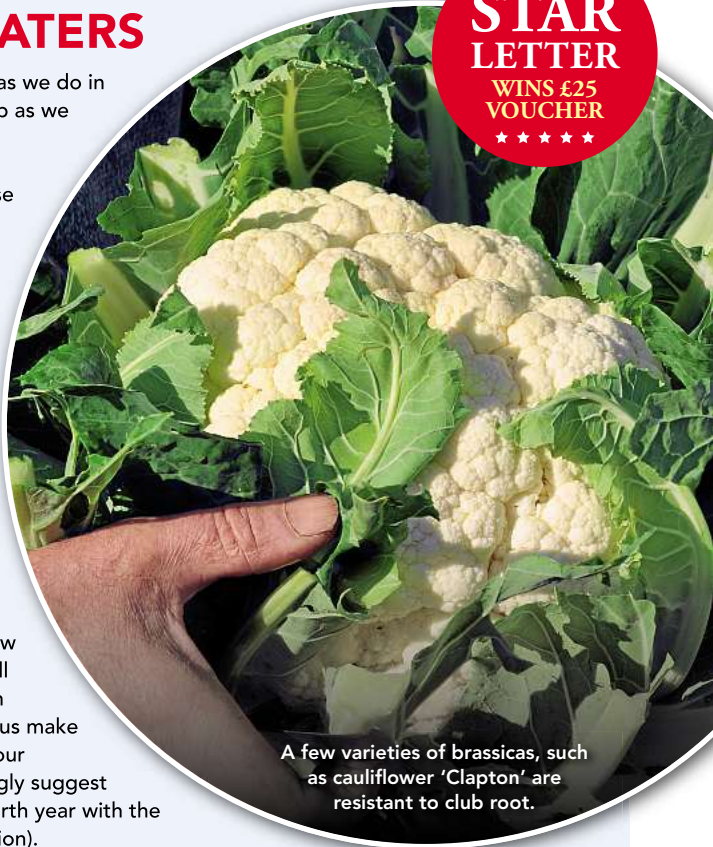
CLUB ROOT CHEATERS

I have a severe club root problem. Living as we do in the Western Highlands is probably no help as we have lots of rain.

My plot has seaweed spread on it each winter and I am sure the soil is in otherwise good condition. I can successfully grow club root resistant calabrese, but I wonder if there are other vegetables I can grow which do not succumb to club root as readily.

David Maunder Lochcarron, Wester Ross.

BOB SAYS: Only the brassicas and their close relations suffer from club root so turnips, swedes, radish, kohlrabi et al are all possibly attacked. Other vegetables such as legumes, root salads and spuds are not affected. There are now club root resistant varieties of cauliflower and cabbage so you could grow those. I am concerned by your high rainfall which is likely to wash out nutrients and in particular to reduce the lime levels and thus make your soil more acid. This will then make your brassicas more prone to club root. I strongly suggest you lime heavily and often (best every fourth year with the legumes and before the brassicas in rotation).



A few varieties of brassicas, such as cauliflower 'Clapton' are resistant to club root.



Leeks and garlic often produce little bulbils from the base. Pictured is elephant garlic.

LEEK FROM BULBS?

I discovered some bulbils at the base of a winter leek plant recently. I know the plant would form a seed head but is this another form of propagation that I could use for growing my annual winter crop?

Alan Conning, Kent.

BOB SAYS: Yes. Indeed I have recently been experimenting with forcing these offsets to grow by de-flowering the leek before the head expands then digging up the plant and drying it off. Several bulbs form, these can then be planted to grow new plants, I find if planted the end of August they make smallish but reasonable leeks by Christmas and

larger ones during a mild winter. The great advantage is that the leek moth is defeated as it is present in early summer and misses a crop grown this way. Secondly it does save sowing seed, handling seedlings and taking up valuable growing space as the bulbs can go in beds as they empty of other crops such as potatoes.

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COMPOST CONFUSION

I wonder if you can help me? I get very confused over compost in the vegetable garden. If you do not have access to manure/find it tricky to work with due to a bad back, what are the best alternatives? Also, when buying a product or products for all vegetables be it root or brassicas, is there one general one that can be rotavated in or not?

Judy Bailey, via email.

ANNE SAYS: It makes sense to have a compost heap or bin, to take green waste from your kitchen and garden. Peelings, weeds (apart from those seeding or with pernicious roots) and the spent remains of crops are all suitable. Sturdy, rotating bins don't need turning all that often and I'm sure you can persuade someone else to do it. While one load is breaking down, pile the ingredients loosely for the next load. My second suggestion is to be clever with green manures.

This is a neat way of creating organic matter because it arrives as tiny seeds, which grow on-site into great volumes of stem and leaf ready to be composted, chopped into soil, or spread over the ground between crops. Then there's composted green waste made by your local recycling depot. This can be bought by the bagful, or delivered in bulk (in my area we can have 1.5 tons delivered for £80 by a community recycling scheme) ideal for mulching no-dig beds. Well rotted compost is suitable for all crops but after rotavation, you'd need to let the ground settle before planting brassicas.

ADVICE ON CHRISTMAS CITRUS

I was given a little orange tree for Christmas complete with half a dozen small oranges all ready to pick. I am not really sure now how to care for it and encourage it to fruit again (it does also have a few beautifully scented flowers). I do have a south-facing conservatory which isn't always heated but is frost free.

Shirley Templeton, Epping, Essex.

BOB SAYS: Frost free will do fine, but best be prepared to cover it over with a sheet as well on really cold nights. Keep the orange in the brightest position and under cover from October



till May. Keep the compost just moist and never waterlogged, use rain water only and add a high nitrogen liquid feed very well diluted in every watering. Thin the fruits early as soon as flowers set or have lots of wee ones and a tired plant. Wipe leaves occasionally with sponge and slightly soapy warm water.

ASHES TO CABBAGES

Is it advisable to add the ash left from burning perennial weeds and diseased plants to the compost heap, or can it be used in any other way in the garden?

Garv, Cymro.

ANNE SAYS: I would add ash from perennial weeds to my compost heap in thin layers, or you can apply it round the base of fruit trees as a source of potash. This tends to blow away in my garden, so I usually have to shovel some earth on top to stabilise it. Ash is usually alkaline, so adding this to raise the pH on soil to be used for anything in the cabbage tribe would be ideal.

You could probably also use the ash from infected plant material, yet there's always the worry that incomplete burning will mean there are still spores or eggs around. They're so small, they'd go undetected.



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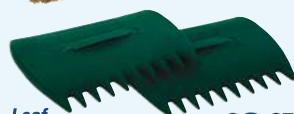


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Mouthwatering melons made easy



Melons can be a challenging crop to grow in our climate but it is worth the effort when you taste them. Charles Dowding has some top tips for growing a bumper harvest



An overarching theme in growing melons in the UK is to acknowledge that they are outside their comfortable growing climate. Even when I lived in south-west France, where temperatures are five degrees warmer, growers used cloches over plants in the spring, and had fields full of sweet fruit by July.

Here we need both a hot summer and protected cropping for melons to grow well, with time to ripen sweetly. Since the weather is never guaranteed, I offer these hot tips for being sure of a crop.

1. Good, early propagation, or buy decent sized plants in May.
2. Choose a suitable variety.
3. Grow melons undercover if possible, otherwise in your sunniest, most sheltered spot.



Here newly sown seeds are placed on a hotbed made of straw manure to germinate, but a heated propagator will do the job, too.



On April 19 these melons plus cucumbers and courgettes had germinated well in the warm conditions provided by the rotting manure.

SOWING EARLY

The golden rule is melon seeds need heat to germinate. Never sow seeds outdoors, but germinate them in modules or small pots in the warmest space you have, and if it is a cupboard you should keep checking for a pale stem after five days in 20-25°C (68-77°F). Then bring into light with the temperature no lower than 10°C (50°F), most windowsills should be all right.

Dates for sowing depend on your growing facilities, for example I sow in late March/early April, in module trays on top of the greenhouse hotbed, and for eventual planting in the greenhouse or polytunnel. If planting in a sheltered spot outdoors, I would sow mid April, in warmth, for planting around the middle of June, no later. So allow six to eight weeks from sowing to planting.

Composts for sowing melons (and cucumbers) want to be free draining and recently I have found that John Innes No 1 does not fulfil the criteria, with poor germination, so last year I used a multipurpose compost and had good germination and early growth.

RAISING PLANTS

As long as you are providing decent warmth, melon plants grow fast, and that means repotting a couple of times. As soon as any lower leaf shows a hint of yellow, indicating a shortage of nutrients, mainly nitrogen, repot your plants into double or triple the volume of compost. I repot into well rotted manure and home-made compost mixed with perlite or sharp sand, or any compost with plenty of goodness.



PLANTING OUT

Melon plants are liked by slugs, and woodlice too. If the weather is at all dull and cool when planting, I put any combination of ash and rockdust around plants when setting them out. Plants can be set in their final growing position from the middle of May undercover until mid June, to allow time for successful fruiting before the sun loses its summer power. Later plantings grow fine but their fruits are then maturing in late August and September, by which time the weaker sunlight results in melons with less sugar, and I know from experience how frustrating this is: after all that trouble, you have melons that taste like cucumbers.

SOIL OR GROWING BAG?

Both are possible but be prepared for regular watering of growing bags in early summer, and feeding too. When growing in soil, I spread 5cm (2in) of compost on top, before planting, in clay soil that holds nutrients and moisture. In growing bags you feed as for cucumbers and in lighter soils you may need to use a high potash feed during July and early August, but not after that as the melon growing season is shorter than that of tomato and cucumber.



Ash sprinkled round newly planted melons.

GRAFTED PLANTS

Are they worth it? I am doubtful but it depends on the timing and skill of the grafting process. In 2012 a trial by Gardening Which? found excellent growth from grafted plants and felt they are worth the price, but last year was not conclusive and in my case I was sent some weak grafted plants which barely ever grew at all – I think they were badly grafted. Whereas ungrafted plants gave bumper harvests for less money. ➤



Melons planted in early June through biodegradable polythene.

VARIETIES TO TRY

I have had best results, over many years, with F1 hybrid seed of three varieties, all cantaloupes. 'Sweetheart' (Suttons, Tuckers) is tried and tested over many seasons, has cream-coloured skin and orange flesh, with as many as six or seven melons of 6-800g each per plant.

'Alvaro' (Seeds of Distinction) is a little greener in appearance with some vertical stripes, but the flesh is similar in colour and sweetness.

'Emir' (Kings, D T Brown) is different with larger, oblong, fruits and paler, yellow-orange flesh: It likes more heat than the other two.

Two other types of melon are honeydew and musk melon, but both need more heat than cantaloupes and I would not try them until you have succeeded with the latter.

GROW UP OR ALONG

Like cucumbers, melons can be grown up strings such as polypropylene. I put a knotted end at the bottom of the planting hole, roots are then able to grow around it and anchor the string, and tie the top end to any support at head height. You then need to remove sideshoots until they are 75cm (30in) high and then allow sideshoots to grow. Melons will then form at the first node of each one, and you pinch off the sideshoot's tip after seeing a melon there. Stop all growth at head height and you will find the plants 'self-prune' i.e they grow a certain number of melons the soil conditions and weather will allow. You don't need to support the actual fruits with little string hammocks etc. that is another myth, see pictures.

If growing them on soil, a polythene mulch helps keep fruit clean. From July, pinch off all sideshoots, that are not supporting fruit and once plants have filled their allotted space. Again, they self-prune to give you as many fruit as they can.



This one plant of 'Emir' produced 7kg of fruit!

TOP TIP

Avoid over-watering melons as their roots need air as well as moisture. I water in the morning when sun is forecast, ensuring good growth and also that leaves and stem are dry by night, with fewer fungal and slug problems.

MELONS OUTDOORS

These need growing at ground level and must be in full sun with some shelter, preferably under a cloche. I recommend 'Sweetheart' as it is the earliest variety, and planting out around the middle of June. Outdoor growing is a gamble though, because in 2012 you would have harvested nothing, whereas last year was good for outdoor melons in a favourable spot.

WATERING

Go steady at first, until you see plants race away, usually in late June or early July. Then for about a month, water most days and use the opportunity to pinch the ends off new sideshoots. July is the busiest month in melon growing. In 2013 mine grew from 23cm (9in) high on July 3 to 155cm (61in) on July 31, which is nearly 5cm (2in) every day. By comparison, a nearby cucumber grew 'slower' from 50cm to 155cm (3.3cm per day), showing how the growth of melons is concentrated into a short period of high summer. Water less once fruits are near to full size.

WHEN ARE FRUIT READY?

Melons look tasty and ready a good fortnight before they are ripe. You need to wait for a delicious aroma of sweet fruit to tell you they are ready, and sniffing the fruit is a good way to recognise the first hint of ripeness. You will notice the colour turning slightly golden, especially around the stem where there may also be some slight splitting. Melons on soil are worth resting on tiles, and once fully grown you must watch them closely for ripeness in case ants get in there first, and slugs like the fruit as well!

Once the first melon is ripening, they tend to come all at once so be prepared for a feast. Eating a ripe melon off the plant, in summer warmth, is a wonderful result of all the care needed to grow them well. ■



Charles sowed 'Emir' on April 28 but it only just had a long enough season to produce fruits and these were not very sweet.

Watch out for...

Red spider mite can be a really destructive pest especially in dry summers.

Daily watering to maintain soil humidity is the best help, also water leaves at midday in bright sun.

Powdery mildew can also develop on the undersides of leaves and again this is mainly due to too little moisture in the soil. A compost mulch can help to prevent water loss.



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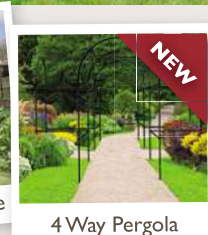
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KG Beginner's Guide

Parsnips

This popular root veg can be a challenge to grow but Veg expert **Andrew Tokely** has the information you need to grow perfect, sweet roots every time

Parsnips are often one of the first vegetables sown each year, but one of the last to harvest. This is because they require a long growing season if they are going to produce good sized roots by harvest time.

GETTING STARTED

It is important to consider where you are going to sow this crop along with your other root vegetables when doing your winter digging. This is because these crops prefer to grow in ground that has not had any manure added to it. So begin by marking out a bed and simply turning the soil, but avoid adding any form of organic matter to it. If parsnips are sown into freshly manured soil they are likely to produce disfigured, forked roots rather than nice straight ones.

In the spring a week or two before sowing the seed, rake down the soil to a fine crumbly texture (tilth), then sprinkle some Growmore fertiliser or pelleted chicken manure at the rate of 60gm per sq m (2oz per sq yard) on to the ground and gently rake it into the surface.

SOWING THE SEED

Gardeners often sow this crop as early as February, but this can give poor results and a very patchy row of seedlings. With modern varieties there is no need to sow this early and I never sow before March and then only if soil and weather conditions allow. Sowing is often delayed

until April or even early May on my Suffolk plot, especially when sowing one of the hybrid varieties that have superb vigour, germinate quicker and produce some quality roots to harvest by autumn and well into the following year.

If you are not fussy what shape or size roots you harvest then the easiest way to sow them is into

shallow drills that have been drawn out with a swan neck hoe. As parsnips can take up to eight weeks to germinate, this can also allow time for a few weed seedlings to emerge making seedling identification difficult.

A handy tip to make this easier is to drop a few radish seeds along the rows at the same time, as these will germinate quicker and help you see where the rows are until the parsnips germinate, plus these few radishes will make a welcome early addition to a salad. Once the drills have been sown they are lightly raked back over until

Did you know?

Germination can take just 14 days if the soil is warm, but eight weeks if the weather and soil are cold.



Radishes act as a useful (and tasty) marker for rows of slow-growing parsnips.



PARSNIPS AT A GLANCE

	Sow	Harvest
Jan		
Feb		
Mar		
Apr		
May		
June		
Jul		
Aug		
Sept		
Oct		
Nov		
Dec		



A parsnip root direct sown (left) compared with one grown over a hole punched into the soil as described below.

Step by step SOWING PARSNIPS



1. Use a crowbar or similar to make deep holes in the soil 15cm (6in) apart.



2. Fill the holes with gritty compost, using a cane to remove air pockets.



3. Sow three to four seeds on top before covering with the same gritty compost.

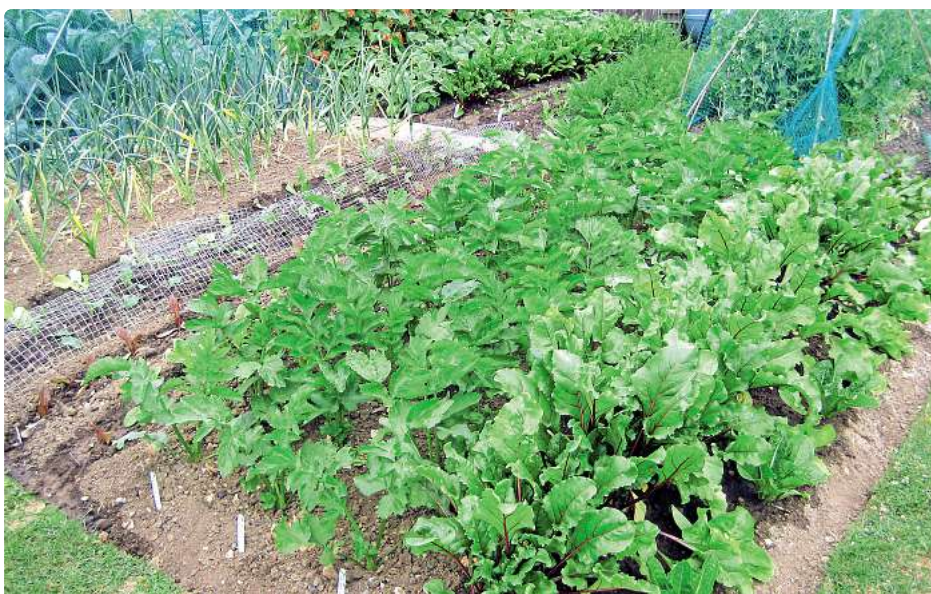
covered with soil and gently tamped down with the back of the rake.

Those gardeners who, like me, would prefer to harvest straight, long, good quality roots for eating or for exhibiting at a local show should try the method I now use. First punch a hole in the ground with a long crowbar about 45-60cm (18-24in) deep. Holes are spaced about 15cm (6in) apart and are filled with multipurpose compost that has had a little sand added to it.

As the holes are filled they are firmed down with a stick to avoid air pockets, then three to four seeds are sown at the top and covered over. Once the seedlings are large enough to handle they will be thinned down to one parsnip per hole and should grow long and straight. This is a method followed now by many of my fellow plot holders on site as it improves the quality of the harvested roots so much.

AFTERCARE

Once the seeds have germinated and have developed two seed leaves plus two true leaves, they are ready for thinning. If sown in a drill these should be thinned to one seedling every 10-15cm (4-6in). Those sown on holes punched into the ground should be thinned leaving the strongest seedling in each station. Many gardeners thin their parsnips by simply pulling out the ►



ANDREW'S PICK OF THE VARIETIES



■ **'TENDER & TRUE'** – A traditional variety with good canker resistance, capable of producing good sized flavoursome roots.



■ **'GLADIATOR F1'** – One of the first hybrids and one of the best. Excellent flavoured long smooth skinned roots with good canker resistance. Great for the kitchen or exhibition.



■ **'COUNTESS F1'** – Specially bred for smooth, white skinned and fleshed roots with excellent flavour. Ready to harvest from October through to April.

All the varieties above are freely available. For details of the major seed suppliers see page 104.

weakest seedlings, but this can often disturb the remaining plant leading to forked roots later on, or even worse the remaining seedling may wither and die.

During the spring and summer keep your hoe moving around the parsnips to keep them weed free, as well as hand weeding close to the roots, so the shoulders are not accidentally grazed by the hoe. Such wounds could allow canker disease to enter.

Parsnips should only be watered if the soil becomes very dry during hot weather, but as a rule they only need it when young, as once the roots start to develop it is better to let them search for any moisture increasing the size and length of roots by the autumn.



ABOVE: Parsnip canker. RIGHT: To harvest, dig carefully down the side of the roots and soak with water before pulling out.

PEST & DISEASES

The main disease is canker and this can only be prevented by trying not to damage the roots while hoeing as it usually attacks weak or damaged roots first. Canker can also be a problem if seed is sown into soil that is deficient in lime. Growing a canker resistant variety is advisable to get a clean and healthy crop.

During very warm springs aphids (greenfly) can sometimes be a problem, feeding on the young foliage. When spotted and if there are only a few they can be rubbed off, but severe attacks should be sprayed with a suitable insecticide.

Carrot fly may attack the roots, but generally are much less of a problem on bulky parsnip roots than on carrots.

HARVESTING

Parsnips are usually left in the ground until required to eat and can be lifted from

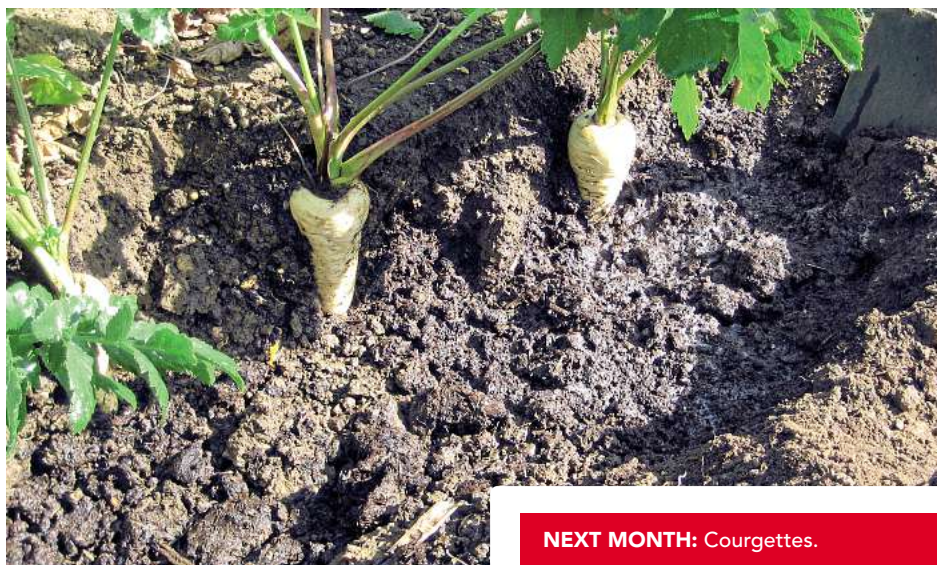
September as soon as

the roots are substantial enough, through to April with some modern hybrids. The easiest method for lifting is to dig down beside the roots with a fork or spade (see below), before gently lifting the roots out without damage.

When lifting extra long roots from punched holes dig down beside the parsnip and fill the hole with water. Leave until the water has drained away then gently pull the foliage and wiggle the root at the same time and the root should come out clean. ■

TOP TIP

Thin out parsnips in the evening when it is cooler to avoid seedling stress, and water them in after thinning to settle any soil disturbance.



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Hot new award winners



There is a bewildering choice of chilli peppers available, all with differing fruit shapes, colours, sizes and 'heat'. Colin Randel of the RHS Vegetable Trials Forum reveals the results of trials to find the very best for your greenhouse and patio pots.

The 2013 trial to discover which chilli varieties deserved the coveted Award of Garden Merit was grown and judged at two nurseries: West Dean Gardens in West Sussex and Sandhill Nursery in Hull, East Yorkshire. These sites were chosen because Sarah Wain at West Dean organises its hugely popular Chilli Fiesta each August, and Simon Crawford of Sandhill Nursery is an expert breeder of peppers and tomatoes. Michael Michaud of Sea Spring Seeds in Dorset, another expert chilli grower and breeder, was co-opted on to the panel for both assessments.

The judges were asked to look for chillies suitable as 'ornamental edible' varieties for windowsill and patio container use.



'Krakatoa'



For the trial at Sandhill Nursery in Hull, some plants were planted direct into the soil...



...and some in pots. Irrigation pipes were used to ensure plants never became dry.

CHILLIES ON TRIAL

A total of 51 chillies were grown at both trial sites. At West Dean, they were grown in a greenhouse; 36 varieties were judged solely for windowsill/patio use, a single plant of the remaining 15 was grown for visual assessment.

At Sandhill, the 51 varieties were grown both in pots and in the greenhouse soil, plus a plant of each of the more compact varieties was placed outside for the duration of the summer.



SOWING THE PLANTS

At West Dean, seeds were sown on February 13, two seeds per 7cm (3in) pot, and thinned to a single plant to avoid pricking out. They were then transferred to 13cm (5in) pots and finally to 18cm (2l) pots during the first week of June. They were then placed on the bench of a south facing unheated greenhouse.

At Sandhill Nursery, the seeds were sown on March 18, the plants potted on in mid-April then planted both in the greenhouse and into pots on May 28.

THE JUDGING

Judging at West Dean took place on a hot and sunny July 24, while judging at Sandhill took place on September 17. As a result 12 new varieties received an award.

CHILLIES FOR THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Can chillies be grown reliably outside? Plants were potted up in Hull during the third week of May but kept under glass until late June due to the cold weather conditions. Of the new award winners 'Treasure's Red', 'Krakatoa', 'Basket of Fire', 'Stumpy', 'Pot Black' and 'Apache' all performed superbly

outdoors and remained in place until October.

Plants for the patio are best grown in 15cm (6in) pots indoors and not placed outside until the first fruits have set (July 1 at Sandhill) where they can remain throughout the summer. Taller, more branching plants are better planted into larger pots.



'Sparkler'



'Pot Black'

The 2014 winners

■ **'TREASURE'S RED':** Compact multi-branched plant 25cm (10in) tall with erect clusters of conical multi-coloured fruits in pale green to orange to red. (Nicky's Nursery.)

■ **'KRAKATOA':** Compact 20cm (8in) plants, with similar fruit shape and colours to 'Treasure's Red'. (Thompson & Morgan.)

■ **'BASKET OF FIRE':** Reaches 25cm (10in) before producing slender 4-5cm (1½-2in) fruits ripening from cream through to scarlet. (Marshalls.)

■ **'SPIKE':** Bushy plant to 33cm (13in), well branched and laden with slender lime green fruits turning red. (Sea Spring Seeds.)

■ **'SPARKLER':** Compact, bushy plants with numerous erect, slender fruits held above the leaves, cream to red. One of the best 'ornamental edibles'. (Sea Spring seeds.)

■ **'STUMPY':** Compact habit to 17cm (6½in), multi-branched with clusters of 1cm (½in) pointed bullet fruits of cream to orange to red. Well cropped. (Sea Spring Seeds.)

■ **'POT BLACK':** Upright plant to 36cm (14in) with upward branching habit. Visually stunning with its dark purple – green leaves with purple 'blocky' fruit. (Thompson & Morgan.)

■ **'RIOT':** Compact plants to 23cm (9in). Clusters of 5cm (2in) fruits, semi-erect in cream to orange to red. A superb 'ornamental edible' pot plant. (Simpsons Seeds.)

■ **'LOCO':** Bushy, cascading habit, especially attractive in a basket. Lots of 2cm (¾in) oblong fruits of purple turning red held above the leaves. Available from DT Brown. (See main picture.)

■ **'BOLIVIAN RAINBOW':** Compact plant with dark green leaves, upright conical fruits of cream through orange to red. (Simpson's Seeds.)

■ **'CAYENNETTA':** Bushy and upright. Produces high numbers of shiny orangey red fruits. (Thompson & Morgan.)

■ **'THAI HOT':** Low growing, spreading plant producing bullet shaped fruit turning to red. An excellent pot plant. Not yet available.

Full details of the seed suppliers can be found on page 104

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Tried & tasted...

Colourful flowered RUNNER BEANS

Runner beans are delicious, but also make attractive climbers for the border. This month veg-growing expert and broadcaster **Joe Maiden** looks at varieties with real eye appeal



Pink-flowered 'Celebration' is heavy cropping and slow to turn tough and stringy.

Runner beans are loved by gardeners and are a fast-maturing crop for summer to late autumn. They are not difficult to grow, but must not be planted too early because they do not like cold weather.

In recent years a breakthrough in breeding has brought along many new varieties, many of which have attractive flowers, some bi-coloured, adding yet more interest, for not only do they taste good, they look great when in flower, too. As well as having attractive flowers most of the new varieties have been bred to include better setting capabilities, many being self-pollinating. This is an important criteria I wanted to test.

Varieties like 'St George' with its red and white flowers, 'Celebration' with pink flowers and 'White Lady' with white blooms, can all look fantastic in the flower garden as well as on the plot. This makes them especially good for small gardens; if you don't have room for a veg patch, why not try a

wigwam planted with these exciting new colours? It will add height to your borders at the same time.

GROUND PREPARATION

Runner beans are one of the quickest-growing of any vegetable, but saying this, they do need good ground – meaning land rich in nutrients with a plentiful supply of organic matter. The latter acts as a soil conditioner with the great advantage of holding moisture in dry weather conditions. This year my preparation was made easy. I had a

problem with water cascading down the path on my south-facing slope during the very wet winter and spring, so I asked a friend with a mini digger to cut a trench across my path for drainage.

While he was there I asked him to take out four trenches across my veg garden. The trenches were spaced 2m (6ft 6in) apart and in less than an hour, four straight trenches were dug 60cm (2ft) wide and deep. The





Joe sows into 8cm (3in) pots. These seeds have nearly all germinated 7-10 days after sowing.

SUPPORTING

Two of my trenches were used to grow beans in the conventional way using straight rows. Strong posts were inserted into the soil before backfilling; the posts were set 1.8m (6ft) apart with a double row of wires fastened to the top of the posts. Canes were inserted in about 30cm (12in) apart with their tops between the two wires. A quick twist with a screwdriver was all that was required to trap the canes firmly between the wires, so securing them tightly. This saves a lot of tying in. This was my father's method that he used nearly 50 years ago.

My wigwam method also worked very well down the centre of the backfilled trench. I knocked in 2.4m (8ft) posts, 60cm (2ft) into the trench at 2m (6ft 6in) intervals. Just before planting I chose my strongest 2.7m (9ft) canes and placed these in a circle 36cm (14in) apart around the central post in a wigwam formation. The canes were inserted 30cm (12in) into the soil and we were ready for planting.



Showing the twin wires twisted together to clamp the canes into place.

base of the trenches were in some fairly solid clay so we used the teeth on the digger bucket to break up the hard clay layer below the topsoil. The good topsoil was mounded up at the side of the trench for backfilling. The trenches were left open so I could fill in at my leisure and I found this a really great way to make four really fertile areas across my plot which I have marked out for future use by knocking in four posts.

These will be ideal for the growing of parsnips, carrots and so on, which love land well manured from a previous crop, but they are also ideal for beans. So, I set to work by using the open trenches as a compost heap – laying in freshly fallen leaves, yellowing leaves from crops such as Brussels sprouts, old hanging-basket liners, bedding plants and so on. After this I wheeled some manure into the trenches. Soil was then filtered back into the trench over each layer of organic matter until it was full once again. It looked a bit like an elephant's grave, but soon settled down, forming a mound.

SOWING

For this trial I decided on a sowing date of May 1 to give plants for setting out on June 1. It is too cold on my plot in North Yorkshire to plant out before this date. I chose 'Enorma' as the benchmark runner bean variety.

Sowing is easy as the bean seeds are large and easy to handle. I sowed individually into 8cm (3in) pots or module trays and placed the pots on the greenhouse bench. I used a John Innes No 1 compost and having filled the trays and pots made a 2.5cm (1in) depression. A bean was placed in the depression on its edge with the scar facing down, (not flat or the seed is more likely to rot).

The pots and trays were then placed on a heated mat with a temperature of 15-18°C (60-

65°F) and germination took around six days. The young plants grew very quickly and the containers soon filled with roots. Last year I found it necessary to pot them into 13cm (5in) pots at this stage and to give each a 45cm (18in) split cane for support. The plants were at the top of the cane by planting time.

PLANTING OUT

My planting date was June 1 and the plants were well watered the night before. It was a very easy job – the canes already being in position and the soil recently dug. A little fertiliser (Vitax Q4) was added to each planting hole and worked into the soil, the plants were firmed in well and watered to settle the roots. The split cane was left in position to direct the young shoots towards the main supports and they quickly established and grew away rapidly.

This was an exciting time as many of the coloured-flowered varieties were new to me and I was looking forward to seeing if the flowers were as striking as the seed catalogues suggested. The growing season last year from June onwards was superb and the plants were all flowering well by mid-July.

When the beans became ready for picking it was noticeable which were more or less stringless and the various sizes at maturity could be easily seen. Some varieties remained in good condition much longer than others as you will see from my conclusions on page 34.

As already mentioned the summer developed into a belter with the correct amount of rainfall and all the varieties grew well. The crop loved the trenches filled with moisture-retentive material. ►



'Tender Star' lived up to its name and is highly recommended for its bi-coloured blooms.



Joe gets ready to harvest some fine pods of 'White Lady'.

TOP TIP
Save your back and speed up planting using a bulb planter when setting out beans



CONCLUSIONS

To be able to grow a good crop of runner beans and not having to stick to red flowers brings a new look to the garden. I will definitely be growing these again.

The best varieties on my North Yorkshire plot were:

RED AND WHITE

■ **'ST GEORGE'**: This was the best red and white-flowered variety. Heavy cropping, tender and brilliant in flower.

PINK-FLOWERED

■ **'CELEBRATION'**: Had the most attractive pink flowers and produced a crop of very tasty beans.

WHITE-FLOWERED

■ **'WHITE APOLLO'**: The best white-flowered type. However, last year I tried 'Moonlight' which was also excellent. Both are heavy cropping and stringless.

FOR POTS, TUBS & WINDOWBOXES

■ **'HESTIA'**: Is a short, compact grower and surprisingly heavy-cropping for its size.

STANDARD RED-FLOWERED

■ In my opinion the best standard red-flowered variety is 'Enorma' followed closely by 'Benchmark'. I believe that the latter may become the most popular variety available.



'Painted Lady' looked good, but was outclassed by 'St George' in Joe's trial.

VARIETY	COLOUR	SETTING	CROP	TASTE	FROM SET TO STRINGY	POD SIZE (CM)	FIRST PICK	LAST PICK	FLOWER IMPACT
'St George'	Red & white	Excellent	Heavy	V good	Slow	30-36	July 28	Oct 6	Striking
'Painted Lady'	Red & white	Good	Medium	Good	Quick	25-30	Aug 10	Sept 20	Good
'Celebration'	Pink	Excellent	Heavy	V good	Slow	Up to 51	July 28	Oct 6	Wonderful
'White Apollo'	White	Excellent	V heavy	Excellent	V slow	45-51	July 20	Oct 6	Striking
'Moonlight'	White	V good	Heavy	Excellent	Slow	Up to 45	July 26	Oct 4	Striking
'Tender Star'	Red & pink	V good	Heavy	Excellent	V slow	20-25	Aug 1	Oct 6	V unusual
'White Lady'	White	V good	Medium	Good	Slow	Up to 36	Aug 4	Oct 1	Good
'Hestia'	Red & white	Poor	Light	Good	Quick	20	July 20	Sept 20	Good
'Enorma'	Red	Good	V heavy	V good	Slow	Up to 51	Aug 1	Oct 6	Good

Joe's pick

Joe's pick

Joe's pick



'St George'



'White Apollo'



'Hestia'

Suppliers

- **'ST GEORGE'**: Mr Fothergill's, DT Brown, Kings, T&M, Suttons, Terwins, Moreveg
- **'CELEBRATION'**: Terwins, Kings, DT Brown, Suttons, Moreveg
- **'WHITE APOLLO'**: T&M, Medwyn's
- **'HESTIA'**: Suttons, Kings, Moreveg, DT Brown, Terwins
- **'MOONLIGHT'**: Moreveg, Suttons, DT Brown, T&M, Kings, Mr Fothergill's, Plants of Distinction
- **'ENORMA'**: Widely available.
- **'BENCHMARK'**: Suttons, T&M, DT Brown

Full details of seed suppliers on page 104

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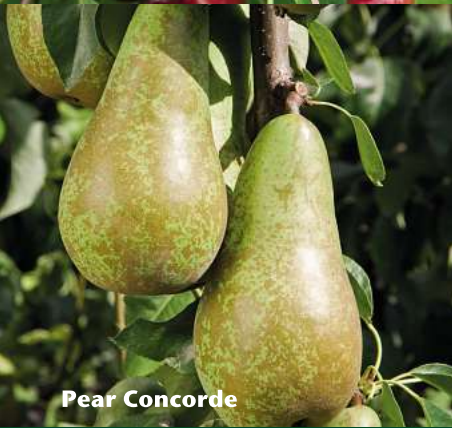


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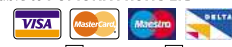
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The lowdown on... Asparagus

The taste of early summer, fresh asparagus is hard to beat and easier to grow than you think, says professional veg gardener, Lucy Halliday

Grow it!

Good asparagus is all in the preparation and it is really as simple as that. As a perennial crop it keeps on giving and although it is fairly space hungry the crowns can produce for up to 20 years. Asparagus crowns are either male or female, males being heavier croppers, which is why many F1 all-male varieties are now available. If you would rather try a more traditional variety it is worth noting that female spears are generally chunkier and more succulent. Although possible to raise from seed, time can be saved by investing in one-year-old crowns.

Choose a site suitable for this long-lived crop; prepare it carefully to rid it of any perennial weeds. Open sunny spots are good but avoid very windy sites as foliage reaches up to 1m tall. Asparagus is traditionally grown in beds of mounded rows with 30cm (12in) between plants and rows. Wire can be trained down rows to support the summer foliage.

Preparation of the soil in your bed is the best investment for a good crop. The essential things are, first, a deep root run with good drainage so well-dug soil or raised beds are needed, particularly on heavier clay soils. Secondly, the addition of a medium fertility soil improver such as garden compost, well-rotted manure or leaf mould at a bucketful per square metre, should be added the winter before planting. Lastly, check your pH as you will need to add a little lime if it is less than pH6.

March to early April is the best time for planting and make sure to plant crowns as soon as they arrive.

PREPARE TO PLANT

Dig trenches in your prepared bed, 30cm (12in) wide and 20cm (8in) deep. Incorporating a little extra leaf mould/manure to the bottom of the trench improves drainage. Create a mound 10cm (4in) high along the centre of each trench then carefully lay out the fragile roots of the crowns over the mound so they sit astride it at 30cm (12in) intervals. Fill in around the crowns, leaving just the bud tips visible at the surface. Water well and mulch with well-rotted manure or compost to at least 4cm (approx 1½in) depth.



Plant in trenches, creating a mound in the base to encourage drainage.

Harvest time:
Mid April
to June



Once established, crowns will crop for 20 years.

CUTTING THE CROP

Asparagus spears should be cut at your desired size and harvested regularly to keep them cropping. Cut just below the soil level with a sharp blade. Remember you are removing the plant's leaves so the rules are: don't cut for first two years, cut for six weeks in the third year and for up to eight weeks in subsequent years.



Asparagus: What to do when

- **JANUARY:** Mulch your asparagus plot to prepare the soil
- **FEBRUARY:** Make sure to order asparagus crowns in time for March delivery
- **MARCH:** Main planting time, for established crops apply a general-purpose or seaweed fertiliser
- **APRIL:** Planting can continue this month, earliest crops ready to harvest
- **MAY:** Warmer nights will kick-start peak production this month for established crowns
- **JUNE:** Continue cropping this month from established crowns
- **JULY:** Keep new crowns well watered in hot weather.
- **AUGUST:** Give support to tall growth as needed. The 'ferns' are lovely in flower arrangements too
- **SEPTEMBER:** Don't let weeding get on top of you, little and often is easier
- **OCTOBER:** Cut down old, yellowed stems to ground to prevent asparagus beetle overwintering
- **NOVEMBER:** Apply a winter mulch of organic material and/or a weed-proof membrane
- **DECEMBER:** For a new bed this is a good time for a thorough dig over before soil gets too cold

FAST TRACK TO SUCCESS

COLD SNAP

Cover emerging young shoots in spring with horticultural fleece to avoid frost damage.

GARDENER'S GRAFT

Key maintenance job is hand weeding to stop perennials taking hold, hoeing can damage roots.

COVER UP

Mulching once a year with heavy weed-suppressing mulch saves much weeding and watering.

DOWN TIME

You can completely cover your bed from autumn through winter with weed-proof membrane to cheat the weeds.

USUAL SUSPECTS

Generally pest-free, the three to look out for are slugs and snails, asparagus beetle and frost on early spears.



Freshly harvested spears are delicious on toast with a soft poached egg.

Save £7 on an asparagus collection

Asparagus is expensive to buy in the shops, but easy to grow and tastes delicious freshly harvested from the garden; simply steam and serve with melting butter. Once established 12 plants will produce around 10kg (22lb) annually for 12 years or more. Our suppliers, Pomona Fruits, supply one-year-old hand-selected 'grade A' crowns which can be harvested just one year after planting.

■ ASPARAGUS 'MONDEO'

This male-dominant F1 hybrid variety produces heavy yields very early in the season and performs well on a range of soil types. The succulent green spears have closed tips and a strong asparagus flavour. Season: early. Offer price £14.85 (inc p&p) for 12 crowns (Saving £2.65). Order code ASP006.

■ ASPARAGUS 'STEWARTS PURPLE'

This new purple F1 hybrid is considerably sweeter than any of the green asparagus varieties. The low fibre content means the spears are particularly tender even when eaten raw. A very attractive and tasty addition to salads. Season: mid/late. Offer price £14.85 (inc p&p) for 12 crowns (Saving £2.65). Order code ASP003.

■ ASPARAGUS COLLECTION

You can make even bigger savings by ordering both of the varieties above (12 crowns each of 'Stewarts Purple' and 'Mondeo' for just £28 (inc p&p), a great saving of £7! Order code ASP911.

How to order

Call 01255 440410 for credit or debit card purchases, quoting offer code 'KG4ASP' or order online at www.pomonafruits.co.uk/KG4ASP. Offer closes on 13/04/2014.

Delivery is from late March/April.

UK addresses only.

■ Note: All prices include p&p.



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A plot less ordinary

Helen Gazeley visits a plot in Shropshire where you won't find neat rows of veg yet from the jumble of plants there is great productivity





Anni Kelsey.

Weeding isn't known for its eureka moments, but it gave Anni Kelsey an idea that changed her vegetable growing forever. "Wouldn't it be great," she thought in 2005, as she hacked back handfuls of weeds, "if all this was edible?"

Thus began her quest to "get as much out of the garden with as little input as possible". Taking her cue from forest gardens and polycultures, Anni looked for perennial vegetables that grew easily and tasted good. Instead, she found a dearth of information.

So, she started experimenting herself and, seven years on, her Shropshire garden is crammed with a variety of root vegetables, brassica, alliums and leaf vegetables, some familiar, others rarely found, most of which stay in the ground from season to season.

A LACK OF CONVENTION

Looking round, it soon becomes clear that Anni's beds are very different from those usually found on a veg plot. At first the plants look jumbled, and wildflowers roam seemingly freely. "It's not a method that would suit everyone," says Anni, "The tidier-minded wouldn't appreciate it, but the children love it. They go in and explore, see what fruit there is to eat and rummage for strawberries."

Gone are neatly labelled rows of carefully spaced plants, though they could be included if wished. "I might have started that way if I'd got more room. I packed a lot into a small space so it turned into quite a muddle."

That 'muddle', though, contains considerable method. Each plant, edible or not, serves a purpose. "Some keep pests at bay," she says, "others pull minerals from the subsoil or fix nitrogen from the air, keep the ground covered and feed insects."

GETTING TO KNOW NATURE

Observation has been key to Anni's methods. She's learned to de-stress brassica during a dry summer by picking more leaves (she rarely waters); to remove aggressive mineral accumulators like chicory from nearby hungry kale; to expect cabbage white butterflies to find cabbages, but wreak less damage on stronger plants, which are often in shade. When a plant self-seeds, Anni waits to see what happens – "It's all part of the bigger picture of letting nature get on with things." If it starts causing trouble, she removes it; otherwise it stays. She feels closer to nature. "I definitely see more than I used to and I'm more in tune with what's going on year on year."

Her knowledge has been acquired with a steely determination. Anni hated the taste of her first choice of perennials – lovage, salad burnet and good King Henry – and overwhelmed herself by growing so many seedlings

TOP LEFT: Variegated Daubenton's kale adds a splash to the brassica.

ABOVE: Polyculture Patch II waking up in spring. At the back are a gooseberry bush and two blackcurrant bushes intermingled with three-cornered leek, wild garlic, sweet cicely and wild violets. In front are kale, sorrel, dandelion and wild rocket.

BELOW: Sea beet, spinach and Welsh onions is one of Anni's experimental polycultures in pots.

that she had nowhere to plant them. "My lack of skills and experience caused a good deal of failures," she says. Other gardeners might have given up, but not Anni. After a couple of years, the garden turned a corner and Anni now wouldn't consider growing any other way. "The more I do, the more absorbed I become." So absorbed that she has even taken up newly laid decking to gain growing space.

A DIFFERENT GARDEN

Intriguingly, previous problem areas have proved surprisingly productive. A damp area named Polyculture Patch II once struggled against "some tiny-leaved spreading thing" that took over under the apple tree. It now flourishes with currant bushes, brassica and leafy greens, with forget-me-nots and primroses flowering in the understorey in spring.

Spring is Anni's busiest time as she cuts back excessive growth. "I sort through things that are in the way, forget-me-nots that need pulling out. But after that not a lot comes, probably because I'm not disturbing the soil, so seeds aren't germinating." And she's finding less work is needed each year. "It's gone from a series of planned tasks, to watching ➤





LEFT: The climber looks like a nasturtium but is actually mashua, a productive relative. Wild cabbage towers behind, with wild marjoram and oca in the mid ground and a young yacon in front.

BELOW: Skirret towers over the clover-like leaves of oca, while the kale flowers in front.

Forest Gardening & polycultures

A forest garden is layered. Tall trees form a canopy over smaller trees and shrubs; below, smaller herbaceous plants and ground covers ensure that every available level is productive. It tends to be far less susceptible to pests and diseases and should increase productivity over time, while requiring less maintenance than conventional growing areas.

A polyculture can be regarded as a team of plants, each of which has a role to play. Placing mineral accumulators such as comfrey and chicory, with nitrogen fixers, such as peas and beans, and insect-attracting plants, such as fennel and thyme, creates a diversity where plants support each other in their needs.

and waiting, taking action only when necessary.” This in itself, presented an unexpected challenge. “I realised how conditioned I was to directing what happens, how hard it is to cede control and become an enabler instead.”

What has surely helped is watching the garden’s transformation. “I’ve more spiders and beetles because I let mainly wild plants seed themselves. Every flower seems to have an insect on it.” The originally loamy soil has changed. Anni doesn’t dig. She makes and spreads compost but often lays weeded plants straight on to the soil. “If something dies in nature, it just falls to the ground,” she points out, and whereas annual plants deplete the soil of nutrients, she adds, “growing perennials in a polyculture seems to help boost soil fertility. Saying the soil’s like sifted icing sugar is a bit of exaggeration, but it’s become much lighter and fluffier, and smells sweet.” This in itself reduces work, as badly placed deep-rooted weeds lift out easily.

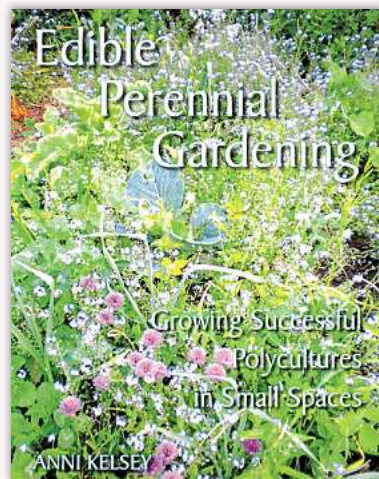
SOMETHING A BIT DIFFERENT

What, though, of the harvest? Leafy greens, onions, roots and tubers are the backbone of production, with many unknown to conventional gardeners. Asturian tree cabbage, Daubenton’s kale, wood sorrel and nodding wild onion co-habit with unusual roots like oca, yacon and mashua. She also treats as perennials some veg conventionally grown as annuals, cutting spring onions and leeks off at ground level and letting the leaves regrow.



Free book for readers

Kitchen Garden readers can order Anni’s new book *Edible Perennial Gardening* from www.green-shopping.co.uk and pay just £12.71 saving 25% on the recommended retail price of £16.95. As a special offer readers can also receive a free copy of *Permaculture in a Nutshell* worth £4.46. This is a great little book, by Patrick, that explains the principles of permaculture. Simply quote “Kitchen Garden Free Book Offer” on the order form to receive the book.



Does the garden supply all her fruit and vegetable needs? Not at the moment, but she expects a new garden at her holiday home in Wales to provide the answer. “Part of the plan there is to work out how to get the most productivity from it, organise according to crops and the amount we need. Perennials are easy to work with, and reliable, so I’m hopeful that I’ll be able to work that out.” For now, Anni’s garden produces a little of lots, rather than the gardener’s curse of lots of one thing at once. Last autumn, in one picking, she gathered rocket, three-cornered leeks, red Russian Kale, variegated Daubenton’s kale, perennial leek, and roots. Add self-seeding wild rocket, landcress and lamb’s lettuce and winter is not the barren time that many vegetable growers find it to be. “There’s something all the time,” she says. Anni’s shared her experiences by writing *Edible Perennial Gardening*, published this month, and is continuing to fill readers in on further experiments on her blog, AnnisVeggies.wordpress.com “It quite shocked me that it worked at all,” she says, “but I’ve found perennials so easy. More people should grow them – you could start with a square foot, a square metre – they’re ideal for this day and age.” ■

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These microplants are ready to be subdivided.

Potatoes: the prequel

Gaby Bartai meets the scientists whose work ensures that our potato crops have the best possible start.

Scotland is renowned for the quality of its seed potatoes. There's a well-hidden upside to its cold winters and cool summers; aphid numbers are lower than in the rest of the UK, which limits the spread of aphid-borne virus diseases. What is less well known is that the story doesn't start with

the planting of a seed crop in a potato field. Even with stringent crop inspections, multiplying up the tubers year on year could not ensure the high health standards that

Scottish potatoes have become known for. There's a prequel to this story.

Historically, seed potatoes were indeed produced by repeatedly replanting the tubers and virus-testing the resulting

crops, but this left potato stocks vulnerable to tuber-borne diseases. In 1970 Scotland started using stem cuttings to produce the initial stock, and in 1981 micropropagation was introduced. Although potato plants produce seeds, they don't come true to type from seed, which is why all potato production is clonal, either by replanting the tubers or by propagating the sprouts. The downside to clonal production in the field is that it's subject to disease pressures, so to ensure that the starting material is pathogen-free, all Scottish seed potatoes derive from 'nuclear stock' produced by SASA – Science and Advice for Scottish Agriculture, a division of the Scottish Government based at a laboratory, glasshouse and farm facility on the outskirts of Edinburgh.

The growth room is maintained at the optimum heat and light levels for the microplants to develop.



Picture: SASA © Crown Copyright.



The sprouts are dissected into individual buds.



The nodal segments are rooted in petri dishes.



Each nodal segment develops into a new plant.

IN VITRO ORIGINS

The SASA only gets involved at the point at which someone has a commercial interest in growing a variety; they are not involved in breeding, and don't go out looking for promising new varieties. "We don't say, I fancy getting that one in, we'll put it through the testing," says Nuclear Stock manager Sandra Goodfellow. Growers who want to produce a seed crop need to apply to SASA for pathogen-tested initial material. This can originate from its nuclear stock collection, which is an in vitro collection of microplants, or from tubers or microplants submitted by the applicant.

SASA's potato facilities are split into two sections; in the initiation unit, plant material is tested for pathogens, while in the maintenance unit, material that has been given a clean bill of health is multiplied up. This ensures that the health of the nuclear stock is never compromised. The first step is for new material to be tested for a range of viruses and other diseases, some of which I'd never heard of, because they don't exist in this country and SASA is working to keep it that way.

Before I was allowed into the maintenance unit, I had to don a white lab coat, cover my shoes with clingfilm and confirm that I hadn't been in a potato field or shed in recent days. The laboratories have high-powered air conditioning, the windows are never opened, and all the in vitro work is done within sterile

cabinets using aseptic procedures.

To produce microplants, tubers are incubated in the dark to make them produce sprouts. These are sterilised to get rid of any fungi or bacteria, and then the buds on the sprouts are cut out. If you look at the buds on potato sprouts closely, you can see that they've already got the beginnings of a root and a shoot; each one is the making of a new plant. The buds are put into vials filled with a solution containing agar, sucrose and nutrients, and these are put into the 'growth room', which has a temperature of 20°C (68°F) and is lit for 16 hours a day. The buds grow into microplants, which look like regular seedlings; after four to six weeks, they're subdivided into nodal segments and each piece is transferred into a separate vial to grow on.

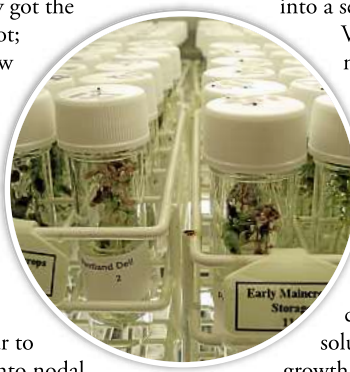
This process continues until enough microplants have been produced.

If SASA is growing a variety on for further testing, the scientists will then root the nodal segments in petri dishes, then plant them into peat pots in the glasshouse.

Later, they will be transferred to larger pots and grown on to produce tubers. However, if the

variety is destined for seed crop production, SASA now hands the multiplication process over to a commercial 'tissue culture' unit. The quantity of material despatched by SASA is tiny – only a few vials per variety – but five years down the line, that will have been multiplied into a seed crop big enough to sell.

Varieties which pass through the maintenance unit are added to SASA's nuclear stock collection, which consists of around 700 varieties. These are stored as microplants in incubators, which look to the untrained eye like giant fridges, though the temperature is maintained at 14°C (57°F). A substance called mannitol is added to the solution in the vials; this acts as a growth retardant, so the microplants can be stored for up to a year before they need to be subdivided. In case of mishap, there are at least two vials of each variety. Every second year, plants are grown on and planted in the field, so they can be checked for any genetic variation that might have occurred. ➤



INSET: The addition of mannitol to the vials slows the growth of the microplants in storage.



Rooted nodal segments are planted into peat pots under mist in the greenhouse.



Some of the varieties in SASA's nuclear stock collection have been stored in vitro since 1981.

GET GROWING

“We’ve got a range of varieties, from the very new to the very old,” says Sandra. I spotted heritage varieties like ‘Kepplestone Kidney’ and ‘Lumpers’ alongside popular standards like ‘Cara’. There were also many names I didn’t recognise, because they’re varieties grown exclusively by commercial growers. Some varieties are stored in the collection on behalf of the companies which own them. Others are maintained as a genetic resource.

CLASS SYSTEM

The next link in the production chain is one of the approved tissue culture units, of which there are seven in Scotland. SASA supplies very little nuclear stock south of the border. Different legislation applies in England and Wales, where much of the seed potato production is at the lower ‘certified’ grade.

The tissue culture units multiply up the microplants and grow them on in a pathogen-free environment, under cover, to produce minitubers. They supply the minitubers to approved seed potato growers, who multiply them up in the field over three or four seasons until they have enough to sell.

Under the Seed Potato Classification Scheme, seed crops are classified as ‘pre-basic’, ‘basic’ and ‘certified’. Counter-intuitively, pre-basic is the highest class, and certified the lowest. Pre-basic seed is rarely available to growers or gardeners; it is what seed potato growers plant to produce basic seed for sale. Basic seed is divided into three sub-classes, each subject to marginally less stringent disease ‘tolerances’ – the percentage of a crop that can be affected before it fails to make the grade. There is a limit to how many generations can be grown at each class, meaning that after a maximum of 10 years, growers have to buy in new minitubers and start again.



Picture: SASA © Crown Copyright.

An entire field of plots is planted up so that new potato inspectors can be trained.

Certified seed is not produced in Scotland, to keep health standards high; if a crop fails to meet the minimum conditions for basic seed, it is rejected. Each crop is subject to at least two official inspections during the growing season, and the tubers are inspected after harvesting – and that’s where SASA comes back into the story.

ROGUES GALLERY

It had never occurred to me that you could become a potato inspector without a background in botany, but because the job only lasts for four or five weeks, SASA hires around 80 temporary inspectors each summer to assist its permanent staff. “You get new people coming in from all walks of life. I remember speaking to

one guy who was a computer scientist,” says variety testing manager Heather Campbell.

“It’s advertised on the Scottish government website, and applicants get all the training before they start. The initial training course is a week and a half, so they’re learning the top 30 varieties that are grown in Scotland, how to identify them, differences between them, and then they learn how to spot other varieties within them – ‘rogues’ – or diseased plants.” Returning inspectors get four days of refresher training, since each season brings new varieties.

A patchwork of training plots is planted up to demonstrate everything the inspectors need to be able to identify: all the varieties they might encounter, diseases, pest problems, pesticide



SASA potato inspectors learn how to identify 30 different varieties and all the problems that might beset them. Picture: SASA © Crown Copyright.



Picture: SASA © Crown Copyright.

damage and off-types. “There’s plots specifically for virus, so they can see the virus on different varieties. There’s plots with undesirable variations, so you could have your healthy plot of ‘Maris Piper’, and then there’s maybe a bolter, or one that’s got blistered leaves.” Many of the disordered plants are sent in by veteran inspectors, who are briefed to dig up anything useful that they spot on the job.

“It’s amazing how quickly you start picking it up,” says Heather. “At the start, I remember that computer scientist saying, ‘They all look green.’ And I said, ‘There’s different colours of green.’ But unless you do it, you’re not going to know that.” At the end of the course there’s an exam, after which successful inspectors are assigned to an area office and sent out on the field. “So you could apply next year, and become a potato inspector.” I have to admit I’m intrigued – if only because I never thought it was something an arts graduate could aspire to.

VARIETY PERFORMANCE

SASA is also responsible for National List testing, the statutory trials that new potato varieties have to undergo before they can be marketed. When I visited in December, Heather was getting new applications in from breeders following successful crop trials in 2013, and batches of tubers were queuing up in the lab. On average, they get 11 new varieties in each year.

National List trials take place over two seasons, so a decision on these latest varieties will not be made until the summer of 2016 – and this is only the final phase. Varieties only reach this point after extensive breeders’ trials. I saw varieties with codes ‘05’ and ‘06’, denoting the year when the cross between the parent plants was made. It generally takes several more years before varieties added to the National List make it into gardening catalogues. Some, of course, we’ll never see, since they will be grown exclusively by the companies which bred them, or are processing varieties that you’ll only ever encounter in a crisp packet.

National List trials come in two parts: Distinctness, Uniformity and Stability (DUS)



Sap from new plant material is tested by a process called ELISA, which uses antibodies to detect viruses.



Other virus tests use ‘indicator’ plants, which are sprayed with sap from the variety being tested to see if they develop symptoms.

Picture: SASA © Crown Copyright.

and Value for Cultivation and Use (VCU). The DUS tests ensure that a new variety is distinct from all existing varieties, that all plants of the variety have uniform characteristics, and that it remains stable after repeated propagation.

The VCU tests focus on resistance to the diseases and defects of most importance in UK potato production: blight, scab, blackleg, propensity to bruising and splitting, dry rot, potato viruses and potato cyst nematode. Sadly, flavour is not among the criteria. The trials include what is known as quality or consumer testing, but while this does assess yield, and notes what proportion of the tubers have slug damage – two factors of obvious importance ➤

HERITAGE RESCUE

Micropropagation can also be used to clean up a virus-ridden heritage variety. The sprout buds are put into a solution which slows down the multiplication of viruses and put through a process of heat therapy, in which the temperature is repeatedly raised to 40°C (104°F) and then lowered again. The heat kills off any viruses, while the cooling phase of the cycle allows a recovery period and avoids killing off the plant.

SOURCING SCOTTISH POTATOES

Most of the major UK seed companies source at least some of their seed potatoes from Scotland. To be certain of getting Scottish stock, you can buy from one of the Scottish seed growers which sell direct to gardeners.

- JBA Seed Potatoes: www.jbaseedpotatoes.co.uk
- Skea Organics: www.skea.eu



The reference collection on show: Iain Barbour of JBA Seed Potatoes laid out a world record-breaking display of 667 varieties at Gardening Scotland 2013, in conjunction with SASA.

- For more on potato breeding see [Fight The Blight](#) starting on page 68.



to gardeners – the cooking test looks only for off flavours or bitterness, not for good flavour as such. “We will sometimes put comments of our own, but that doesn’t come into the decision-making,” says Heather.

The UK National List only includes commercial cultivars; heritage varieties are exempted from the regulations and can be sold on a small scale without being put through all the tests. In recent years, a Conservation National List has been established, but at the moment listing older varieties is optional.

POTATOES FOR POSTERITY

There are in fact two potato collections at SASA. As well as the nuclear stock collection, there’s also the reference collection, which is maintained as tubers. This contains just over 1000 varieties, making it the largest in Europe. Every variety in this collection is planted every single year, in fields situated at a safe distance from the disease-ridden training plots and from any commercial potato crops.

Gardeners are taught that they must not simply replant saved tubers from their potato crop, because the stock will degenerate, so I was surprised to be told that this is precisely what happens with SASA’s reference collection. I had assumed that material from each crop would be micropropagated, but no; they simply save 20 to 30 tubers and replant those the following spring. What makes this possible, of course, is that each crop is tested for viruses and other diseases; if

any problem is detected, a request is put in to the *in vitro* collection, and new, healthy material of that variety is started off. If, however, there are no disease problems, the tubers can safely be replanted year after year. Between seasons, they are cold-stored in a vast carousel system.

The reference collection encompasses both heritage and modern varieties, and one of its functions is as a genetic resource for future breeding. SASA scientists recently tested many of the older varieties and found, to their surprise, that several from the 1960s had good resistance to current strains of foliage blight, so those may well be used as breeding lines. There is also the prospect of future breeding for flavour, using well-flavoured older cultivars to create new varieties combining good flavour with desirable modern characteristics like disease-resistance and high yield.

Alongside the serious science, SASA is happy to receive requests from gardeners who are looking for a heritage variety that is not commercially available. A recent request came from a woman who wanted the variety ‘Katie Glover’ because that was her granddaughter’s name. Although many of their varieties are very rare, the SASA scientists don’t actually need the tubers they harvest other than for replanting the following year, so they normally have some to spare. “People contact us and say, there was this variety my granny used to have, and I can’t find it anywhere,” says Heather. “And we’ll usually have it in our collection, and we’ll be able to provide some material, so they can grow it on.” ■

ABOVE: The carousel’s electronic filing system allows the scientists to summon the shelf containing the variety they require.



The huge carousel system houses over 1000 varieties of tubers, some of familiar varieties others only grown by commercial producers.

Find out more:

- SASA: www.sasa.gov.uk
- British Potato Variety Database: www.varieties.potato.org.uk
- European Cultivated Potato Database: www.europotato.org

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Anne's Top 10 winter brassicas



April and May is the time to sow these essential winter greens. Gardening writer and broadcaster **Anne Swithinbank** reveals her favourite varieties



Brassicas (plants in the cabbage family) hardy enough to stand over winter are vital to self sufficiency and give us a variety of harvests from autumn to spring. They need generous spacings and it pays to plan carefully what and how many to grow. You can sow direct into a nursery bed and transplant to their permanent positions later. Alternatively, sow into a pot and transplant seedlings individually to pots or modules to grow on and plant out. Plant firmly in good, neutral or slightly alkaline soil and protect from caterpillars.



1 KALE 'PENTLAND BRIG'

This delicious kale with soft, slightly curly leaves has taken a back seat to showier types, yet in terms of yield outperforms most others. Expect a harvest of main leaves from autumn and further pickings of tender sideshoots bearing slender, broccoli-type flower heads in early spring. D.T. Brown 0845 371 0532 www.dtbrownseeds.co.uk

2 CABBAGE 'JANUARY KING'

This is the most beautiful of cabbages with blue-green leaves that colour well to a rosy heart and veining as the weather turns colder. Leaves are slightly blistered like a savoy and both flavour and texture are good. Plants grow quite wide, so space them a good 50cm (20in) apart. Kings Seeds 01376 570000 www.kingsseeds.com



3 KALE 'NERO DI TOSCANA'

Black Tuscan kale makes strong plants with long, narrow dark crinkled leaves. This looks handsome on the plot and also makes good eating, whether shredded into soups or lightly boiled or steamed as a side veg. There is never anything left on plants when we grow them. Tuckers Seeds 01364 652233 www.tuckers-seeds.com

4 CAULIFLOWER 'WALCHEREN WINTER 3 (ARMADO APRIL)'

Forgive the unwieldy name because this is the only cauliflower variety I can say I've grown really well, with all plants producing large heads of superb quality and flavour. Stands well through the hardest of winters to produce impressive white curds. Mr.Fothergills 0845 371 0518 www.mr-fothergills.co.uk



5 BRUSSELS SPROUT 'WELLINGTON'

This was my dad's favourite sprout because it always delivered good crops when he wanted them around Christmas time. In fact, decent pickings can be had for a long period between November and February. Plants reach 60cm (24in) high, which is tall enough for my windy plot. Sarah Raven seeds 0845 092 0283 www.sarahraven.com





6 BROCCOLI 'EARLY WHITE SPROUTING'

I like to serve up a mix of different brassicas and it's fun to add in a few white, cauliflower-like broccoli spears. The skill lies in knowing which order to throw them in to boil so they all turn out al dente. Expect a good number of tasty spears appearing from March onwards. Chiltern Seeds 01491 824675

7 BROCCOLI 'CLARET'

This F1 variety waits until March or April before producing a significant crop of large central heads followed by generous side shoots. Probably the best and most productive sprouting broccoli I've tried. Spears are flavoursome and produced over a four to six week period. Marshalls 0844 557 6700 www.marshalls-seeds.co.uk



8 SAVOY CABBAGE 'ALASKA'

There are few finer sights in the garden than a row of savoy cabbages rimmed with frost. This variety stands well during cold weather and is a compact grower. There's a lot of cabbage in a savoy heart, so growing a smaller variety at close spacings is ideal to eke out the harvest during winter months. Marshalls (as above)



9 CURLY KALE 'REFLEX'

A reliable, rich green curly kale is a good standby as these hardy greens keep going all winter. I'll take a few leaves in autumn, maybe shred a few into soups during midwinter and then wait for a burst of tender new leaves in spring. Thompson and Morgan 0844 573 1818 www.thompson-morgan.com



10 FLOWER SPROUT 'PETIT POSY'



Also known as bru-sprout, this kale/Brussels sprout cross is a novelty I'm trying for the first time this season. Hardy and happy to stand all winter, the 'sprouts' are said to be loose, frilly and taste like spring greens. At least I won't have to worry about them 'blowing' because they already have. Suttons 0844 922 0606 www.suttons.co.uk

Expert's choice

I asked Lorraine Colebrook, supervisor of the lovely walled kitchen garden at Knightshayes Court in Devon (National Trust), to name her favourite winter hardy brassica.

"Kale red Russian curled is very attractive, with serrated edged leaves. You can harvest leaves as and when but we start picking to supply the restaurant in early March."

Lorraine went on to tell me that the plants were sown in August last year, transplanted to 9cm (3½in) pots and then set out in October at generous 75-90cm (30-35in) spacings to give good-sized plants 1m high when in full leaf. A March sowing is also made to supply leaves mainly in the autumn.

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YOUR FREE SEEDS

This month we bring you two free packets of seeds: carrot 'Nantes 5' and lettuce 'Little Gem', both superb varieties for flavour and performance. Here are some top tips to help you get the best from your sowings

Carrot 'Nantes 5' is a modern selection of an old tried and trusted variety, 'Early Nantes' and shares many of its attributes including its earliness and wonderful flavour. 'Nantes 5' is superb when harvested as mature or as baby roots and can be grown equally well in pots or soil.

Carrots germinate more successfully in warm soil so delay sowing until late March/April if the soil is cold or wet. Germination can be further improved by trying the following:

- Water the base of the drill prior to sowing and cover with dry soil. This acts as a 'dry mulch', trapping moisture around the seeds, slowing germination and reducing water loss.
- Instead of covering the seeds with soil, cover lightly with sieved seed compost, which is less

liable to 'capping' (forming a hard layer). This allows the seedlings to push through and into the light more easily – being darker it also absorbs more heat to help warm the germinating seeds. However, it does dry out much more quickly than soil, so check watering every day during dry spells.

- Cover early sowings with cloches. These trap heat, so warming the soil and young plants, but have the added benefit of protecting your sowings from cats, birds and other pests until the plants are established.

BEATING CARROT FLY

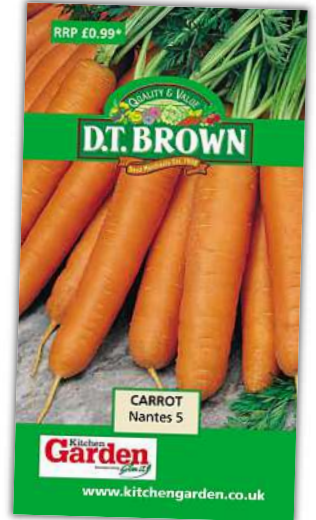
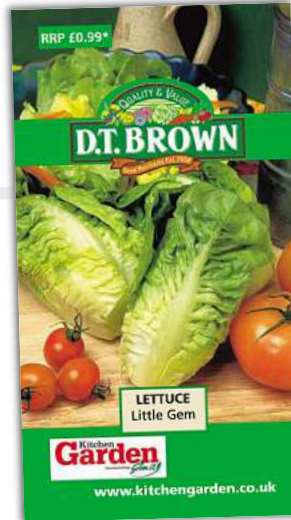
Cover with fleece or crop-protection netting. This performs the same purpose as cloches above, but can be left in place for the life of the crop to protect against carrot fly – one of the most damaging carrot pests.

Carrot flies are most active in May and June when they emerge from pupae in the soil. If you delay sowing until then, your roots will have yet to form and the flies will go hungry. The second generation in August/September will then be much smaller.

Carrot fly will also attack carrot relatives such as parsley, parsnips and also celery. It will attack weeds within the carrot family, too, such as cow parsley, which can act as hosts, so any nearby weeds should be removed if possible.

The female carrot fly finds carrots and other host plants by smell, therefore planting pungent crops such as garlic and onions or colourful marigolds alongside or among the rows can help to confuse the pest.

Sow thinly to avoid the need for lots of thinning out; the damage caused while removing unwanted plants releases that carrot smell that attracts the flies. If you do have to thin, do it in the early morning or evening before the flies are active and dispose of the seedlings well away from the rows. ➤



Growing tips

- Weed the rows regularly to prevent competition for light and water and remove any weeds while small to minimise root disturbance for the carrots. Maintain even watering during dry spells to prevent the roots splitting from a sudden influx of water.

- Slugs can be a problem on wet or heavy soils. Animal-friendly slug pellets can help if lightly scattered over the soil regularly, but the little black keeled slugs that cause much of the damage live underground.

Consider watering with a nematode-based slug killer, to reach them in the soil.

- Watch for greenfly, which occasionally feed on the young foliage at the top of the root. The first sign is often yellowing and distortion of the leaves.

Spray as necessary.

- Sow every three weeks or so from March to July for a succession of roots.

Harvesting tips

- Water rows well the day before harvesting if the soil is dry to aid removal of the roots. They should slide out of the damp soil quite easily.

- Take the largest roots first, trying to disturb neighbouring carrots as little as possible. The rest can be allowed to grow on.



Sow thinly to avoid having to thin.





Cos lettuce 'Little Gem' is one of the nation's most popular varieties for its small heads of crunchy, tasty leaves and lack of any hard internal core. Heads can simply be rinsed and sliced as part of a green salad leaving no waste at all. This is an old variety, tried and trusted, and often found in supermarkets where it ranks alongside iceberg types for popularity although it has considerably more flavour.

SOWING TIPS

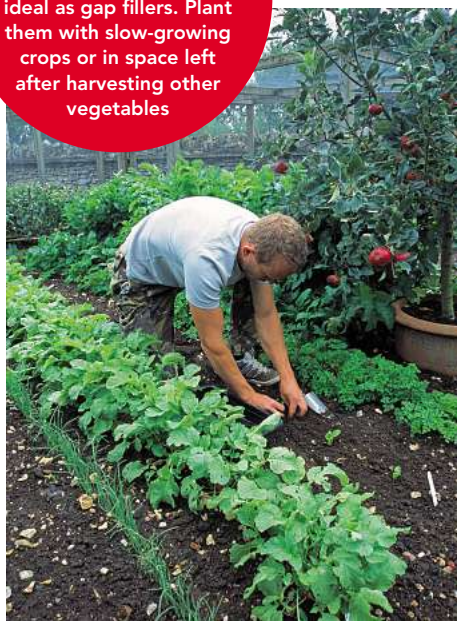
This lettuce is ideal for producing mature heads or for harvesting a salad leaf. For mature heads sow thinly in short rows outdoors, protecting early sowings with cloches. Sow every two or three weeks from March to August for a successive cropping.

Alternatively sow in cell trays, one seed per small cell in a frost-free greenhouse or polytunnel and plant 15cm (6in) apart out after hardening off (acclimatising to outdoor conditions). This gives plants some protection from pests such as slugs and birds before planting. After planting water in well and protect with a scattering of animal-friendly pellets, barriers or traps to eliminate slugs.

If growing as a salad leaf your 'Little Gem' seeds can simply be

TOP TIP

Fast-growing lettuces are ideal as gap fillers. Plant them with slow-growing crops or in space left after harvesting other vegetables



Protect early sowings of lettuce with cloches or fleece.

scattered lightly over the surface of some compost in a deep tray, raised bed or sown more thickly in rows as above. Once the seedlings have developed a few big leaves harvesting can begin. Pick one leaf from each plant as required taking care not to damage the growing tip. Plants can be cropped several times in this way. Feed occasionally with a high-nitrogen liquid fertiliser such as Miracle-Gro to encourage fresh, succulent growth.

While it is possible to sow until the end of August, avoid sowing in hot weather since high temperatures cause lettuces to become dormant and germination will be poor. Those plants that do germinate may bolt (run to seed) quickly under hot conditions.

Lettuce is one of the few vegetable seeds that we commonly grow to be affected by light. When covering yours in trays and pots try covering with a fine dusting of vermiculite or perlite. This allows light through, but helps

retain moisture around the seed, improving germination. Outside, however, seeds should be covered with 1cm (½in) of soil to maintain moisture levels.

GROWING ON

Maintain weeding and watering and protect plants from birds in the early stages using cloches or netting. Harvest regularly, especially in summer when plants will run to seed quite rapidly. ■

Have you tried...

Lettuce is usually thought of as a salad or sandwich filling, but have you tried making lettuce soup? This is a tasty and nutritious way to use up a glut and very simple. Alternatively lettuce can be lightly braised with onions and peas or chives, bay and parsley.

Lettuce soup

Serves 4

- 1lb (450g) lettuce
- 1 medium onion
- ½lb (225g) potatoes
- 1 garlic glove
- ½oz (15g) butter
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 clove
- Salt and pepper
- 1pt (560ml) chicken or vegetable stock

1. Shred or chop the lettuce, peel and slice the onion and peel the potatoes. Cook these in the butter for 10 minutes with the crushed garlic clove on a very low heat, stirring gently. Then add the stock, shredded lettuce, salt, a few twists of black pepper and bay leaf. Simmer gently until the lettuce is tender – about 20 minutes. Blitz in a blender when cooled a little.
2. Reheat to serve and sprinkle with some chopped chives, croutons or a swirl of cream.



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A strange fascination

Gardening writer and broadcaster **Toby Buckland** loves to grow pumpkins and squashes. Follow him as he makes preparations for a bumper harvest this autumn



Toby's truckload of 'Connecticut Field' 'carving' pumpkins.

This year I've got big plans for my pumpkins. I've earmarked a tennis court-sized plot alongside my nursery and the aim is to grow 50 different varieties for a Pumpkin-fest in the autumn. I've always been fascinated by the cucurbit clan of vegetables. The way they grow from a penny-sized seed into giant vines bearing fruit in every colour and shape from gold and knobbly Faberge eggs to pleated red 'beanbags' favoured by pantomime fairy godmothers is a miracle of nature.

Last year I grew a truckful of the orange carver 'Connecticut Field' which is a really good variety for lanterns but this summer I'm concentrating on more tasty types including sweet-fleshed acorns like the white 'Thelma Saunders Sweet Potato' to Japanese kabochas like 'Cha Cha' that have a lovely nutty flavour and flaky flesh.

Basically, my fabulous 50 is made up of winter squash – a group of pumpkins, gourds and hybrids between that have skins that ripen into hard rinds meaning they keep for winter (summer squash gherkins and cucumbers don't).

RECYCLED WEED CONTROL

The ground I've chosen is sheltered and in good heart and a spit of soil (a good spade's depth) deep which is important for pumpkins and squash as they need feed and a lot of soil around their roots, though the patch is a little weedy. You might read that pumpkins are good crops to grow on new plots as the giant umbrella-like leaves suppress weeds. Sadly, I've never found this to be true – in fact nettles and couch grass seem to thrive in their cool shade and, worse, hole-up among the stems safe out of weeding's way.

To put paid to this problem, I'm putting down a mulch of cardboard boxes before planting. Although relatively thin and soft, when

soggy it makes a surprisingly good weed barrier. Last year when I trialled the technique it worked a treat and the pumpkins really enjoyed having extra moisture and warmth locked around their roots and I liked the fact that between sowing and harvest I didn't have to weed.

There are only two downsides to using card as a mulch – the first is finding a decent supply as when opened up and laid flat on the soil a car boot full of boxes barely goes anywhere. So it's important to start collecting from shops and markets well before it's time to plant.

The other challenge is keeping the boxes in place. After broadcasting a handful-per-square-metre of fish, blood and bone over the soil, I lay the card out and temporarily pin it down with bricks while I barrow back and forth with loads of green-waste compost to mulch over the top. Green waste spread 5-8cm (2-3in) thick does an excellent job of disguising the card and when delivered in bulk is economical to buy. I find it particularly good for pumpkins as the dark colour traps heat from the sun and its high lime content sweetens my acid soil.

SOWING MADE SIMPLE

I used to sow all my squash in pots in the greenhouse, hardening them off once they'd sprouted before planting them out after the frosts. It's still a good method for more tender types like cucumbers and bottle gourds or for growing potential prizewinning pumpkins, but for the rest I sow straight into the soil.

Winter squash are often mollycoddled when actually the seeds are pretty irrepressible. The spent fruit of a pumpkin, for example, if left to rot on the compost heap or inside a wormery will often survive and be

The pumpkin carving competition revealed some real talent!



SQUASH TYPES

Another difference between summer and winter squash is that the summer types are picked regularly to encourage more fruit. That said, many, including courgettes and the flying saucer-shaped pattypan, can be left to swell and harden although they lose some of their delicacy.

- **ACORN SQUASH** – so-called as they look like super-sized acorns inside their cups. A favourite in the US. Mostly green with moist, sweet flesh.
- **CHEESE PUMPKINS** – pale pleated skins give them the look of cheese wheels with firm good-for-roasting flesh. My favourite is the similar and red 'Rouge vif d'etampes'.
- **BUTTERNUTS** – their big advantage is that they don't have large stringy cavities so are easy to prepare. They do well in raised beds where drainage is guaranteed. Good nutty taste but I prefer the less ubiquitous banana squash.
- **SPAGHETTI** – my favourite squash, less about taste and all about the texture. When cooked the flesh turns into noodle-like strings that when roasted soak up the flavour of bacon and tomatoes.
- **BUTTERCUP SQUASH** – small fruits with thick walls and lots of creamy yellow flesh. Similar in taste to the knobble-topped Turk's turban. Very mild floury flavour that soaks up other spices.
- **SWEET DUMPLING SQUASH** – mini-me pumpkins growing just 12cm (5in) across. Sweet but dry flesh.
- **DELICATA** – looks a little like ornamental gourds with striped and speckled skins. They don't keep that well as the skins are thin but they're as tasty as sweet potatoes especially with lots of butter.



A butternut squash nearing maturity.

- **HUBBARD** – thick skins, and hefty size. They sweeten over time so best for storing. The yellow flesh is lovely roasted.
- **KABOCHA** – nutty flavour and holds its shape when cooked so good for adding body to veggie curries. From Japan and mostly green with a sweet potato taste.
- **SERPENTINE SQUASH** – I like these large and long snake-like gourds. 'Tromba di Albenga' is a particular favourite. Sliced and fried or oiled and grilled on the barbecue, they taste like a pattypan.
- **PATTYPAN** – doesn't scramble on long vines like the above but has really beautiful flying saucer-shaped fruit with a nutty flavour.

THE INEDIBLES

- **ORNAMENTAL GOURDS** – mixtures of bottle, pear and swan-necked fruit in freckled whites and greens. Not edible but great autumnal decorations (widely available).

- **SQUIRTING CUCUMBERS** – a real favourite with my kids – touch the ripened fruit and the pods propel themselves across the garden on a jet of seeds and water. Not for the pot or the faint-hearted. (Plant World Seeds, Chiltern Seeds)

Ornamental gourds – great for winter decorations.



only too happy to come up among the carrots when the compost is spread.

I sow in May (early May if it's warm and late if it's not) first punching through the mulch and card to make a shallow slit in the soil below and then drop two seeds (one for luck) into the gap. I water them in (about half a litre) and then brush the green-compost over the top to make sure they're covered.

Spaced every 1.2m (4ft) across the area, the pumpkins are up within a fortnight and quickly spread to form a mat of green leaves that covers the whole area. Last year I sowed a second batch of seeds in late June (and kept my fingers crossed for an Indian summer) when it was dry so used an overhead sprinkler to give them a boost, but apart from that didn't have to bother.

One thing about using cardboard mulch is that once the crops are gathered in and the tangle of stems cleared to the compost, there are always lengths of packing tape to rake up and bin. This is a small price to pay, as the soil freshly worked by worms (worms love eating damp cardboard) is left in really good condition – perfect for a September sowing of phacelia or a ryegrass green manure.

My crop of pumpkins and gourds looked and went down a treat – and here's hoping that this autumn I have even more. ■



Toby's Pumpkin-fest at his nursery at Powderham Castle in Devon proved to be a success last year.

TOBY'S FAVOURITES

■ **'TURK'S TURBAN'** (Plant World Seeds, T&M, Plants of Distinction, Seeds of Italy)

■ **'UCHIKI KURI'** (Organic Gardening catalogue, D T Brown, Mr Fothergill's, Kings, Moreveg, Chiltern Seeds)

■ **BUTTERNUT SQUASH** (Widely available)

■ **SPAGHETTI SQUASH** (Seeds of Italy, Moreveg, Plant World Seeds)

■ **'SERPENTE DI SICILIA'** (Seeds of Italy)

■ **'TROMBA DI ALBENGA'** (Seeds of Italy)

■ **'ZUCCA OF NAPOLI'** – like a butternut with turmeric-yellow flesh (Seeds of Italy)

■ **'CROWN PRINCE'** (Suttons, Seeds of Distinction, Dobies, T&M, Moreveg)

■ **'HONEY BEAR'** (Unwins, Moreveg, Kings, Plant World Seeds)

■ **'PINK BANANA'** (Unwins, Moreveg)

■ **'BLUE KURI'** (Kings Seeds)

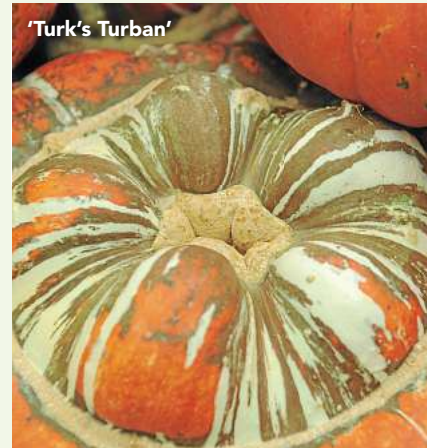
■ **'CONNELL'S BUSH DELICATA'** (Moreveg, Kings Seeds, Plant World Seeds)

■ **'GOLDEN HUBBARD'** (Kings, T&M, Organic Gardening Catalogue)

■ **'ROUGE VIF D'ETAMPES'** (Mr Fothergill's)

■ **'THELMA SANDERS SWEET POTATO'** (realseeds.co.uk, Moreveg)

■ **KABOCHA 'CHA CHA'** (Kings Seeds)



See page 104 for full details of seed suppliers.



Toby cuts his favourite squash – the spaghetti squash.

SAVE 50% ON YOUR 2014 SQUASH SEEDS

Been inspired by Toby's feature to grow some squashes this year? Well we have teamed up with leading supplier, Franchi Seeds 1783, to bring you savings of almost 50% on some delicious and novel squash varieties.

OUR OFFER INCLUDES:

■ **SQUASH 'SERPENTE DI SICILIA':**

Climber with white courgette flowers and fruits growing up to 2m in length.

■ **PUMPKIN 'HUBBARD LARGE BLUE':**

Traditionally used to make pumpkin pie in America.

■ **BUTTERNUT SQUASH 'RUGOSA':**

Excellent for mash, butternut soups and ravioli.

■ **SPAGHETTI SQUASH:** In Italy used dressed with pasta sauce and especially loved by children.

These four packs have an RRP of £9.46 plus £2.99 p&p, but can be yours for just £6.25. But that's not all, for you will also receive a sachet of Ariosto Natural Season-all food seasoning from Milan (made from fresh vegetables, herbs and Sicilian salt) plus a sachet of Brand ONE all-purpose seaweed based fertiliser and plant growth stimulator from Valagro of Abruzzo.

HOW TO ORDER

Simply call Franchi Seeds 1783 on 0208 427 5020 and quote code SOITKG1A or go online to www.seedsofitaly.com and type the offer code above into the box when prompted to claim your special discount. Offer ends March 31, 2014.

Starter's orders

Get your vegetables off to a flying start by sowing correctly. **Benedict Vanheems** explains how to get it right

Sowing seeds then watching them germinate is a moment of wonder for any kitchen gardener. The best bit is that the accompanying child-like excitement never diminishes with time. In each and every seed lies the promise of tasty pickings to come. All you have to do is germinate it, nurture it then reap the rewards.

Seeds can be started off under cover or outdoors. Starting seeds off within a greenhouse, polytunnel, cold frame or windowsill enables better management of growing conditions at the vulnerable seedling stage along with an earlier start to the season. This early start is crucial for frost-sensitive fruiting

vegetables such as aubergines, winter squash and tomatoes as it means plants reach the point of harvesting much sooner – no bad thing in the ever-changeable British climate. Sowing under cover tends to see less wasted seed.

Of course, most vegetables have traditionally been sown directly outside where they are to grow or within a seedbed for later transplanting (moving on) to their final growing positions. Sowing outside saves on valuable indoor space and is essential for vegetables such as carrots and parsnips that hate being disturbed. Many quick-growing salads are also best sown directly outside during the peak growing season.

TOP TIP

Mix very fine seed with clean horticultural sand to make it easier to sow thinly.

SOWING INSIDE

Seeds may be sown into seed trays, individual pots or module trays. The size of seeds and the number of plants you require will determine which of these you choose. Leeks, lettuces and other tiny seeds are best sown into seed trays or modules. Fill a tray with compost firmed down with your fingers or a tamper then sow your seeds thinly over the surface. Cover with a shallow layer of compost, usually to around twice the depth of the seed.

Module trays will need just a few seeds sown per cell which, depending on what's being grown, may need thinning after germination to leave either a cluster of two or three seedlings or the strongest seedling only.



Seeds can be sown into module (or cell) trays for later potting on or planting out.



Sow large seeds such as those of cucurbits (eg cucumbers) individually in small pots.

SEED COMPOSTS

Seed compost must be free-draining as seedlings hate to sit in wet conditions, which can lead to fungal diseases such as damping off. Compost sold especially for seed sowing is best but for most seeds multipurpose compost sieved to remove any lumps works just as well. You can use garden-made compost; just sieve it first then and add some sharp sand to improve drainage.

Step by step SOWING INTO POTS



STEP 1 Plastic pots make a good alternative to seed trays when only a few plants are required. Fill the pots with compost, firming it into place.



STEP 2 Water to settle then sow the seeds thinly on the surface. Larger seeds are easy to space individually to make pricking out (see below) easier.



STEP 3 Cover with the correct depth of compost. Pop into a propagator or secure a plastic bag over the top to create a microclimate for germination.



On the windowsill or in the greenhouse, a propagator will hasten germination.

Larger seeds like beans, squashes and courgettes can be sown one seed per 8cm (3in) pot. Simply poke the seeds into the compost using your finger and cover back over. Plastic pots work well but you can also recycle old loo roll centres or make your own pots from sheets of newspaper to create temporary pots that can be planted out whole and left to rot down into the soil.

WARM RECEPTION

Most hardy vegetables will germinate once temperatures reach 10-12°C (50-54°F). You can speed germination along by popping your sown tray or pots into a propagator or by simply placing a sheet of glass over the top of the pots or trays to create a warm microclimate. Remove the cover of glass or the propagator lid as the seedlings appear. Cloches and horticultural fleece provide the same warming effect for outdoor-sown seeds.

Temperature-controlled heated propagators set to maintain a minimum temperature of 18-20°C (65-68°F) enable the exacting requirements for seeds of tender crops such as tomatoes, courgettes and peppers to be met. If you haven't got a propagator cover pots with a clear plastic bag (such as a supermarket loose produce bag) secured in place with an elastic band and sit the pots on a warm windowsill indoors.

MOISTURE REQUIREMENTS

It is preferable to wet the compost before sowing to avoid disturbing the seeds once they have been sown – you don't want to wash them out in a gush of water. Alternatively trays and pots can be stood in water until beads of moisture appear at the surface of the compost, indicating the compost is thoroughly moistened.

Seeds and seedlings need very little watering. It's easier to overwater than under water, so



Seed tapes have the seeds spaced at the correct distances for you.

apply it sparingly only when the compost has dried out at the surface. Seedlings will need more water as they grow on, particularly during sunny days when temperatures under cover can quickly soar. Water in the morning so that the compost is nicely warmed by sunset. For best results leave the filled watering can in the greenhouse or polytunnel to warm up to ambient temperature before applying.

SOWING OUTSIDE

Seeds to be sown outside need a well-prepared soil that's been raked to a fine, crumbly texture or 'tilth'. This avoids the seeds being 'swamped' by larger soil particles or bulky clods. Most seeds are sown into drills: grooves made in the soil to the correct depth for the crop being sown. The edge of a hoe is useful for marking out drills; to ensure a straight line draw the hoe into the soil against a string-line held taut between two sticks. Straight lines make it easier to achieve the exact spacings needed ▶



Station-sowing parsnips to avoid gaps later.

Step by step SOW INTO A SEED DRILL



STEP 1 Rake the ground to fine tilth, removing any weeds, large clods of soil or stones. Stretch out a string line to ensure a good, straight row.



STEP 2 Mark out the drill to the correct depth using a hoe. Water along the bottom to wet the base then sow the seeds thinly.



STEP 3 Sow according to instructions for that particular vegetable. Cover the seeds back over by pinching the drill closed. Water along the row.



These chili seedlings are ready for pricking out into module trays or pots.



between subsequent rows of vegetables and will make spotting stray weeds considerably easier.

With your seed drill marked out water along the bottom if dry to speed germination. Sow your seeds as thinly as you are able, according to the instructions for that vegetable, or lay a seed tape with the seeds already spaced out for you. Cover back over with soil and water along the row again using a watering can fitted with a rose. Label the end of the row so you know what you've sown – it's all too easy to forget!

Some seeds such as parsnip may be 'station sown' by positioning two or three seeds at regular intervals rather than in a continuous line. The strongest seedling appearing at each station is left to grow on while the others are removed. This avoids the need for multiple thinnings and conserves precious seed. In a similar way, beans can be sown two to each supporting cane then thinned to leave one plant at each cane.



Step by step PRICKING OUT



STEP 1 Fill new modules with compost, tapping the trays to settle and then water. Now gently lift the seedlings out of the old modules and tease them apart.



STEP 2 Handling by the leaves only, prick out a few seedlings at a time so they don't dry out. Dibber a hole into the compost then tease the roots into the hole.



STEP 3 Try to get the roots right down into the hole before firming back the compost. Once the tray is full water it using a watering can fitted with a fine rose.



ABOVE: Start thinning out seedlings as soon as they are large enough to handle.

PRICKING OUT

Seedlings sown into seed trays need to be 'pricked out' – simply transplanting into module trays or their own pots. Pricking out is best carried out when seedlings are still young, when just their seedling leaves are present.

To prick out, lift clumps of seedlings clear from the seed tray using a dibber or pencil then tease them apart very carefully into individual plants. Handle the seedlings by their leaves, never the delicate stem, and discard any seedlings that are small, damaged or have insufficient roots to support them in their new home.

Make one hole in each pot or module cell of compost. Drop a seedling into each hole, if necessary coaxing the roots down using the dibber or pencil. Cover the roots back over with compost so that just the leaves and the top of the stem are poking proud of the compost surface. Water again to settle the compost around the roots. Within a few days the seedlings will have settled in and will start putting on leaf growth once more.

GROWING ON

Seedlings started off inside but destined for a final outdoor growing position can be planted out once they are of a suitable size and/or when the weather is favourable. Having grown in a cosseted environment growth will be quite soft so plants will need hardening off before they're ready to brave the elements. Do this by leaving plants outside during the day and bringing them in at night, increasing the length of time they are outside over the course of a week. Alternatively place them in a cold frame with the lid left off during the day.

Larger seedlings may need potting on a few times before they can go outside. Do this as soon as their roots fill the compost available to them – delay after this point and you will only hinder

“LARGER SEEDLINGS MAY NEED POTTING ON A FEW TIMES BEFORE THEY CAN GO OUTSIDE”

their smooth progress.

Carefully ease the plantlet out of its pot or cell then place into the next pot size up, feeding in fresh multipurpose compost around the edges of the rootball and firming into place. Finish by watering to settle the compost. When planting out make sure the plants are at the same depth they were at in their pot – too deep and they could rot, while too high and the rootball risks drying out.

THINNING OUT

Unless you've been exceptionally light handed, seeds sown outdoors into drills will need to be thinned to give each plant adequate space to grow on. This is important to avoid overcrowding and can be done all at once or in stages, removing every other seedling after each thinning. Be ruthless – there's little point hanging on to excess seedlings.

With plants successfully thinned, transplanted or planted out you're on the homerun to harvest. Every kitchen gardener knows the joy of finally getting to enjoy the freshest, home-grown produce. And it all begins with those precious seeds. ■

LEFT: Young plants will need hardening off before planting outside into the veg patch.

NEXT MONTH: Benedict explains how to double your yields by intercropping







A tasty tour

Writer Liz Dobbs recommends gardens to visit in the Loire and Berry region of France, with the accent on kitchen gardens

LEFT: Entrance to the enclosed gardens of Château d'Ainay-le-Vieil.

ABOVE: The Medieval fortress and gardens of Ainay-le-Vieil have been in the same family since 1467.

The most famous chateau of the Loire family has the Renaissance vegetable gardens at Villandry and the waterside Chenonceau. Both are wonderful 'must-sees' but these can be visited at almost any time in the growing season because they have the resources to change their veg and bedding displays twice a year. This means an autumn visit might suit keen veg growers better if your own crops need less tending; gardens with a second or succession of planting usually have so much fresh colour into September. But let's not wish the year away yet, I'll start with spring, featuring some less familiar gardens that are also worth visiting.

SPRINGTIME TRIPS

Berry is a region south of the Loire Valley; it is worth a detour to experience these unique gardens. Both owners warned me how hot it could be in summer, so a spring visit when the fruit blossom is out might suit you best.

CHÂTEAU D'AINAY-LE-VEIL

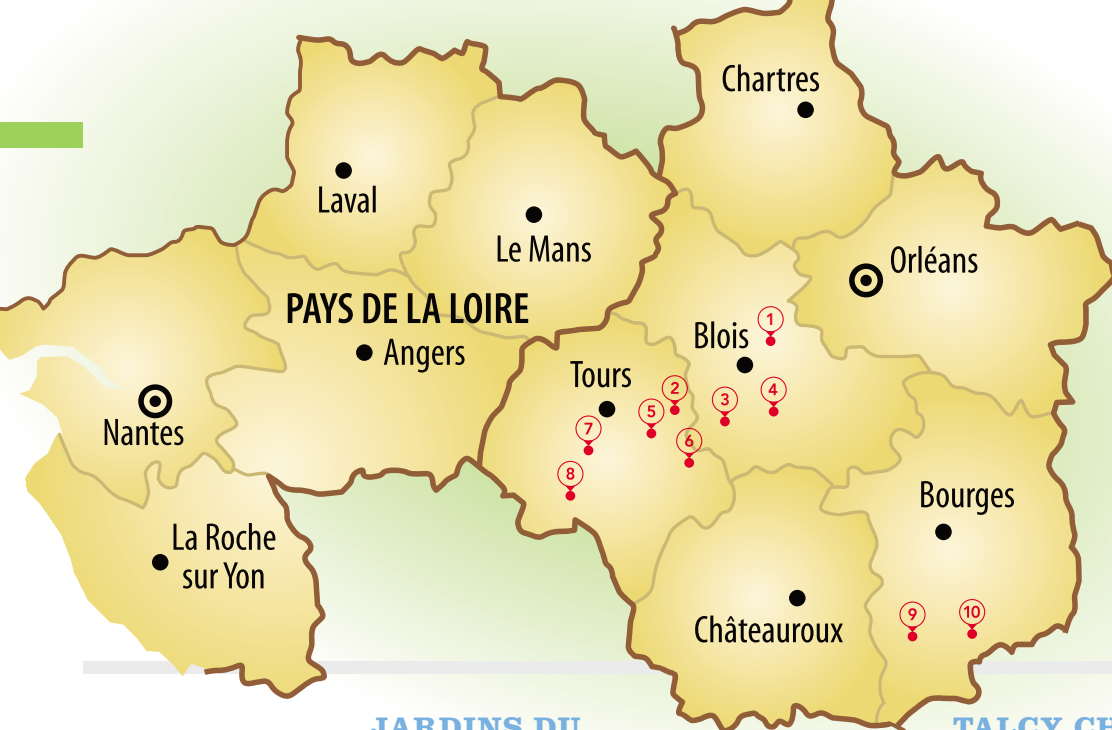
Château d'Ainay-le-Vieil is a medieval fortress that has been owned by the same family since 1467. The adjoining gardens have an ancient architectural structure once used for fruit production. It comprises a line of five walled gardens

linked by an arcade. The 4m (13ft) high walls created a range of different microclimates so fruit production could be staggered. These days you can walk through; each 'room' is themed with a period of French garden history.

The second room is a sculptured orchard paying tribute to La Quintinie, creator of the King's kitchen garden for Louis XIV at Versailles. Marie-Sol de la Tour d'Auvergne, the current family member responsible for the gardens, believes that this contemporary of André Le Nôtre made a contribution to horticulture that is not sufficiently valued today. She explains: "He worked out that the best fruit needs sun and that many leaves could be removed and just one branch given shape could be made productive."

In the next outdoor room is a garden of the Middle Ages with a fresco, and in another, plantings of medicinal herbs and apple trees trained to have cartwheel-like tiers up their trunks.

In such an old garden, it is sobering to think that an additional 'modern' 19th century kitchen garden, planted when much of the estate was transformed into a landscape park, was not restored after a 1984 storm. Instead, attention was focused on restoring the far earlier 16th century water gardens. The site of the kitchen garden is now marked by hornbeam hedging, a plant which thrives in the region. www.chateau.ainaylevieil.free.fr ►



Gardens to visit

1. Talcy Château
2. Château de Valmer
3. Chaumont-sur-Loire
4. Château de Cheverny
5. Château de la Bourdaisiere
6. Château de Chenonceau
7. Château et Jardins de Villandry
8. Château du Rivau
9. The Jardins du Prieuré d'Orsan
10. Château d'Ainay-le-Vieil

JARDINS DU PRIEURÉ D'ORSAN

This garden was designed as a contemporary space by architect Patrice Taravella and Sonia Lesot who were inspired to restore the priory 20 years ago. The plants were selected for symbolic reasons and Patrice's attention to design detail is found not only in the layout but also down to the most humble of gardening objects. The result is a unique place of great tranquility; but for those interested in techniques, head gardener Gilles Guillot's high standard of horticulture matches the design. Patrice is now redesigning some areas; for example, the new raised beds for veg and herbs were finely crafted and beautiful to look at even before they were planted. www.prieuredorsan.com



RIGHT: Part of the new vegetable garden at Jardins du Prieuré d'Orsan. The tiled areas are a simple way to stop the chickens scratching the straw onto the paths.

BELOW: Renovated fruit trees at Jardins du Prieuré d'Orsan with their trunks protected from sun scorch by a thick lime wash.

TALCY CHÂTEAU

State-owned Talcy Château has been restored to give the feel of an 18th century working country estate. There's a 16th century dovecote and an 18th century wine press in good condition. When the six hectare gardens were restored in 1996, it was decided to focus on fruit. Gardener in chief Claude Bichon runs courses in fruit training; they may be old techniques but he believes they are still a good choice for those with small modern gardens so he wants to encourage more people to learn the pruning. To enlist the locals to keep growing local fruit varieties, they encourage people to taste ripe fruit. www.chateau-cheverny.fr

CHÂTEAU DE CHEVERNY

Many of the traditional kitchen gardens will be rather bare in April so for early colour, the new veg and cutting garden at Château de Cheverny scored highly. Within the walled garden is a modern design with short rows of different tulips, perennials, as well as veg and coloured gravels. It would probably look good in summer as well as there are vines with roses between and a pergola to display orchids. Perhaps not enough for the serious veg grower to make a special visit but there is plenty to do for a family day out (Tintin exhibition, boat rides, dog kennels and castle). www.chateau-cheverny.fr



SUMMER VISITS

CHÂTEAU DE VALMER

At Château de Valmer, the restored walled gardens are used for their original purpose of growing edibles. As owner Alix de Saint Venant points out: "The key purpose of a kitchen garden is to have something to eat." The classic French 15th-century layout is retained but once you are among the plants there are novel tastes among the heirloom and local varieties (tasting is encouraged). There are some interesting plant combinations such as ornamental cabbage and white butterfly flowers of gaura around the central pond. Beyond is an orchard with wild flowers, a hen house and a pergola of gourds. In the last 15 years, botanist Alix has conserved 3000 heirloom varieties (1000 are grown each year with the others frozen as seeds) although she now plans to simplify this list. A hands-on gardener, Alix says the alkaline, very dry soil is a challenge for a garden, although a bonus for the family vineyard and its Vouvray AC wines.

There are so many plant treasures, plantaholics will be lost for hours. For others, there are gentle distractions: wine tasting, an ancient Troglodyte Chapel, ramparts walk to take in the views and 16th century landscaping. Check before visiting as it is not open every day.

www.chateaudervalmer.com

CHÂTEAU DE RIVAU

Le Potager de Gargantua is an amazing veg and flower creation in front of the fairy-tale castle. In summer, globe artichokes and nasturtiums add colour, then in September a finale of dahlias, cabbage and winter squash. Rare squash varieties are an interest of the owner Patricia Laigneau, so there is 'White Flat Boer' from South Africa as well as the local sweet Berry pumpkin. As the potager is in a courtyard, deep raised beds filled with soil are used and supplemented with regular home-made liquid feeds made of nettles.

Patricia trained as an artist and has created 14 other gardens at Rivau, inspired by fairy tales, art and literature. This playful approach makes it an excellent place for the family. Events in 2014 include a garden weekend (June 1-2 when the roses are out) and a Pumpkin Festival September 14.

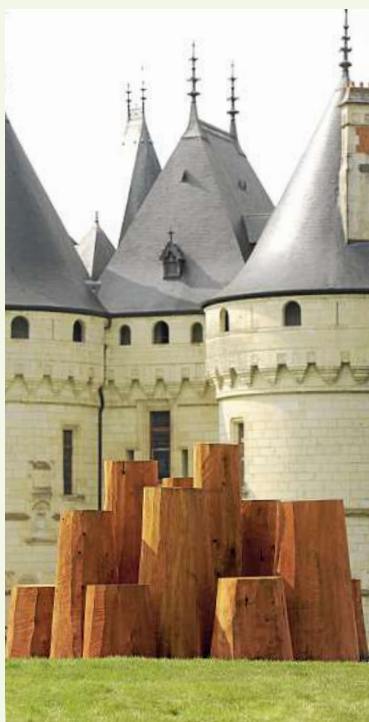
www.loire-castle-rivau.com ►



Picture: Loire tourist board

Chaumont -sur-Loire

The annual International Garden Festival is always worth a visit in summer. I'd advise summer rather than when it first opens in spring; that way the temporary gardens will have settled in and you can make the most of evening and night visits. After 20 years' experience staging this event, the organisers have it running well and it caters for those wanting a family day out and those who want a more serious look at garden art. The theme for 2014 is Garden of the Deadly Sins; no details as we went to press but I'm sure there will be some edibles somewhere, given Adam, Eve and that apple. The historic park and three new Chinese-inspired gardens means you can easily fill a day here. Finally, don't forget to visit the château and take in the view over the Loire. There are lots of ticket options, so research in advance on the website. www.domaine-chaumont.fr



TOP INSET: Owner of Château de Valmer, Alix de Saint Venant, is a biologist, landscape designer and hands-on gardener.

TOP: Château de Valmer is a family-run estate.

LEFT: View from the fruit gardens, over the fish pond (under restoration), towards Talcy Château.

RIGHT: White Boer squash at Château de Rivau. The grey nets are to keep the peacocks off the cabbages.



AUTUMN SHOW

CHÂTEAU DE LA BOURDAISIÈRE

August and September at Château de La Bourdaisière sees the extensive collections of tomatoes and dahlias at their peak. The 19th century walled kitchen garden is on a gentle slope and is laid to grass with beds cut out; this gives it a timeless rustic feel. The walled garden is home to over 600 tomato varieties and there's still room for a mix of other flowers, veg, herbs and an ancient greenhouse. The other side of the wall is Le Dahliacolor, a colourful spectacle of every type of dahlia. Dahlia enthusiasts can walk the rows methodically, notebook in hand (both collections are very well labelled), while others can treat the flower power as a backdrop to the outdoor Tomato Bar, climb the viewing mound or explore the upmarket sheds and seating areas. www.labourdaisiere.com

JARDINS DE VILLANDRY

Pictures of the famous Renaissance Vegetable Garden at the Château et Jardins de Villandry don't prepare you for the scale of it in real life. I actually prefer this perfection on the brink of unruly, so a September visit with the fennel in flower and the begonias starting to spill out suits me. Get a bird's-eye view of the layout first from the rooms of the château and the tower. Since 2009, the veg garden has been run on organic lines and there is an informative booklet in English about the techniques and how they go about planning the veg year – as you can imagine it is quite a production schedule.

The present owner Henri Carvallo has created some new gardens and opened up the greenhouse area to encourage visitors to go further afield so there is plenty more to see if you haven't visited for a while. www.chateauvillandry.com

CHÂTEAU DE CHENONCEAU

The history and architecture of Château de Chenonceau are worth a visit in their own right but the gardens hold their own too. The working kitchen garden supplies armfuls of home-grown cut flowers to the team of florists who create many arrangements for the château. An autumn



A show of well-labelled dahlias is another reason to visit Château de La Bourdaisière.



The restored vegetable garden at Villandry shows a 16th century layout of veg, flowers and fruit in front of the château.

visit could see rows of dahlias, alstromeria, cleome, celosia, asters, ornamental grasses and particularly impressive amaranthus. There's also a medley of different veg as well as working greenhouses. The lives of two historical figures, Diane de Poitiers and Catherine De'Medici, dominate the château and each created her own riverside garden. Head gardener Alain Roger told me he likes to keep up the rivalry between the two women by having contrasting colour themes in each garden every year. The bedding plants are replaced twice a year to ensure a good show for visitors. www.chenonceau.com ■

Travel information

Getting there Ryan Air flies direct to Tours from Stanstead, Manchester and Dublin, so it is possible to have a long weekend in the Loire without too much driving. An alternative would be a four to seven day break coming via Eurostar then hiring a car. For more advice www.visaloire.com

Accommodation

There are many B&Bs both with lovely gardens and good food (it's usual to eat and converse with the owners in the evening): www.lafeuillaie.com is highly recommended in Saint-AY. For art lovers it has a gallery, lovely garden and is well placed for Chaumont. For more garden-orientated guesthouses, such as Le Petit Villandry, visit www.petitvillandry.com



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Win the blight fight

To make growing maincrop spuds more than an annual lottery, it's time to move on by planting the cutting-edge potatoes of tomorrow, says John Walker



A blight-prone potato variety rapidly succumbing to infection. In a few days' time the leaves will be completely rotted, leaving only the infected stalks.

Bidding goodbye to old friends is always tough – tougher still when they're very much alive and kicking. Dipping into my seed and plant catalogues recently, I've said a few final farewells to some of kitchen gardening's most enduring names, some of which have been around for longer than I have; 'King Edward', 'Charlotte' and 'Desiree' among them – all well-known potato varieties. We gardeners have a special relationship with our spuds; other veg varieties come and go with time and trends, but we're unable to let go of our potatoes, which come in all shapes, sizes and colours. Our devotion has helped bring many 'heritage' varieties back from the brink, and each winter the spuds' pull on our gardening psyche has us swarming to 'potato days'. Catalogues devote pages to them and entire books have been penned about them.

But love them as we do, I believe it's time we turned the page and began a whole new chapter in the potato story, one of fond farewells but also of exciting new 'hellos'. The best bit about this fresh chapter is that it's already being written.

ABOVE: Some of the blight-resistant 'Sárpo' varieties, clockwise from top left: elongated tubers of 'Kifli', dark-skinned early maincrop 'Blue Danube', white-skinned early maincrop 'Sárpo Shona'*, and pink-skinned 'Sárpo Una'*, a second early which can be left to mature as a good baker (*unavailable in 2014).

EVOLVING ENEMY

We might love potatoes, but growing them comes with an ever-increasing risk of heartbreak, thanks to a microscopic organism called *Phytophthora infestans*. This seaweed-like, wet summer-loving pathogen causes late blight disease on mostly maincrop potatoes ('earlies' generally escape) and outdoor tomatoes, and it gets cannier all the time; new strains are constantly evolving that can decimate potato varieties which were once 'resistant' to attack. Blight spores take to the air during warm, damp spells of weather (remember the dismal growing seasons prior to 2013?) and can turn leafy potato haulms to mouldering mush within days. Blight spores can also infect tubers – should the plant get a chance to produce any.



In the Sárvári Trust's field trials, potato varieties which have been killed by blight infection show up as blocks of dead, brown stems, while the Sárpos are still green and growing.



The dense, light-excluding haulms of the Sárpo range helps to suppress weeds.

BEATING BLIGHT

There are two ways to avoid being crestfallen by blight, and one of those is a gamble. The first is to start spraying plants, from top to toe, with a copper-based fungicide at the first hint of a blight outbreak, repeating it every week or so. All this does is add a protective coating to the haulms; once a single blight spore breaks through, the disease takes hold and further spraying only slows its progress. Ironically, the copper-based sprays available to gardeners (and organic growers) are highly toxic in the environment (much more so than the chemicals used by potato farmers).

But chemical sprays – in garden or field – use energy and resources, cost money, take time and are not infallible; during 2012's washout summer, farmers, let alone gardeners, were forced to spray their crops every few days.

CUTTING EDGE

The second way to avoid becoming despondent as your potatoes rot before your eyes is to grow cutting-edge varieties which are highly resistant to late blight. These varieties, known collectively as the 'Sárpos' (Sárvári + potato, pronounced 'sharpo'), are the result of decades of conventional plant breeding (they're not 'GM' or genetically modified) carried out by the Hungarian Sárvári family. Since 2002, the Sárvári Research Trust has been developing these varieties at its North Wales base; there are now a clutch of Sárpo varieties, with white, red and blue skins, to suit all uses and palates, some of which are already grown by thousands of gardeners.

What all the Sárpos share is natural, exceptional in-built resistance to blight: these spuds don't need any polluting chemical sprays and they've proven their mettle during the worst



“THERE ARE TWO WAYS TO AVOID BEING CRESTFALLEN BY BLIGHT, AND ONE OF THOSE IS A GAMBLE.”

This comparison of inoculated leaves shows how quickly blight spreads in susceptible 'Bintje', 'Lady Balfour' and 'Arran Victory', compared with limited damage on blight-resistant 'Sárpo Una', 'Kifli' and 'Sárpo Mira'.

blight years on record. But they have other benefits too: high yields, virus resistance, strong, weed-smothering shoots, deep water and nutrient-seeking roots, and they store without sprouting for many months.

NEW FACES

Bidding old favourites adieu might be a big ask, but our increasingly topsy-turvy weather could make growing worthwhile crops of most of the potatoes we're familiar with an even bigger one, hitched inevitably to never-ending spraying. And if copper-based garden chemicals are eventually withdrawn, what then?

Blight-prone maincrop 'King Edward' is a tough act to follow as a roasting potato, but 'Blue Danube' is gaining a reputation as the 'best

roastie ever', with blight resistance and beautiful purple flowers to boot. Reliable old 'Desiree' does well where other spuds struggle; but 'Sárpo Mira', in addition to being a blight-proof maincrop, resists slug damage and produces respectable crops of big, red-skinned, floury tubers for all-round use, even on drier soils. You might find second-early favourite 'Charlotte' hard to beat, but 'Kifli', a white-skinned early maincrop Sárpo, has firm flesh and a fine 'new potato' flavour.

I'm a tad sad to think I might not grow some potatoes again, but I'm not one for dousing my food garden in toxic anything, and it's reassuring to know I can plant modern varieties that will fend off blight and guarantee me a decent harvest come monsoon or heat wave (or both).

I'm turning the potato page and look forward to getting to grow some new friends. How about you? ➤



'Axona' is a late, red-skinned maincrop with excellent blight resistance. Like other Sárpo varieties, it stores for months without sprouting.

TRIP WIRES

The secret of the Sárpos' success is their ability to go on the defensive when inundated with airborne blight spores. When a microscopic spore lands on and penetrates a leaf or stem, a 'tripwire' effect triggers a reaction in which the plant immediately fights back, isolating the point of infection and preventing most attacks from spreading any further. Although this can cause small dead spots on the leaves late in the growing season (see 'Sárpo Axona' right) there is little effect on yield.

The problem in many traditionally 'resistant' potato varieties is that a strain of blight evolves that can 'crawl under' the tripwire, break into the plant and cause mayhem. Some can still repel light infections, but they all succumb quickly to an early and severe blight outbreak, which results in the rapid and total death of the plant, and few if any tubers. As blight strains become ever more aggressive, outbreaks are likely to worsen, locking blight and potato breeders into a kind of ongoing 'arms race'. Luckily, the Sárpo tripwire is still holding firm.



FUNDING THE FUTURE

Despite being a huge hit with gardeners, the team developing and growing the Sárpos have faced a 'perfect storm' of challenges in recent years, not least the run of dire growing seasons prior to 2013. Dr David Shaw, director of the Sárvári Research Trust, explains: "We're a small, independent outfit so we're always doing a fine balancing act between growing enough seed potatoes to sell to gardeners and farmers and keeping enough back to plant ourselves so we can gradually bulk up more seed tubers ready to offer the following year. One of our biggest challenges hasn't been growing the plants, but actually harvesting the tubers. The dismal growing seasons before last, especially waterlogged soil at harvest time, gave us serious headaches. The knock-on effect has left stocks of 'Sárpo Gwyn', 'Sárpo Shona' and 'Sárpo Una' in short supply and so it hasn't been viable to list them in catalogues for 2014 - we need to plant every single tuber we've got to make sure we've enough seed potatoes to offer gardeners in 2015."

"Our small size also means we have large overheads which put a tight squeeze on any profits, and it's tough competing with big companies which can subsidise new introductions. But we've got a solid business plan in place to double our stocks of seed tubers over the next five years, which should mean that all of the Sárpos will eventually be widely available. Our new not-for-profit company Sárpo Potatoes Ltd will help us do that, and we're running a crowd-funding appeal to encourage gardeners, growers and farmers to become a part of our future. The money raised will help the new company expand and reap the benefits of scaling up, meaning we can grow more Sárpos and also invest in developing more blight-resistant varieties. The response so far has been tremendous with many gardeners already supporting us. Anyone can make a donation of up to £50, or, If you'd like to loan us money over five years - £50 or more - you'll earn 4.5% in interest payments and get some Sárpo seed potatoes too. You won't get those with an ISA!" ■

■ For more on the Sárpo crowd-funding appeal visit www.buzzbnk.org/SarpoPotatoes

■ As KG went to press, Sárpo Mira' was still available from www.thompson-morgan.com, www.mr-fothergills.co.uk as well as www.tamarorganics.co.uk

SAVE £4.95 ON SÁRPO POTATOES!

We have joined forces with leading seed supplier, D T Brown to offer KG readers the chance to buy a 1.5kg pack of potato 'Sárpo Mira' at a knock-down price. 'Sárpo Mira' is a drought and slug resistant maincrop type producing red-skinned tubers. The white, floury flesh is just perfect for roasting, chipping and baking.

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Harrogate Spring Flower Show has teamed up with show sponsor *Kitchen Garden* to offer seven lucky winners the chance to win:

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That's more than £380 worth of prizes to be won!

7 prizes to be won



Rated Britain's best gardening event by Which? Gardening, Harrogate Spring Flower Show will be celebrating pedals as well as petals in 2014.

As excitement builds for the Yorkshire start of the Tour de France, exhibitors at the UK's most prestigious independent flower show are preparing to add a little joie de vivre to their displays.

Staged at the Great Yorkshire Showground from April 24 – 27, the spring flower show will feature beautiful new show gardens created especially for the event. With more large scale designs than ever before this year, the gardens will offer plenty of ideas and inspiration to suit a wide range of homes and tastes.

The show is also famous for displays by more than 100 leading plant nurseries. This year's theme for the most innovative exhibit is also a tribute to the famous cycling event – On your bike and pedal.

Live entertainment at the show includes expert growing advice and demonstrations from the *Kitchen Garden Live!* team. Come along and meet Steve and Emma on the *Kitchen Garden* stand in Gardening Hall 2.

Tickets: Thurs-Sat *£14.50 booked before noon on April 15; £17 on the gate. Sun *£12.50 in advance or £15 on the gate. Visit www.flowershow.org.uk or call 01423 546157. *A single £1 postage and admin fee applies per order.



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Take veg. growing to new heights

Run out of room on the level; then why not go upward and increase your growing area? Emma Rawlings has some top tips on vertical gardening

Those who grow fruit and veg in small gardens know only too well that space is at a premium – there never seems to be enough room. However, with a bit of careful planning, a few DIY skills and thinking out of the box and up the wall, you could vastly increase your growing area. Simply think vertical!

WHY GROW VERTICAL?

There are many advantages to growing this way and the first one is space. You may have walls or fences that are bare and this large area could be used to grow your salads and herbs, freeing up space on the ground to produce other crops. Strawberries are perfect subjects for vertical growing. They are in the ground a long time, take up a lot of room and crop for a short time so why not grow them on a wall out of the way.

- Vertical gardening is good for those with mobility problems. There is obviously less bending and crops are easier to harvest.
- You will also use a lot less compost in vertical gardens and this will help keep costs down.
- Pests may be less problematic. Slugs and snails can climb but the drier walls and fences will be less attractive to them.
- Walls can radiate heat which will benefit the plants and may speed up growth.

THE CHALLENGES

Growing vertically does have some challenges and watering is the main one. Natural rainfall may not water your vertical veg patch very efficiently so you may have to water by hand or install an irrigation system. Also vertical planting systems tend not to use as much compost and so fertiliser reserves will be quickly exhausted. Regular feeding when watering will be necessary. The planters that are used to support the plants also need to be sturdy and secured really well to the wall.

Vertical planting ideas

GUTTER GARDENS

These can produce a lot of leafy veg and are relatively cheap to set up. All you need is guttering and brackets and these can be fixed direct to a wall, or as pictured on to a wooden frame. The one shown is a small model showing the principle but you can have much longer pieces of guttering as long as it is supported well every metre or so.

If the guttering is fixed to the wall you could put up several lengths and slope it just slightly, zig-zagging them down the wall. The idea with this design is that you water the top guttering and excess water will drip down to the guttering below and so on. You could even install an automatic watering system to water the whole gutter garden. The best veg to grow in gutter gardens are lettuce, lambs lettuce, mizuna and other salad leaves.



This modular vertical planting includes colourful lettuce, mizuna and mint.



Drill holes into the guttering to allow drainage.



◀ TOP DRAWER

Now here's a good idea. Why not make planting boxes out of a set of old drawers? You may need a bit of support under the bottom drawer to stop the whole thing tipping forward but it would certainly make a talking point. The plant stand pictured next to the drawers can be bought from several companies. A similar wooden tiered stand is available from www.greenfingers.com price £27.99.

STAIRWAY TO VEG HEAVEN

A set of old steps or self-made stairs could be placed against a wall or a pergola and topped with pots filled with herbs or vegetables. It would make a wonderful feature for any garden and provide extra growing space. ▶



TROUGH TRELLIS

This is an idea taken from a show garden. A slatted wooden wall is broken up with wooden troughs planted with a mixture of evergreens and herbs.



TOP TIP

Use some controlled release fertiliser in the compost when planting up vertical veg pouches or other planters. This will allow gradual feeding of the plants over a long period and reduces the need to apply regular liquid fertilisers.



PALLET GARDEN

Old pallets make great vertical gardens. Here the pallet has been painted and the top part has been filled with short pieces of bamboo. These provide holes for insects to colonise.

The back and sides of the pallet are clad and stapled with plastic sheet or a permeable membrane. It is also a good idea to use pieces of a broken pallet through the gaps, which will hold the compost in small sections, and stop it all settling to the bottom when the pallet is turned on its side. Once filled with compost young salad plants are planted through the gaps.

Other leafy crops can be planted such as herbs or chard, pak choi and spinach. The pallet needs to be left flat for two to three weeks until the crops start to put down good roots. At this stage it should be possible to stand the panel up against a wall and the roots should hold most of the compost in. The advantage of creating sections within the pallet will become evident at this stage. The pallet needs to be fixed securely to the wall or it could topple forward.



IN THE CAN

A chainlink fence has been brightened up with metal cans filled with herbs such as chives, salads, nasturtiums and mini tomato plants.

PUT IN THE BOOT

This is a bit of fun – some old boots have been planted with marigolds and attached to a fence. The planting pockets below are a great idea. Burgon & Ball sell these called Verti-Plant. For more information on these and to be in with a chance of winning some turn to page 77. To the right is another pallet garden and you can see the plastic backing to the pallet is pulled around the sides.



MODULAR GROWING MADE EASY

The VertiGarden Easy is a purpose-made vertical growing system, which you can plant up with flowers, veg or, as pictured, strawberries. It is a modular system that you can keep adding to. One module is 40-50cm (16-20in) high x 9cm (3½in) deep. They come with brackets, screws and irrigation connectors. www.vertigarden.co.uk



LIVING WALLS ON A GRAND SCALE

Patrick Blanc is a botanist and artist who has taken living walls to the urban jungle on a massive scale. His amazing works can be seen in cities around the world. He uses a system of slats to hold artificial felt that the roots of the plants grow through. Automatic watering and feeding systems keep the plants healthy. The plants are carefully chosen to thrive in their particular environment. His latest project is in Sydney, Australia, installing plants and vines up a 166-metre façade of the Sydney's One Central Park tower creating the tallest living wall in the world.

One of Patrick Blanc's living wall designs on the Athenaeum Hotel in London.



Win a wall planter

Here's your chance to win some fabulous planting pockets to start your own vertical veg garden. Burgon & Ball is giving 10 lucky readers the chance to win a pack of Verti-plant.

These are made from heavy duty fabric and each planter has three pockets that provide ample space for six plants. The top two pockets have drainage holes which allow water to drip down to the lower pockets making watering easy and efficient.

The Verti-plant measures 51cm high x 30cm wide x 10cm (20inx12inx4in) and is simply screwed to a wall or fence. The pockets are filled with your favourite compost and then planted up. You could plant the pockets with a wide range of fruit or veg including strawberries, herbs, salads and even small bush tomatoes. A Verti-plant packed with these crops will provide weeks of pickings and at the end of the season they could be planted up with winter pansies or stored away and reused again the following season, giving great value. A Verti-plant Pack contains two planters and costs £9.95.

Burgon & Ball is offering *Kitchen Garden* readers the chance to win one of 10 Verti-plant packs. **To enter simply log on to www.kitchengarden.co.uk and look for the Win a Verti-plant link to enter the competition.**

Burgon & Ball makes a wonderful range of quality and stylish garden products. For more information and to buy its products visit www.burgonandball.com

GET THE WATERING RIGHT

Vertical planting schemes only work if you can get the watering right. The plants are grown in less compost and this can dry out very quickly. The angle of the planting means rain may not even reach the roots and can run off the leaves. If you have just a few wall planters then watering is relatively simple especially if you can invest in a long watering lance attached to a hose. You can also make the whole system automatic and direct water to the roots of the plants. This system of watering prevents wastage of water and saves you a lot of hard work.

Micro-irrigation systems are best. These can be bought in kit form such as the Maxi Micro Automated Irrigation System with Timer (pictured) from Two Wests and Elliott (£49.99). It comes with a long length of thin tube to which is attached 20 drippers. The narrow tubing is woven throughout the vertical planter and drippers positioned at regular intervals. A hose is attached to the end of the narrow tubing and the hose leads back to your tap where a timer is set to water just when you require.



Have you tried... **companion planting?**

Gardening writer Lucy Halliday explains how mixing up your plantings can help to attract beneficial insects and add colour to your patch

Can onions really protect carrots? Companion planting is an odd subject which, in my experience, tends to inspire in gardeners one of three conversational responses; abject devotion, severe scepticism or total ignorance of its existence.

Historically, I might even have placed myself in the middle category, coming from a scientific background and having a healthy disregard for the great many old wives' tales that abound in gardening circles.

The idea that plants can protect each other from enemies or boost each other's growth has always been an attractive if sometimes overly romanticised idea. So what are its real potential benefits?

The notion of companion plants in a more sophisticated form has gained much ground with the increasingly scientific approach of the organic horticulture movement, and although many old wives' tales can be debunked, some stand true or have merits that were not initially thought of. Companion planting is in reality, widely used across the both the industrialised and developing world by farmers and gardeners alike.

The traditional neat rows of kitchen and allotment gardens encourage us to think of each crop in isolation but crops do clearly affect each other; a fact that most of us acknowledge by using a crop rotation to keep our soil and plants healthy year on year. Thinking of your vegetable garden as an ecosystem is a scientifically valid approach. Despite many specific plant combinations really needing better scientific testing to satisfy my personal curiosity, thinking about your garden in these dynamic terms will certainly make you a better gardener and most likely fill your plate more effectively, too. So, in what ways will kitchen garden plants interact and how can this be harnessed to our benefit?



Tall plants like sunflowers, provide shade for heat-sensitive crops such as lettuce.



Grow sweet peas among runner beans to attract pollinators and give a bonus crop of cut flowers.

HOW IT BEGAN

Over the last 50 years notions of companion planting have gained ground with the advent of the organic movement, permaculture thinking and practices such as forest gardening or square-foot gardening.

We all give more credence to the idea of our garden as an ecosystem than we perhaps did in the mid-20th century but these ideas are not new. In China, ferns of the *Azolla* species have been planted alongside rice crops for more than a thousand years. It turns out that these ferns are host to a form of cyanobacteria, which fixes nitrogen to feed the rice, with the ferns blocking light from competing weed species, helping the rice to thrive.

The ancient people of Mesoamerica were also known to be hot on companion planting. They were some of the earliest people to domesticate crops such as squash and maize and teamed these new crops up in beneficial ways. A famous example, which works very well in any garden today, is that of the Three Sisters technique used more than 7000 years ago. Tall sweetcorn stems provide a supportive framework for climbing beans planted at their base to fix nitrogen while squash cover the ground suppressing weeds and retaining moisture with their ample leaves.

Closer to home the European 'potager' or cottage garden is a clear example of polyculture that has a venerable tradition, although its more recent roots lie in Renaissance Europe, the ancient Egyptians and Romans practised clearly recognisable forms of kitchen gardening this way. ►



Nasturtiums can be used as sacrificial plants, drawing pests such as caterpillars and blackfly away from other crops.

WHY PLANTING PARTNERS WORK?

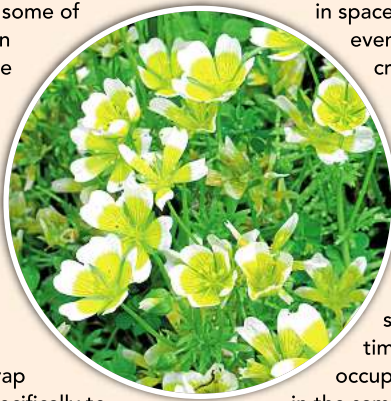
There is a large number of ways that plants can be selected to have a positive influence on each other.

■ **CHEMICAL CONTROL:** There is increasing evidence that some of the traditional companion planting combinations are based on the fact that many plants produce chemicals through volatile scent compounds, from their roots or in their leaf tissues, which deter pests and diseases.

■ **BOTANICAL MARTYRS:** Some companions, known as trap crops, can be planted specifically to be sacrificed as they lure pests away from the main attraction; your food crop.

■ **PATTERN DISRUPTION:** In my book one of the most important companion planting factors is that pests spread rapidly in the ideal conditions of a crop monoculture. The target crop is easy to find and plentiful. However, in mixed, polyculture plantings the host detection mechanisms evolved by the pest are disrupted, making it harder for them to both find the crop and for their offspring to spread if they do.

■ **LEAN ON ME:** Plants can provide protective roles for each other such as providing a wind break or shade, for example a runner bean tunnel provides the ideal cooler spot for mid-summer lettuces.



■ **PLAY THE ODDS:** Growing a variety of crops in the same space is statistically beneficial and it simply reduces the odds of all crops failing so that the investment in space will yield delicious food even if one or two of the crops fail.

■ **EMERGENT PROPERTIES:** Plants have naturally evolved to grow in communities. Although the reasons for this are probably too complex to ever fully unpick, studies show time and time again that crops that occupy different levels or roles in the same space, such as the Three Sisters combination, can be healthier and give greater yields.

■ **RECRUITING ALLIES:** Many plants prolific in their pollen or nectar production encourage higher populations of breeding beneficial adult insects in your garden, for instance those that eat pest species only when in their larval form. These plants may also be chosen to provide suitable homes for beneficial species year round. Garlic chives and early-flowering salvias draw in the crowds.

■ **INSET:** Nectar-rich species such as poached egg plants (*limnanthes*) help to attract pollinators such as hoverflies. Hoverfly larvae are voracious feeders on greenfly.

THE BOTANY BIT

HOW CAN COMPANION PLANTS CONFUSE FLYING PESTS?

Recent scientific studies show how pest species, evolved to latch on to certain cues of scent, shape, colour or pattern in their host foliage, can be 'thrown off' by a surrounding of other plant material, even green plastic or cardboard 'leaves'. As they have evolved detailed innate behaviour patterns for finding the best egg-laying sites based on odour cues, avoiding bare soil and repeated landing for close inspection; mixing crops of different foliage structures and scents can make pests far less successful. In one study a simple ground-cover crop of clover around cabbages reduced the cabbage root flies successful egg-laying attempts from 36% of cabbages affected to a mere 7%.



Pungent onions and garlic can help to confuse pests by masking the smells of crops such as carrots and cabbages.



Try growing basil with your aubergines and peppers. Cretan gardeners use this technique.



The strong, tall stems of sweetcorn provide support for ramblers such as squashes.



Chives will attract beneficial insects but are tasty to eat too.



French marigolds help deter whitefly from their tomato neighbours.

COMPANION COMBINATIONS TO TRY

Here are some specific plant companions, backed by positive results in real gardens that you could try. All work to increase the health and productivity of your little ecosystem.

PAIR...	WITH...	TO HELP...
French marigolds	Tomatoes	Repel aphids/whitefly through scent and attracting predatory hoverflies (but insect-proof mesh is by far the best defence)
Summer savory and potatoes	Broad beans	Repel blackfly (still pinch out the tips)
<i>Nicotiana tabacum</i> , hyssop and artemisia	Cabbage family	Repel cabbage white butterflies with scent
Onion family (garlic/leeks)	Carrots	Repel carrot root fly through scent and foliage pattern disruption (but insect-proof mesh is by far the best defence)
Nasturtiums (edible too)	Cabbage family	Draw cabbage caterpillars away from the main crop
Tomatoes	Asparagus	Deter asparagus beetle
Mexican marigold (<i>Tagetes minuta</i>)	Any troublesome weedy areas you may have	Deters weed growth such as bindweed and ground elder through its root exudates
Lettuce	Slug-prone seedlings	Forms a sacrificial barrier around them
Sunflowers and sweetcorn	Cucumbers	Shade them from high temperatures
Basil	Aubergines and peppers	Cretan gardeners swear by this plant as it can improve productivity

COMPANION PLANTING SUPPLIES AND INFORMATION

Companion planting seed mixes are available to buy from www.sarahraven.com and an extensive collection as well as a multipack mix at www.crocus.co.uk – just search 'companion planting' on these sites.

A website from the USA, www.westcoastseeds.com has an excellent page giving details on specific companion plants and their effects (click on articles and instructions), as do www.thompson-morgan.com and www.vegetableseeds.net.

There are also a number of good books on the subject such as *The A-Z of Companion Planting* by Jayne Neville, *Soil Mates* by Sara Alway, and the very useful and concise *Bob's Basics: Companion Planting* by Bob Flowerdew, all of which are available at www.rhsshop.co.uk

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Stop Birds & Cabbage White Butterflies.

7mm square (1/4 inch) netting designed to stop cabbage white butterflies and birds attacking your vegetables. Light enough to be laid directly over your crops and soft enough to drape. This is available in widths from 2 to 8 metres wide. Suitable for covering hoops and cages.



Soft Butterfly Protection Netting

Stop Birds & Cabbage White Butterflies.

This soft butterfly protection netting is light enough to be laid directly over crops. It will protect crops against pigeons, cabbage white butterflies & birds and can be laid directly over crops or to cover hoops and cages. Mesh size of 5 x 7mm.



Bird/Fruit Netting

Stop Birds Damaging Your Fruit & Vegetables.

This lovely quality, double stitch, knitted netting (which feels like a soft fabric to touch) has a mesh size of 17mm. (2/3 inch). Bird Netting will protect your fruit & vegetables from birds whilst allowing bees through to pollinate. An extremely versatile netting which can be laid directly over crops, cages or hoops. Often used on fruit cage structures as the roof cover.



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Crop Cover Clips

Stop damage to netting, fleece or polythene with these fantastic clips. Designed to clip onto any garden fabric and create an eyelet, which is then secured with a steel peg.



Walk-in Aluminium Fruit & Vegetable Cages

Our walk-in aluminium cages offer excellent crop protection and value for money! Standing at 1.9m (6' 3") these cages offer plenty of room to work under and walk in. Available in a range of sizes, with two different covers, or bespoke.



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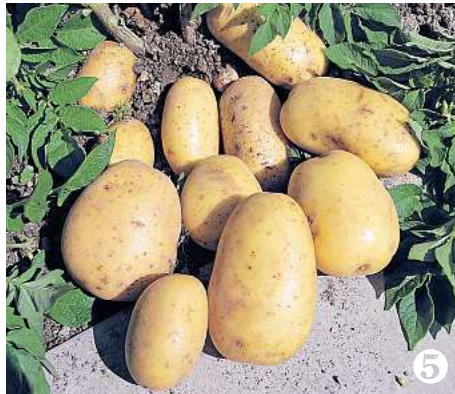
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Slug X - Slug Trap

A great trap to attract slugs and snails using beer or bait. Totally safe for children, pets and wildlife.

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EXPERT'S CHOICE

THE PROFESSIONALS REVEAL THE VARIETIES THEY GROW ON THEIR PLOTS AND WHY

RACHEL COLE

(SEED BUYER FOR MR FOTHERGILL'S SEEDS)



Vegetable growing became part of my life very soon after I started working at the seed company. I got the 'bug'. I soon rented an allotment and right from the start had advice from family members who had grown their own for many years – advice which was invaluable.

I started off with sowing an entire packet of carrot seeds (thousands of them) in one small 6ft row; but it did not deter me when I pulled out the most straggly carrot roots you have ever seen.

These days I enjoy finding different ways to grow varieties. I still get very excited when seed germinates in spring – which to me signals that I must get moving in the garden/allotment.

To choose six favourite varieties has proved extremely difficult but the following are some of the best I have ever grown and are well worth growing each and every year.

1. SPRING ONION 'MATRIX'

I first saw this in our trials a few years ago and was amazed with its vigour, it really stood out among all the varieties. It also seems to tolerate many weather conditions so it is a must for me. Very winter hardy, which is superb as I never eat all my spring onions by the autumn. I have copied our trials manager as he sows these in cells first then transplants. I get much better results now that I use this trick.

2. CLIMBING BEAN 'COBRA'

This is an incredibly attractive bean with lilac coloured blooms. It is also earlier than runner beans and if you keep picking it will produce a crop for weeks and weeks. Great in the kitchen too – just need to 'top and tail'.

3. BROAD BEAN 'CRIMSON FLOWERED'

This has been around for many years, but I have been impressed with the rich flavour it produces and the flowers are highly attractive too. I never used to like broad beans until I grew them, now I think they are superb. I really think they are quite smart as the beans have a coat, so depending on how rich you like the flavour you just remove the outer shell for the sweetest taste. My last picking of a few pods did not make it off the allotment, I ate them all raw.

4. CARROT 'MAESTRO F1'

A winner in my eyes every time, this very reliable variety is always one of three varieties of carrot I grow. It is a smooth skinned Nantes type but I find it doesn't suffer from pests and is a good eater. It also keeps well in the ground until beyond Christmas.

5. POTATO 'MARIS PIPER'

This is fantastic for roast, 'fluffy' potatoes. Superb – even if I only have space for a small row in the potato patch I will make sure I have a few plants of this. I know it has been around many, many years but it is my favourite potato to date. It will have to be a special variety to knock this off my list.

6. 'MIXED SALAD LEAVES'

They are so easy; I particularly enjoy growing mixed lettuce 'Red & Green Salad Bowl' as a 'cut and come again' salad in pots. You cannot get fresher and the taste is superb. I like to mix some rocket 'Skyrocket' in with the lettuce for added punch to salads.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

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How to... Make your own plant labels

Joyce Russell has some great ideas for making some markers and labels for your plants which could save you money

Garden labels can be fun. They can be functional too, but most of all they shouldn't be too expensive. You can buy plastic ones, wooden ones and some made from copper and other metals, but why buy at all if you have an enterprising spirit and a little bit of ingenuity?

PLASTIC MILK BOTTLES

These are favourite labels for me because they are so functional; it's easy to make a lot, and it's a practical bit of reuse.

Any plastic bottle can be used, but opaque white ones are good because the writing stands out against the background. Make sure the bottle is washed and completely dry before using.

Simply cut strips to the size of labels you need. It's best to use the flat sides rather than any ridged or stippled parts. A permanent marker is best for clear lettering. This will be readable for the lifetime of the seedlings.

If you are particularly conscious about recycling and reuse, the labels can be scrubbed with household cleaner and used again.



Functional labels from a milk carton.

Step by step MAKING WOODEN LABELS



Clamp several layers of wood together tightly.



Fifteen plant labels quickly made from cutting through five layers of wood sheeting.

MATERIALS: Any thin wood will do, you don't have to buy this; scrap timber such as thin cladding boards, an old cupboard or drawer side can be used. The measurements can change to suit your requirements but this is what I used:

- Five pieces timber @ 63mm x 4mm x 180mm (make this last measurement a bit longer if you want room for a clamp).
- Sandpaper.
- Jigsaw or a fretsaw with a fine cutting blade, or you can use a handsaw if you want to make straight labels.
- Paper template for the shape you want and a pen to transfer this on to the wood.
- A clamp to hold the wood firmly against the bench.



Wooden labels can be painted in a range of bright colours and reused again and again.

HOW TO MAKE:

1 Clamp the five pieces of timber together to make a flat stack. This way you can cut several labels at once. Timber should not be able to move when clamped.

2 Place the template on the top piece of wood and draw round it. Bear in mind that the extra bits on either side of the stem can also be used as labels if you are following this design.

3 Follow the pattern drawn on the wood and use the jigsaw to cut through all five layers at once. Cut across the top of the labels last of all, so the clamp does its job until all labels are cut. Sand any rough edges.

4 You will now have five large labels with a curved top and 10 more labels from the cut out sides.

5 Labels can be painted if you want to brighten them up. You can also repaint them after they have been used: this covers any previous writing, protects the wood and freshens the labels up.

easy plant label ideas to try

Robust and flexible inner tube rubber is strong enough to tie a tree.



INNER TUBE LABELS

There's plenty of rubber in a tyre inner tube. It is flexible, hard-wearing and easy to cut. Any garage that changes tyres should have a surplus of old inner tubes, and one tube will make plenty of labels. Cut the tube open and give it a good scrub before using.

These combined tree ties and labels need to be long enough to go between the tree trunk and its support post. Make a slit at one end and two 'tails' at the other. The tails go through the slit and tie together to fix the tie in place.

You can also use a stapler to join the ends of the tie, but these will rust long before the rubber perishes (you can always replace staples to restore the tree tie). Use an indelible ink white pen, or a china white marker to write on the rubber and the label will last for years. ➤



Pebbles make good markers for plants.



This way to the peas...



A jam jar protects a paper seed packet.



Enjoy the lollipop and reuse the stick!

LOLLIPOP STICKS

This old favourite is another way that children can help in the garden. Simply get them to save all the sticks from their lollipops. The shape doesn't matter; just wash them clean and leave them to dry. If

the stick is stained from the lollipop, then it can be painted over.

Children are happy to help with all stages of this project and they soon learn the names of the plants that they have made a label for.

BEACH PEBBLES

These smooth stones are lovely in their own right, but all the more so if they are used to label the herb garden. There are no rough edges and it's simple enough to write on the name of the herb with a permanent marker or a china white pen. Turn the stone over if you want to use it again for a different name. You can always paint the stone if you want a more colourful display: try a ladybird with lettering on the wings or a snail with writing round the spiral.

This is a great way to teach children the names of herbs and to make sure they bring the right ones into the kitchen when sent on a herb-gathering mission.

growing well at that point and maybe you remember anyway, but it seems a shame to watch the packet disintegrate.

Hardly a stroke of genius, it took me a good few years to realise that a clear glass jar inverted over the top would protect the seed packet. The information on the packet is perfectly readable and the life of this simple row marker is extended significantly.

SEED PACKETS

These are often pictured on sticks at the end of rows and this is a clear and simple way of marking what has been sown. The practice, for me, has always led to soggy packets that split and fade until it's hard to see what they might say. Of course, the seedlings are probably

CLOTHES PEGS

These remind me of signposts. They look pretty and are so simple to make that anyone might want to give it a try.

I chose bamboo cane as the upright portion, but you could use any twig, or piece of small diameter dowel, to do the same.

The bamboo can be chopped to length with good loppers, or use a saw if you prefer. Then it's just a case of finding some wooden clothes pegs; they are still available in many shops. Of course you can use coloured, plastic pegs if you want to brighten things up. Check different permanent markers to find out which one works best. ■



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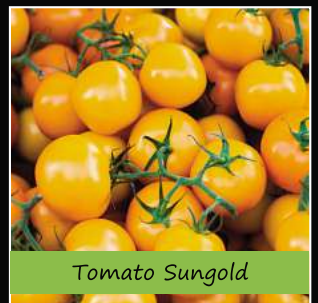
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SIMPLY SEED

Happy Hatching!

Fluffy yellow chicks are so cute, but have you thought of hatching your own? Poultry expert Karen Pimlott offers her top tips for success



Although I have hatched chicks every year for the last 10 years, I still get excited at hatching time. I do it for exhibition so I have a purpose, but what about hatching just for fun? A few hens in the back garden is one thing, but to add to your flock by hatching a sitting of eggs is quite another.

Firstly, of course, a cock bird is needed so you have fertile eggs. If you are lucky enough to have a chap to do his 'stuff' then you can simply let nature take its course. However, many back garden keepers don't or cannot keep a male, so what happens next? The best way is to try and source some fertile eggs. Get in touch with the breeder you purchased your original hens from; that way you know you are sourcing eggs from good quality disease-free stock. If unsuccessful, they may be able to point you in the right direction.

Avoid purchasing eggs from internet auction sites. There are many risks buying hatching eggs this way. You could be buying infertile eggs, the pictures advertising stock may not be theirs, the eggs could come from weak or diseased stock and you may not get what you should out of your eggs – if they hatch. It can be costly too. Of course there are a few exceptions to the rule, as I do know of several people who have hatched from such sites.

Try and collect your hatching eggs from the point of sale if possible, as posting eggs can cause infertility – if they suffer a knock or bang it can rupture the air sac.

SPOTTING A HEALTHY EGG

Eggs should be nice and spherical, not pointy or long or an odd shape – always discard the latter. Eggs should be clean and be stored in the correct way, point down; this allows the air sack to stay at the rounded end which allows the egg to retain its moisture.





A broody hen can be used to hatch fertile eggs and will usually take over the rearing of the chicks successfully afterwards.

HATCHING YOUR EGGS

So you now have your sitting of eggs, how do you hatch them? There are two ways, both tried and tested. First and foremost is the broody hen, but how do you know if your hen is broody? Well, she will become demonic—literally.

She will not like anyone or anything, she will fail to lay and won't move from the nest box for anything more than to relieve herself and to take a bite to eat twice a day. She will fluff up and become quite vocal when approached by either you or the other hens; she may even stop your other hens laying in the nest boxes or entering the coop. But you can make use of her natural desire to raise a brood; fertile eggs can be strategically placed under her and she can be left to her own devices, and all being well 21 days later she will emerge with her chicks.

Alternatively, hatching can be done using an incubator in your own home. Incubators can be bought for as little as £50 or as much as £1000. There are also many places that now hire them out.

Incubators need to be clean and free from bacteria, so buy new if at all possible.

Shells are absorbent and eggs 'breathe' through the shell and contaminants such as bacteria can pass into the egg affecting hatch rates.



Incubators come in all sizes and levels of complexity. They start from around £50.

BROODY HEN V INCUBATOR

Both have positives and negatives. Broody hens can be unreliable; they can get fed up and stop being broody, leaving you with cold eggs. Some broodies become aggressive and have been known to kill the chicks they have just hatched. Also production is limited to the number of eggs you can fit underneath your hen. But on the plus side, all you have to do is provide food and water for 21 days and the hen does the rest herself, and rears them too, which is a bonus.

Although incubators offer a more controlled way of hatching, they are more complex and a lot more hard work – monitoring temperatures and humidity etc. However, you can hatch eggs in larger numbers dependent on the size of the incubator and you can observe eggs from setting to hatching. This is very exciting but



as tempting as it may seem, when eggs are hatching you must refrain from opening the incubator lid to have a peek, as this affects the humidity, causing levels to drop. This can lead to deformities and even death, with unhatched chicks dead in shells.

Once chicks are hatched in an incubator, you will have to rear them. When chicks are 24-48 hours old and dried off, they need to be moved to a brooder (they live on what is left of their yolk sacs until this time). Brooders are boxes containing a heat lamp or heat board to mimic the broody hen. Chicks need to stay under heat/light until they are feathered and old enough to be moved outside, the timescale depending on the breed.

INSET: Newly hatched chicks are a real delight.

Eggs need to be turned at least twice a day for the first 18 days (a broody hen will shuffle and turn her eggs up to 50 times a day). Day 18 to 21 the eggs are not turned as the chicks are getting into position ready for hatching (hen eggs take 21 days from setting, or placing in the incubator, to hatching). Some incubators have automatic turners in them which turn the eggs at specified intervals so you don't have to. Humidity and temperature in the incubator also need monitoring.

REARING YOUR CHICKS AND MOVING THEM ON

Regardless of how they were hatched, chicks need to be fed on a medicated chick crumb to prevent diseases such as coccidiosis (a microscopic parasite that attaches to the gut) which can prove fatal in chicks. Another thing to consider when hatching is what you will do with the hatchees once they have emerged, especially if they all turn out to be boys.

Some breeders (myself included) will give fertile eggs to people and schools to hatch just for fun and to experience the joys of hatching. Then when the chicks are 48 hours old they are collected and brought home and reared in the brooder.

Whatever you do, hatching is fun and an amazing experience, especially for little ones. There are many highs and lows and tears can be shed, especially after you have nurtured eggs for 21 days and nothing hatches, but it's all a learning curve.



STILL WANTING TO HAVE A GO?

There are some good books on the market that you can purchase to help you along your way, for example *The Chicken Manual* by Laurence Beeken and published by Haynes (ISBN: 9781844257294). ■

MULTI-FUNCTIONAL SCISSORS ARE A CUT ABOVE



Fiskars' new Cuts+More Scissors are not your average snips, these are multi-functional, giving gardeners help with jobs large and small. These amazing scissors can adapt to different cutting requirements and can even turn into a knife in one swift movement; the scissors separate and the titanium-coated blade becomes a useful knife. As scissors they are strong enough for trimming, pruning and opening packages and include a notch that will cut light rope.

There is also a wire cutter for cutting light wire without damaging the blades, as well as a twine cutter to cut twine cleanly and an awl tip for piercing small holes in cardboard. The scissors have a removable cover, which includes an integrated ceramic sharpener and tape cutter, and, just for good measure, a bottle opener.

Price: RRP £18.99. For more information: www.fiskars.co.uk



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Vermiculite has long been used as a growing medium or for covering seeds because of its many beneficial qualities. It is a sterile material free from weed seeds and pathogens and creates an open and moist surface for the seeds. The laminated structure and light-reflecting properties of the material also aid germination in many seeds. Those seeds requiring darkness to germinate, such as calendula, will benefit from being covered with a little compost first and then the vermiculite.

134g canister, enough for two 35 x 20cm (14 x 8in) seed trays.

Price: £2.99 from good garden centres. For more information www.william-sinclair.co.uk



useful products for your garden

A HOSE WITH STYLE

The ZEE Mirtoon hose reel is a neat and colourful way to keep your garden hose tidy.

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Price: £125 (10m) and £230 (30m). Available exclusively online through www.cuckooland.com Telephone 01305 755621

FUN BOOT PLANTER

Rainy Day Garden Kits are colourful ceramic welly boot planters packed with everything needed to start a garden except the rain!

Inside these cute little boots are a peat disc and seed packs of either herbs or flowers. Just add water to expand the peat, then sow the seeds and place on a warm windowsill.

The Rainy Day Garden Kits come in four colours: red (wild strawberry), yellow (camomile), blue (mint) and green (basil). Each boot measures 9 x 8.25 x 5cm (3.5 x 3¼ x 2in).



Price: £9.95. Available from www.whatyousow.co.uk

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Keder Greenhouses has been established for more than 20 years and offers next-generation protected growing environments as an alternative to traditional glasshouses.

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The Keder range caters for almost every space from 2m square to acreage coverage and there is free delivery to any mainland UK location. [For more information visit www.kedergreenhouse.co.uk](http://www.kedergreenhouse.co.uk) or telephone 01386 49094.



SEED KITS FOR THE 'GROWING' FAMILY

If you're reading this in early March you may be thinking about Mother's Day on March 30. A great gift for mum or other members of the family are these growing kits from Seed Pantry.

The Mum and Me Flowers & Veg Seeds Starter Packs are a great way to get the whole family involved in growing wild flowers, vegetables and herbs.

Mum's pack contains seeds to grow five different types of wild flowers: field poppies, yarrow, musk mallow, chamomile and wallflowers. The Me seeds pack lets younger gardeners grow four varieties of vegetables and herbs – sweetcorn, cress, pumpkins and sunflowers. The whole kit contains all the equipment you need to get started, including biodegradable rice husk pots, coir seed trays, organic compost (3-litre bag), and an FSC oak dibble. There are also other kits available including wildflower starter boxes.



Price: £36.50 for the Mum and Me Starter pack; £24.50 for the Wild Flower Seeds Starter pack. Available at www.seedpantry.co.uk Order by March 21 to guarantee delivery before Mother's Day.

MAKE YOUR OWN PLANT FOOD

Here is a clever little plant food maker from Burgon & Ball and available from Greenhouse Sensations. This stylish jug has a central perforated section which is stuffed with chopped nettles or comfrey; the outer chamber is filled with water and left to infuse. After a couple of weeks or less you will have your own ready-made plant food. You may need to dilute the feed. As a rough guide, if the solution looks like weak tea that is about the right dilution. Jug measures 29cm (11in) diameter at the widest point and is 28cm high.

Price: £29.95 from Greenhouse Sensation. Visit www.greenhousesensation.co.uk or telephone 0845 6023774.





Product review

Bed edgers

This month **Joyce Russell** looks at tools designed to keep the edges of your beds and lawns neat and tidy. Pictures: Ben Russell

Have you ever visited a park, or large garden, where all the beds look as if they've been newly cut out of the surrounding ground? There's something about those sharp edges between bed and lawn, or path and soil, that make you wish you had a team of gardeners on hand to do the same job for you. The beds

look tidy and edges run in lovely smooth lines and are just perfect. Well, this might just be one wish that can come true: not that a team of gardeners is going to arrive to tidy the beds for you, but a little tool called an edger can soon impose some order on an unruly garden and you don't have to be an expert to use one!

Features: WHAT TO LOOK FOR WHEN PURCHASING

SIZE OF BLADE

A wide blade can take a bigger slice at each go, but a smaller one will clip fiddly edges that need more precision.

A deep blade can cut a deep sod, but a shallower blade might be better for trimming the edges along a path.

LENGTH OF HANDLE

You shouldn't have to bend too much, or put pressure on the back, when edging beds. A short handle is fine if you are keeping your back straight and pushing down with a foot to make the cut. A longer handle is preferable if you are pushing the cutting edge backwards and forwards like a hoe.

SHARPNESS

The edge doesn't have to be 'knife sharp' and in fact it is best if it isn't: too fine an edge would soon bend, or become blunt, when pushed into stony soil. Something like a sharp spade edge is ideal. The metal should be thick enough to regrind if necessary as the tool ages.

WEIGHT

The jury is out on this one. A light tool is easy to carry, easy to hang up and light to use, but all the pressure has to come from you when cutting tough sods. A heavy tool on the other hand is harder to lug around and more likely to do damage if it falls off the shed wall, but you have to exert less

pressure when using it. If you have a small bit of edging to do then a lighter tool may suit; if you have a lot of edges to maintain, then a heavier tool will munch through in no time. Or, you could play safe and choose one from the middle of the weight range.

SUPPLIERS

- **DARLAC:** www.darlac.com
- **DRAPER TOOLS:** www.draper.co.uk
- **FISKARS:** www.fiskars.co.uk
- **HAYLOFT PLANTS:** www.hayloftplants.co.uk
- **WOLF-GARTEN:** www.wolfgartentools.co.uk
- **WILKINSON SWORD:** www.wilkinsonsword-tools.co.uk



GRAMPA'S DO-IT-ALL MULTI-PURPOSE GARDEN TOOL (HAYLOFT PLANTS)

PRODUCT CODE: SUO3A12 **FEATURES:** WOODEN HANDLE. CAST METAL HEAD WITH TOOTHED EDGES. THE HANDLE IS FIXED INTO A CAST METAL FERRULE. **OVERALL LENGTH:** 1165MM. **BLADE WIDTH:** 160MM. **WEIGHT:** 907G. **PRICE:** £17.95

This simple, old-fashioned tool is surprisingly useful. The head is small, but it is strong. It works best as an edger if turned on its side and a pushing or pulling motion is used to cut a clear line next to the edge. It works well on the edge of gravel paths, on rain-softened grass or on light sandy soil. The head can be used flat to remove trimmed sods. I would have liked a slightly longer handle when using flat and it doesn't give the neatest edge, but it is a tidy headed tool that is fast to use. It can be used for weeding paths, patios and beds at the same time.

KG Verdict

A very useful tool that doubles as an edger and a handy weeder.

PERFORMANCE

★★★★★

EASE OF USE

★★★★★

VALUE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

KG Verdict

Robust and efficient with all the advantages of a multi-tool system.

PERFORMANCE

★★★★★

EASE OF USE

★★★★★

VALUE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

MULTI-CHANGE LAWN EDGE IRON (WOLF-GARTEN)

PRODUCT CODE: RMM **FEATURES:** HALF MOON STAINLESS STEEL BLADE WITH TREADS. D GRIP, ALUMINIUM AND PLASTIC HANDLE. HEAD SLOTS INTO THE HANDLE. **OVERALL LENGTH:** 1000MM. **BLADE WIDTH:** 225MM. **WEIGHT:** 822G. **PRICE:** HEAD £17.99, HANDLE £9.99

The beauty of any multi-change tool is that you only have to store one handle, but a wide range of heads can be fitted as needed. This is a robust tool with a broad head and a comfortable handle. The head is less pointed than some, and may not be so smooth an action on stony soil, but on most soils it cuts cleanly and with little effort. The blade can be used to flip the cut sod over and it's easy to cut a straight line if following a string.



EXPERT STAINLESS STEEL LAWN EDGER (DRAPER TOOLS)

PRODUCT CODE: 44979 **FEATURES:** STAINLESS STEEL BLADE, HALF MOON WITH TURNOVER TREADS. T SHAPED, FSC CERTIFIED ASH HANDLE. THE HANDLE IS FIXED INTO A STAINLESS STEEL FERRULE. **OVERALL LENGTH:** 940MM. **BLADE WIDTH:** 215MM. **WEIGHT:** 808G. **LIST PRICE:** £37.56 (BUT MUCH CHEAPER FROM SOME ONLINE SUPPLIERS).

I really like this tool. It looks great, has a good length handle and cuts a neat edge without any fuss or bother. The slightly pointed blade is easy to locate each time you move along an edge and it's pretty easy to eyeball a straight line and cut to it. The ferrule — where the wooden handle fits to the head — is strong and the handle is slim and comfortable. The blade is easy to wipe clean and to restore the shine. ➤

KG Verdict

A well-made tool that is a pleasure to use. Makes it easy to cut a neat line.

PERFORMANCE

★★★★★

EASE OF USE

★★★★★

VALUE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★





GARDEN LIGHT EDGING KNIFE (FISKARS)

PRODUCT CODE: 136505 **FEATURES:** PLASTIC COATED ALUMINIUM HANDLE. THE HEAD IS FIXED INTO THE HANDLE. **OVERALL LENGTH:** 995MM. **BLADE WIDTH:** 200MM. **WEIGHT:** 600G. **PRICE:** £29.99

This extra-light tool may suit someone with back problems. It really is as light as you could imagine and is good for cutting fiddly curves or for trimming lawn edges. Not as big a blade, or as strong as some for cutting larger sods, but the handle is a good length and it hardly feels like you are using a tool when edging. If you want to keep a small lawn in order then this tool would do the job.

KG Verdict

Ultra-light and comfortable to use. Ideal for gardeners with back problems or small plots.

PERFORMANCE
★★★★★

EASE OF USE
★★★★★

VALUE
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

KG Verdict

An unusual design for a tool that can cut deep and fast. Perfect for larger gardens.

PERFORMANCE
★★★★★

EASE OF USE
★★★★★

VALUE
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

ROCK ON EDGER (DARLAC)

PRODUCT CODE: DP777 **FEATURES:** CURVED, SHARP, GALVANISED BLADE. RED COATED STEEL HANDLE. SELF-ASSEMBLY. THE HEAD ATTACHES TO THE HANDLE WITH A BOLT. **OVERALL LENGTH:** 960MM. **BLADE WIDTH:** 310MM. **WEIGHT:** 1588G. **PRICE:** £24.95

If you have a lot of edging to do, or want to cut curves for a new bed, then this tool will take on the task. It does take a little getting used to — you have to lift the handle to help move the foot with the tool as you move forward; and you can't really see where to place the blade in relation to the previous cut, so need to follow a line with the footplate — but once you get it, you are flying! It's heavier than most and the blade may rust over time, but it's built for tackling tough edging jobs.



TOP TIP

Use string and sticks to mark a line and follow this to get the best straight edge.



STAINLESS STEEL EDGING BLADE (WILKINSON SWORD)

PRODUCT CODE: 111115W **FEATURES:** HALF MOON, STAINLESS STEEL BLADE WITH FOLD OVER TREADS. T GRIP, WEATHERPROOFED ASH HANDLE. THE HANDLE IS FIXED INTO A STAINLESS STEEL FERRULE. **OVERALL LENGTH:** 890MM. **BLADE WIDTH:** 215MM. **WEIGHT:** 879G. **PRICE:** £29.99

Another simple but beautifully designed tool. It does what it should and looks and feels lovely while it is doing it. The handle is a little shorter and the tool is a little heavier than my top pick, but this comes a very close second and for someone shorter than me it might top the list! Strong ferrule, blade and handle design means this tool should last a long time. The blade cuts well and wipes clean to leave the original polished shine. ■

KG Verdict

Well-made, lovely design, strong and easy to use. Ideal for short gardeners.

PERFORMANCE
★★★★★

EASE OF USE
★★★★★

VALUE
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

Over two million satisfied gardeners can't be wrong



The Mantis Tiller is the ultimate versatile garden power tool, with attachments available for lawncare, planting and more. Why work harder than you need to? Let your Mantis do the work.

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GROWING GUIDES

WEBSITES AND BLOGS FOR ALLOTMENT GARDENERS BY HELEN GAZELEY



Rainbow Trugs make colourful planters.

Rainbow Trugs www.rainbowtrugs.com 01386 427110

Since trugs appeared on the market a few years ago, they've proved invaluable as everything from waste-tidiers to water reservoirs and plant holders, and since 2007, Paul Barratt and his wife have developed a colourful range in sizes from 14-75 litres. Made in Britain, they are, he says, the sturdiest on the market. Videos on the website not only demonstrate their robust nature but also a wide range of uses. Accessories include a lid and a riddle for compost sieving.

Once you've got one, you can enter the monthly competition for the best picture of a trug in action, which means you get a chance to own more of the range.



A handy riddle accessory is also available for sieving large lumps from compost.

Loose and Leafy <http://looseandleafy.blogspot.co.uk>

Blogging since 2008, Lucy Corrandar writes mainly about hedgerow plants and trees around her home in Dorset. The blog is very much about observation – looking at pollinators and following particular views to see how they alter during the seasons.

She also follows trees and invites readers to do the same, documenting what they see. It would be a lovely way to get to understand your fruit tree better, and a chance to exchange notes with other tree followers. Lucy will either link to a tree-following post on your blog or is happy to include your text and photos on her own. Expert knowledge isn't necessary. Lucy says: "I'm not a scientist. For most of the time I don't even know what I'm looking at. But it makes you more aware of small things."



The Smallest Smallholding www.smallestsmallholding.com

Lucy Debenham found herself out of kilter with her generation when she started eagerly awaiting Gardeners' World each week. As she says: "Not your usual programme of choice for a 24-year-old." Seven years on, she blogs about the trials, tribulations and successes on her smallholding – "really just a large garden" – as she pursues a vegan way of life. You'll also find a sprinkling of show and product reviews and useful information and links on rehoming battery hens, of which she used to have four.



Chocolate garden tools from Schokolat.

Schokolat <http://schokolat.co.uk> 0800 612 0522

With Easter coming up this month, chocolate is bound to feature. Schokolat offers the chance to break away from eggs with some astonishingly lifelike edible tools. Made from Belgian chocolate (60% cocoa solids) and cleverly coloured to resemble aged metal and wood, the range even includes tools with moving parts. For the gardener, there's a choice of secateurs, a garden tap and antique shears. Placed next to genuine old tools, they really are difficult to tell apart without looking closely.

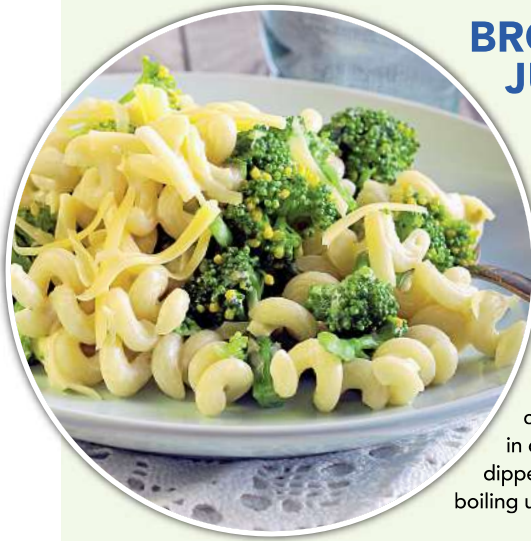


WHY NOT LOG ON TO WWW.KITCHENGARDEN.CO.UK



KG WEBSITE FORUM

Join our friendly forum and find lots of growing tips. [Go to www.kitchengarden.co.uk](http://www.kitchengarden.co.uk)



BROCCOLI IS NOT JUST FOR BOILING!

Q: What are the alternatives to simply boiling broccoli?

Piegirl

■ I always steam it.

Peter, Near Stansted

■ Use the large heads mixed with cauliflower to make a different cauliflower cheese. Small purple sprouting can be added to stir fries. Both can be used in quiches. Spears can be used like asparagus dipped in butter or any sauce of your choice. If boiling use very little water and don't overcook.

Beryl, Gosport, Hants

■ I make broccoli and cauliflower cheese. I add it, lightly steamed, to pasta with a creamy sauce. Also add it to veggie curries, roast it for roast vegetable quiches or pizzas.

Catherine, Pendle, Lancs

■ I blanch broccoli in small florets and then just before the meal is ready I stir fry it with garlic in a very hot oil adding a little Chinese rice wine (or very dry sherry). It's yummy, but not nearly as healthy as just steaming it.

Chantal, Rugby, Warwicks

LET'S TALK VEG

HERE ARE A FEW TIPS & IDEAS FROM THE KG INTERNET COMMUNITY


Kitchen Garden reader poll

Here are the results of the latest reader poll posted on our website.

HOW DO YOU START OFF YOUR SPRING SOWINGS?

- ★ In a tray/propagator on the windowsill 29%
- ★ In tray/propagator in the greenhouse 27%
- ★ I sow all my seeds direct into the soil when conditions allow 7%
- ★ I use a mixture of the above 37%
- ★ I don't sow but buy my plants in as plug plants 0%



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BEAN TRENCH TREATMENT

After digging a bean trench in winter I laid whole wet newspapers folded over in the bottom. To this I added a mulch of seaweed gathered from my local beach and washed with clean rainwater in a water butt. I shall use the liquid diluted as a fertiliser during the cropping season. I also added compost from my bins and rotted leaves and then infilled with soil taken off the top when digging the trench. My runner beans love this treatment and I look forward to another bumper crop.

Mike Race



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GIVEAWAYS

**WORTH
OVER
£1983**

TO ENTER OUR GIVEAWAYS SEE PAGE 104 OR VISIT THE **KG** WEBSITE



**4
TO GIVE
AWAY**

TOPSOIL IN THE BAG

Good soil is the basis of a successful garden, so if yours could use improvement, set yourself up for the season with a delivery of quality topsoil. Rolawn Vegetable and Fruit Topsoil is a consistent blend of fertile, friable topsoil and soil conditioners formulated to suit a wide variety of edible crops.

Rolawn topsoil is sourced from prime arable land, not brownfield sites or skip waste, so it is a sustainable and safe product. It is peat-free and does not contain manures, which can be variable and, in some instances, potentially harmful. It is screened to 20mm (¾in), with minimal stone content, and analysed to BS3882:2007, the British standard for topsoil. It breaks down readily, retains moisture naturally and is friable even when wet. Typically classed as a sandy loam, it has an organic matter content of 6% and a pH of around 7.6, and



contains sufficient nutrients for the initial establishment stages of most crops.

Rolawn Vegetable and Fruit Topsoil is supplied in 1m³ bulk bags, which minimise waste and mess and are easy to store.

The average price including delivery to a UK mainland address is £130 per bag. There is approximately

50% more in a 1m³ bag than in a tonne of ordinary topsoil, so this offers excellent value for money.

For more information on Rolawn products and services visit www.rolawn.co.uk/direct or call 0845 604 6050. And there's a bonus offer for

KG readers: quote code 'KGAPR14' to claim a 10% discount on any order placed by phone or on the website before April 30, 2014.

We have four bags of Vegetable and Fruit Topsoil, worth an average of £130 each, to give away.

MAKE CHILD'S PLAY OF DIY

If building has somehow never been the same since you were knee-high and used click-together blocks, WoodBlocX could restore your faith in DIY. An ingenious product for garden landscaping, it lets you create strong raised beds, planters, retaining walls, terracing, kerbing, ponds, greenhouse bases, and garden features like seats, in whatever size or shape you need.

The chunky FSC pine BlocX fit together using large plastic dowels which have a patented locking action. The many connections make the finished structure rigid, so WoodBlocX structures need no foundations and will not crack or break with ground movement or frost. WoodBlocX has more strength than masonry in some situations because it can withstand tension forces as well as compression.

The wood is pressure-treated twice and can be expected to last at least 20 years. The pieces are light enough to carry and are pre-drilled, so you can put them together using only a hammer and a couple of other household tools. The strong overlapped corner joints require no nails or screws, and bevelled capping gives an elegant finish. WoodBlocX is available in kits or you can use the online calculator to work out which components you need for your own design. Alternatively, WoodBlocX offers a free design service. Full instructions are provided, including a layer by layer plan to aid construction, and the company aims to deliver within a week.

Prices start at £89 – and there's a discount for KG readers. Place any order online before April 30, 2014, quoting code 'KGAPRIL' and you'll get a 5% discount. To find out more, call 0800 389 1420 or visit www.woodblocx.co.uk

We have a £500 WoodBlocX voucher to give away.



**£500
VOUCHER
TO GIVE
AWAY**



TO ENTER GO TO WWW.KITCHENGARDEN.CO.UK/COMPETITIONS



HOLD ON TO THE HEAT!

An early start to the season doesn't need to mean cold feet: Heat Holders keep your feet seven times warmer than normal cotton socks. As far as has ever been tested, they are the warmest thermal socks in the world, with a tog rating of 2.34 and a unique patent-pending extra long-looped thermal pile.

Their gentle grip prevents the rubbing or discomfort that may be experienced from a sock with a lower tog rating. Their advanced insulating yarn also provides superior moisture wicking, while the soft brushed inner adds comfort.

Heat Holders are available in a variety of colours and styles and come in men's, women's and children's sizes. Heat Holders Originals cost £10 for men (one size fits 6-11) and women (4-8) and £5 for children (9-1½ and 2-5½).

Heat Holders are available from various high-street retailers and from www.heatholders.com For details of colours and styles, visit the website, Twitter @HeatHolderSocks or www.facebook.com/heatholders

We have 12 prizes of three pairs of Heat Holders Originals – a men's, a women's and a children's pair, worth £25 – to give away. Colours will vary.



12
PRIZES TO GIVE AWAY

GREENER CARE FOR LUSHER LAWNS

Eco-friendly gardeners can look forward to greener, thicker, more attractive lawns this summer thanks to new organic lawn care products from Neudorff.

The 100% natural Organic Lawn Feed & Improver (£12.49 for 5kg) contains a unique combination of soil-revitalising microorganisms and naturally occurring mycorrhiza fungi that ensures particularly strong and healthy roots and growth. The mycorrhiza fungi increase the roots' surface area by up to 150 times, enabling them to absorb water and nutrients more effectively. This promotes resistance to drought and frost.

New Organic Moss Control for Lawns Concentrate (£9.99 for 1 litre) fights moss effectively and in an eco-friendly way. The

active ingredient in this biodegradable product is pelargonic acid, which occurs naturally in plants. This guarantees fast, visible results without harming the lawn. Organic Moss Control for Lawns works even at low temperatures and doesn't leave stains on concrete or stones. Once it has dried, pets can be released into treated areas without concern.

Our Neudorff prize packages also include Organic Tomato & Vegetable Food (£5.99 for 2kg) for high yields of well-flavoured crops.

For more information or to find your nearest stockist visit www.neudorff.co.uk

We have 11 prizes worth £28.47 containing all three of the above products, to give away.



11
PRIZES TO GIVE AWAY



GOOD FOOD FESTIVAL

The Exeter Festival of South West Food & Drink is back for 2014, running from Friday to Sunday, April 25-27, in the beautiful surroundings of Exeter Castle and Northernhay Gardens.

Now in its 11th year, the festival celebrates the outstanding food and drink of the South West. Visitors can learn from the best in the Festival Cookery Theatre, where a line-up of culinary talent will feature in demonstrations, cook-offs and masterclasses. More than 100 artisan producers from across the region will be showcasing their food and drink, while the Darts Farm Food is Fun teepees will be serving up workshops, masterclasses and talks. The Little Cookies area offers food-themed activities for children. After Dark party nights on the Thursday (24th), Friday and Saturday evenings combine local food, ales and ciders with live music.

Tickets cost £7.50 per day pass, £12 for a combined day and After Dark pass or £17.50 for a weekend pass allowing entry on all three days including After Dark. Children's tickets cost £1 per day or £3 for the weekend, and under-fives go free. For more information or to buy tickets visit www.exeterfoodanddrinkfestival.co.uk

We have 10 pairs of weekend passes, worth £35 per pair, to give away.



10
PAIRS OF PASSES TO GIVE AWAY

OR YOU CAN FILL IN YOUR DETAILS ON THE GIVEAWAYS FORM – PAGE 104

READER OFFERS



EXCLUSIVE SAVINGS TO GET YOUR SEASON OFF TO A GREAT START

FREE*

FOR EVERY READER

50 SALAD PLANTS

* YOU PAY JUST £4.95 P&P

Perfect for getting speedy crops, these veg plants are grown on the nursery and are subject to the greatest care, up until they are ready for planting out, when they will be delivered direct to you. This collection will keep your salad bowl full and includes:

- 10 plants of lettuce 'Bijou'
- 10 plants of lettuce 'Soleison'
- 10 plants of beetroot 'Solist'
- 20 plants of spring onion 'White Lisbon'



**WORTH
£14.88**



SWEETHEART CABBAGE COLLECTION

The pointed, or sweetheart, cabbages in this collection have a looser leaf and much sweeter flavour and a softer texture than the ball-headed types. Our collection includes three great-tasting varieties:

■ **'HISPI F1'** – The finest pointed summer cabbage, the flavour and texture are quite superb.

■ **'ADVANTAGE F1'** – This versatile performer is tender and delicious when grown as unheated greens or left to form a heart.

■ **'DUTCHMAN F1'** – An incredibly mild and sweet 'Duchy' type which is both very attractive and a good cropper.

– 15 PLANTS, FIVE OF EACH JUST £5.95!



Cabbage 'Advantage F1'

**SAVE
UP TO £14
THIS MONTH**

LEEK COLLECTION

– 60 PLANTS, 30 OF EACH £7.90

This leek plant collection is made up of two different varieties chosen for their different cropping time to give you leeks ready for digging for up to eight months of the year. The first variety, 'Carlton F1', is ready for harvesting from August and will stand in the ground through to October. 'Sultan F1' takes over in November and provides harvests right through to March.



OIGNONS DOUX DU BOURBONNAIS

– 40 PLANTS £6.95

This mild onion from the Cevennes region in south central France is highly prized by chefs for its mild and deliciously sweet flavour. This superb flavour can be savoured when eaten raw or cooked and the satin-like appearance and pale skin makes it an attractive addition to any plate.



GET THESE GREAT OFFERS AND MANY MORE ONLINE:

Come & join us!

Popular gardening magazine *Kitchen Garden* is looking for an enthusiastic, talented and ambitious journalist to join its ranks. The job involves everything from news writing, product reviews and feature writing to blogging, Twittering and Facebooking.

If you love growing fruit and veg, have an understanding of what works and what doesn't and the curiosity required to be a great journalist, plus the ability to communicate clearly and entertainingly, this is almost certainly the best job in the world.

Previous experience and a journalism qualification are desirable, but not essential. You will, however, need the ability to write, spell and punctuate properly. You will also need to be reliable, dependable and professional. The job is based at our offices in Horncastle, Lincolnshire.

How to apply

To apply for the job please send your CV, a review of your favourite piece of gardening equipment (200 words) and a piece (500 words) explaining what's happening on your veg plot right now to:

Recruitment@mortons.co.uk, quoting reference number ED33, or write to: Recruitment, Mortons Media Group, Morton Way, Horncastle, Lincolnshire LN9 6JR.

■ The closing date for applications is Monday, April 7, 2014.



WE ARE HIRING

Kitchen Garden
Incorporating *Grow it!*

DIARY DATES

SHOWS, SWAPS AND COURSES: THERE IS SO MUCH TO SEE AND DO THIS MONTH

GARDEN SHOW AND FESTIVALS

CORNWALL SPRING FLOWER SHOW

APRIL 5-6. Baconnoc, near Lostwithiel. 07734 366504
www.cornwallgardensociety.org.uk

SECRET GARDEN SUNDAY APRIL 6, MAY 4. RHS Lindley Hall, Vincent Square, London SW1. Local food and grow-your-own stalls, advice, workshops; 10am-4pm.

www.rhs.org.uk/shows-events

SPRING GARDENING SHOW

APRIL 11-13. Capel Manor Gardens, Bullsmoor Lane, Enfield, Middlesex. 10am-5pm. 08456 122122

www.capelmanorgardens.co.uk

CARDIFF FLOWER SHOW APRIL

11-13. Bute Park, Cardiff Castle. 10am-5.30pm (4.30pm Sunday)
www.rhs.org.uk/shows-events

LOSELEY SPRING GARDEN SHOW

APRIL 25-27. Loseley Park, Guildford, Surrey. Plant and food stalls in the walled garden, 10am-5pm. 01483 304440
www.loseleypark.co.uk

MALVERN SPRING FESTIVAL

MAY 8-11. The Three Counties Showground, Malvern, Worcestershire. 9am-5pm. 01684 584924
www.threecounties.co.uk

GARDEN FESTIVAL IRELAND

MAY 9-11. Antrim Castle Gardens, Randalstown Road, Antrim. Grow-your-own workshops and cookery; 10am-6pm.
www.gardenshowireland.com



Display by Neath Port Talbot College in the Learn and Grow Marquee at the Cardiff Flower Show, on April 11-13.

DEVON CHILLI FIESTA MAY 10-11.

RHS Garden Rosemoor, Great Torrington, Devon. 10-4pm. 0845 265 8072

www.rhs.org.uk/gardens/rosemoor

ROYAL WELSH SPRING FESTIVAL

MAY 17-18. Royal Welsh Showground, Builth Wells, Powys. Smallholding, gardening and sustainable living. 01982 553683
www.rwas.co.uk

CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW MAY

20-24. Royal Hospital, Chelsea, London SW3.
www.rhs.org.uk/flowershows

HERBS AND CUT FLOWERS

LEARNING TO GROW HERBS

APRIL 2. Doddington Hall, near Lincoln. Propagation, cultivation, herb garden planning; 10am-4pm. Book on 07758 730462
www.doddingtonhall.com

HOW TO GROW A CUT FLOWER

GARDEN APRIL 4. RHS Garden Harlow Carr, Harrogate, Yorkshire. Site, varieties, planting, growing, cutting – talk and practical; 10am-4pm. Book on 0845 6121253
www.rhs.org.uk/harlowcarr

GROW YOUR OWN CUT FLOWERS

APRIL 5. West Dean Gardens, West Dean, Chichester, West Sussex. Site, varieties, cultivation; 9am-5pm. Book on 01243 811301
www.westdean.org.uk

GROWING HERBS FOR THE

KITCHEN APRIL 9. RHS Garden Harlow Carr, Harrogate, Yorkshire. Propagation, cultivation and use; 10am-4pm. Book on 0845 6121253
www.rhs.org.uk/harlowcarr

HERB GARDEN DESIGN APRIL 12.

Jekka's Herb Farm, Rose Cottage, Shellards Lane, Alveston, Bristol. Practical master class with Jekka; 10am-4.30pm. Book on 01454 418878
www.jekkasherbfarm.com

HERB PROPAGATION APRIL 26.

Jekka's Herb Farm, Rose Cottage, Shellards Lane, Alveston, Bristol. Practical master class with Jekka; 10am-4.30pm. Book on 01454 418878
www.jekkasherbfarm.com

THE CUTTING GARDEN MAY 7.

Waterperry Gardens, Waterperry, near Wheatley, Oxfordshire. How to grow flowers for cutting even in the smallest spaces, 10.30am-3.30pm. Book on 01844 339254
www.waterperrygardens.co.uk >

PLEASE NOTE

We have made every effort to ensure these details are correct at the time of going to press, but recommend you check with organisers before travelling.



Herbs and cut flowers in the beautiful walled kitchen garden at Doddington Hall, near Lincoln.

KG APRIL GIVEAWAYS

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VEG GROWING COURSES

NO-DIG GARDENING APRIL 5 OR 9.

Alhampton, Shepton Mallet, Somerset. Veg and fruit growing with Charles Dowding, 10.30am-4pm. Book on 01749 860292 www.charlesdowding.co.uk

VEGETABLES ALL YEAR ROUND

APRIL 10. Barnsdale Gardens, The Avenue, Exton, Oakham, Rutland. Practical course for both novices and the more experienced. 10am-3.30pm. Book on 01572 813200 www.barnsdalegardens.co.uk

PLAN YOUR OWN VEGETABLE

GARDEN APRIL 15. Doddington Hall, near Lincoln. Talk and tour of the kitchen garden; 9am-12pm. Book on 01522 812510 www.doddingtonhall.com

GROWING A MINI VEG PLOT

APRIL 23. RHS Garden Harlow Carr, Harrogate, Yorkshire. Create an attractive and productive plot in the smallest of gardens; 10am-12.30pm. Book on 0845 6121253 www.rhs.org.uk/harlowcarr

NO-DIG GARDENING APRIL 27.

West Dean College, West Dean, Chichester, West Sussex. Day course with Charles Dowding, 9am-5pm. Book on 01243 811301 www.westdean.org.uk

THE VEGETABLE GARDEN IN SUMMER MAY 7 OR 8.

RHS Garden Wisley, Woking, Surrey. Practical day on summer veg, 10.30am-4pm. Book on 0845 6121253 www.rhs.co.uk/gardens/wisley

VEGETABLE WORKSHOP MAY 13.

Hinton Ampner, near Alresford, Hampshire. What to sow and when, 10.30am-1pm. Book on 01962 771305 www.nationaltrust.org.uk/hinton-ampner

EDIBLE HANGING BASKETS MAY 23.

RHS Garden Harlow Carr, Harrogate, Yorkshire. Veg, herbs and salads for containers and baskets, 10am-12pm. Book on 0845 6121253 www.rhs.org.uk/harlowcarr



Plant stalls at the Red Cross open day, Hampton Court Castle, April 30

OPEN DAYS

JEKKA'S HERB FARM OPEN DAYS

APRIL 4-5, MAY 2-3, MAY 30-31. Jekka's Herb Farm, Rose Cottage, Shellards Lane, Alveston, Bristol. Look round the herbetum, buy herbs and seeds; 10am-4pm. 01454 418878 www.jekkasheerbfarm.com

MEET THE BEEKEEPER APRIL 25 AND MAY 30. Hinton Ampner, near Alresford, Hampshire. Beekeeping advice in the orchard. 2.15-3.15pm. 01962 771305 www.nationaltrust.org.uk/hinton-ampner

GREAT SPRING GARDENING EVENT

APRIL 30. Hampton Court Castle, near Leominster, Herefordshire. Open day and stalls (in aid of the British Red Cross); 10.30am-4.30pm. 01432 373020 www.redcross.org.uk/gardeningevent

SPRING VEGETABLE WEEKEND

MAY 17-18. Barnsdale Gardens, The Avenue, Exton, Oakham, Rutland. View the allotments areas and greenhouses, expert advice; from 11am. 01572 813200 www.barnsdalegardens.co.uk

OTHER COURSES

GROWING AND PRUNING FIGS, STONE FRUITS, VINES AND LOQUATS APRIL 5.

Waterperry Gardens, near Wheatley, Oxford. Talk and demonstrations on how to produce the best crops. 10.30am-3.30pm. 01844 339254 www.waterperrygardens.co.uk

COMPOSTING APRIL 7.

Barnsdale Gardens, The Avenue, Exton, Oakham, Rutland. 10.30am-12.30pm. Book on 01572 813200 www.barnsdalegardens.co.uk

KEEPING HENS IN THE GARDEN

APRIL 12. West Dean Garden, West Dean, Chichester, West Sussex. Talk on choosing and looking after hens; 2-4pm. Book on 01243 811301 www.westdean.org.uk

KEEPING CHICKENS MAY 3.

RHS Garden Harlow Carr, Harrogate, Yorkshire. Essentials for beginners; 10am-1pm. Book on 0845 6121253 www.rhs.org.uk/harlowcarr

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GET COOKING

What's in store?

This month Anna Pettigrew and Gaby Bartai are taking what may still be left in store including onions, squash and potatoes and turning them into something special



Caramelised red onion pizza with olives, anchovies & goat's cheese

This pizza looks gorgeous and tastes gorgeous! The sweet caramelised red onions work tremendously well with the anchovies by balancing out their sharp, salty flavour. Make the pizza dough by hand or use your bread machine's dough setting. You can't beat home-made pizza made with your own harvested onions.

Makes two large pizzas or four individual pizzas

FOR THE DOUGH:

- 300g (10½oz) organic strong white flour
- 170ml (5¾fl oz) lukewarm water
- 2 tbsp organic olive oil
- 1 tsp salt
- ½ tsp easy bake yeast

TOPPING:

- 2 medium red onions
- 2 tbsp sugar
- ½ jar green pesto
- 1 tin (80g/3oz) anchovies
- 10-12 pitted Kalamata olives
- 125g (4½oz) roll of goat's cheese
- 1 knob butter
- Black pepper

1. Start by making the dough either by hand or with your bread machine (follow manufacturer's guidelines). To make the dough by hand, mix the dry ingredients in a large bowl, then add the lukewarm water, incorporating it all to make a soft dough. Tip out on to a floured work surface, knead for 10 minutes until the dough is smooth and elastic.
2. Place in a covered bowl and leave to rise for an hour.
3. Peel the red onions and slice finely into rings. Add a knob of butter to a large frying pan and heat the onions gently until soft. Now add the sugar. Continue to fry until all the sugar has dissolved and has covered the onions in a thin coating of caramel.
4. Preheat oven to 220°C/200°C fan/gas mark 6.
5. Turn out the dough and knead briefly, divide into two or four pieces, depending on your preference, and using a rolling pin roll the dough pieces to 5mm (¼in) thickness.
6. Line baking trays with greaseproof paper and place the pizza bases on to the trays. Evenly spread the pesto over the pizzas, then add slices of goat's cheese, anchovies, olives, and finally scatter the caramelised onions over the top. Finish by grinding fresh black pepper over the pizzas.
7. Bake for 10-12 minutes until the crust is golden.
8. Serve with a side salad.



Stuffed onions with mushroom, white wine & chard

Although upholding the foundations of almost all savoury dishes, the onion rarely takes centre stage. This dish takes advantage of the onions' excellent ability to be stuffed, offering numerous flavour combinations. Try stuffing them with ground lamb and tomato or beans and rice.

Serves 4

- 4 large onions, red or brown
- 250g (9oz) chestnut mushrooms
- 1 garlic clove
- 100ml (3½fl oz) white wine
- 125g (4½oz) cottage cheese
- 2 big handfuls of spinach/chard or kale
- 2 tbsp pumpkin seeds
- Salt and pepper

1. Preheat oven to 200°C/190°C fan/gas mark 6
2. Cut 1cm (½in) off from the bottoms of the onions, so they can stand flat. Wrap each onion in foil and bake until soft in the oven for 30 minutes. Remove from the oven, unwrap and leave until cool enough to handle.
3. Peel the onions and hollow out the middle, using a melon scoop or small knife, leaving the outer three layers to form a shell, and place back into the baking dish. Save four heaped tablespoons of the onion flesh, chop and set aside (save the rest for another use).
4. Heat the olive oil in a large frying pan and add the chopped onions, mushrooms and spinach/chard and sauté for a few minutes. Next add the garlic and half the white wine, heat through. Finally add the cottage cheese, season to taste and scoop the stuffing into the hollow onions.
5. Brush the outsides of the onions with olive oil. Pour the remaining wine into the baking dish.
6. Roast until the onions are tender and golden for 30 minutes. Carefully lift each onion from the baking dish and serve hot with couscous or mashed potatoes and gravy. ►



Sprouting broccoli, sweetcorn & mushroom soup

Chinese-style soups (and stir-fries) are ideal for sprouting broccoli; cooking it quickly at a high heat preserves its colour and texture. This is a soup full of lively flavours.

Serves 2

- 1 tbsp vegetable oil
- ½ small leek, trimmed and sliced
- 1 clove garlic, peeled and crushed
- 1cm (½in) slice of root ginger, peeled and finely chopped
- 60g (2¼oz) sprouting broccoli (prepared weight), trimmed and separated into small florets
- 600ml (1pt) vegetable stock
- 1 tbsp cornflour
- 60g (2¼oz) button mushrooms, sliced
- 60g (2¼oz) sweetcorn
- 1 tbsp light soy sauce
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

1. Heat the oil in a large pan. Add the leek, garlic and ginger and saute them over a moderate heat for two minutes.
2. Add the broccoli and stir-fry it for another two minutes, then add 100ml (3½fl oz) of the stock, turn the heat down, cover the pan and let it simmer for five minutes.
3. Put the cornflour into a bowl with a tablespoonful of stock and mix to a paste.
4. Add the rest of the stock, the mushrooms and the sweetcorn to the soup and let it simmer for three minutes.
5. Add the cornflour paste and soy sauce and stir until the soup thickens, then season to taste with salt and pepper.

flavourful dish!



Spiced roast potatoes & squash

Potatoes and squash are a happy match, and both welcome the company of curry spices. This would work well as an accompaniment to roast chicken or pork or you could serve it as a snack or starter with natural yoghurt and a fruity chutney.

Serves 2

- 325g (11½oz) potatoes, peeled and cut into bite-sized chunks
- 2 tsp cumin seeds
- 2 tsp coriander seeds
- ½ tsp black peppercorns
- 1 tsp ground turmeric
- ¼ tsp salt
- 3 tbsp vegetable oil
- 325g (11½oz) winter squash, peeled and cut into bite-size chunks
- 1 mild red chilli, finely chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled and crushed

1. Parboil the potatoes in unsalted water for eight minutes, then drain them, cover the pan and shake it vigorously to rough up their surfaces.
2. Crush the cumin and coriander seeds and the peppercorns with a mortar and pestle, then mix in the turmeric and salt.
3. Measure the oil into a large roasting tray and put it into the oven at 200°C/400°F/gas mark 6 for five minutes.
4. Tip the potatoes and squash into the hot oil, add the spice mix and stir everything around so that all the pieces are coated. Put the tray back into the oven for 20 minutes.
5. Add the chilli and garlic to the tray, give everything another stir, and return it to the oven for another 20 minutes.

Cheese, onion & potato pasties

Inspired by – but better than – the ones you can eat out of a paper bag on the high street, these pasties are the perfect antidote to a winter that won't go away.

Serves 4

- 250g (9oz) floury potatoes, peeled and diced
- 1 tbsp vegetable oil
- 1 medium onion, peeled and diced
- 20g (¾oz) butter
- 80g (2¾oz) mature Cheddar, grated
- 1 tsp English mustard
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 400g (14oz) puff pastry
- 1 egg, beaten

1. Boil the potatoes until they are tender, then drain them and let them steam dry.
2. Heat the oil in a frying pan and saute the onion over a gentle heat for five minutes.
3. Add the butter to the potatoes and mash them well, then mix in the onion, Cheddar and mustard. Season to taste with salt and pepper.
4. Roll out the pastry into a 30cm (12in) square and then divide it into four 15cm (6in) squares.
5. Put a quarter of the potato mixture on to the lower half of each pastry square, leaving a clear border around the edges. Brush the borders with the beaten egg, then fold each square in half to form a rectangular parcel, crimping the edges together firmly to seal them. Brush the top of each pasty with egg and prick the tops with a fork.
6. Put the pasties on a baking tray and bake them at 190°C/375°F/gas mark 5 for 20 minutes, or until the pastry is crisp and golden.



Pasta with broccoli, salmon & cream

Classy but very quick and easy to make, this is my stand-by recipe for unexpected guests. As the year unfolds, you can substitute asparagus tips, baby broad beans, peas, mangetout or mushrooms for the broccoli. For a vegetarian version, omit the salmon and marry up two vegetables.

Serves 2

- 175g (6oz) pasta (dry weight)
- 100g (3½oz) sprouting broccoli (prepared weight), trimmed and separated into small florets
- 20g (¾oz) butter
- 100g (3½oz) smoked salmon trimmings, diced
- 300ml (½pt) single cream
- 2 tsp lemon juice, plus more to taste
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

1. Cook the pasta to al dente point, then drain it.
2. Steam the broccoli until it is just tender, then drain it.
3. Melt the butter in a frying pan over a gentle heat. Add the salmon and cook it until the pieces have just become opaque.
4. Add the pasta, broccoli, cream and lemon juice to the frying pan. Increase the heat and bring the cream to simmering point, then cook for another two minutes. Season to taste with salt and pepper. ■



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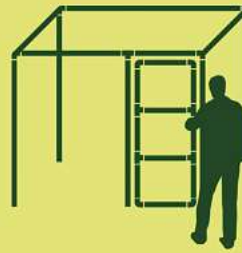
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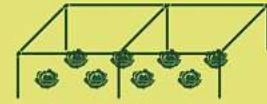
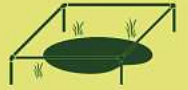


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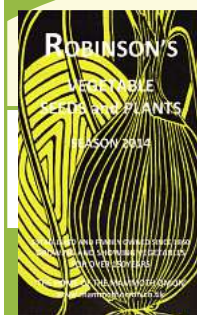
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LAST WORD



Charlye and Cecile (pictured right) have a very productive plot and the excess veg is sold at their local Country Market.



Country markets are a wonderful source of local produce and a great place to sell your excess veg as Charlye Woolman from Solihull explains

How many pastimes give you enjoyment, fellowship, and actually make money for you rather than the reverse? Kitchen gardening and the country markets complement each other like cheese and pickle.

Sharing your harvest and making jams and chutneys means you can turn excesses into a bonus rather than a problem. Your neighbours will no longer have to draw the curtains and pretend they are out during the courgette season. At the market there will be dozens of people who will happily pay for your lovely home-grown produce.

Country markets are organized as a collection of non-profit cooperatives. Anyone over the age of 16 can join. When goods are sold, most of the money goes to the producer, while a small percentage goes towards the running costs of the market.

Cecile and I retired early so that we could help look after my mother in her own home. There is a large garden and a greenhouse. We cleared out a jungle of weeds, renovated an orchard and planted fruit bushes and vegetables. We went on a beekeeping course as we liked the idea of producing honey and it seemed a natural complement to all the fruit trees that needed pollinating.

There is no pressure to produce more than you want to. Everybody's goods are mixed together and you serve

customers in whichever section you are put. Meanwhile you look for unfilled niches. If no one is bringing in beetroots, then that would be a good crop to grow.

For some produce e.g. tomatoes, there is a big demand and lots of people may bring them in. In that case you simply make sure that your produce is attractive to the buyer. You compete on quality not price. We use no pesticides on our crops and say so on our labels.

People like that. If you have half a dozen cauliflower heads but a couple of them have been damaged by slugs then only sell the good ones. The less good ones you can eat yourself or make into piccalilli.

Aim for variety. If you bring in 20 lettuces you will probably only sell half of them. If you bring in half a dozen each of three or four different things you may sell the lot. This is great for the amateur grower as it is much more fun to grow a miscellany of crops rather than lots of the same thing.

It's not just fruit and vegetables that you can sell at the market. Plants and cut flowers go well. In fact the market is for anything home-made or home-produced, including foods and crafts. Look at the national website www.country-markets.co.uk to find the market nearest you, or search Bentley Heath Country Market on YouTube for a short video. Join a country market – it's just what you have been looking for! ■



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