

Notes for Grow North session at Netherton November 5th 2016

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Shutdown Time (mostly)

If you're being successful at thinking like a plant you'll probably be feeling a bit sleepy by now. Light is minimal, it's getting cold, the soil's likely to be pretty wet and stay so for maybe 5 months. Even those crops which grow over winter virtually cease in December and January. The coldest time is, on average, about a month after the winter solstice but, by then, daylight has begun to increase enough to torpidly start the spring tussle between increasing light and lingering cold. Just now it's the converse: light is still dropping but there is some residual warmth in the soil and air.

Winter Crops

There are lots! All you need to do is think about them well in advance, find the space for them and manage their cropping effectively. Most are brassicas: purple sprouting broccoli (PSB), cabbages, kales, brussels sprouts, winter radish, turnip, swede (cauliflowers are more iffy, those wanting to crop between January and March will probably fail but earlier and later than that usually work well enough); others: jerusalem artichoke, leeks, parsnip. Critical to good yields is timely sowing and transplanting, I like to sow my leek / brassica seed bed by late March under cloches (mostly to protect against cabbage root fly but leeks benefit from the extra warmth) and get them transplanted by mid June. Swede need sowing in first half of May, parsnip in April, turnip and winter radish for autumn / winter about mid July. Be careful cropping your kales, if you pick too much in autumn they will produce less in spring when you may need them more, solution: grow a range of winter cabbages (savoy, ormskirk etc) and use these in mid winter instead.

Threats and defenses

The obvious threat is weather: wind, wet, cold. Climate change may reduce the latter but might increase the other two. Perhaps surprisingly I've found cold to be a minimal destructive problem for most moderately hardy crops, exceptions: winter cropping cauli, Dec--Feb cropping PSB. All varieties of winter leeks, autumn planting garlic, winter cabbage, kale, most brussels sprouts, late spring cauli, parsnips, have done fine. Shallow root crops can be turned to mush by serious cold: turnip, swede, beetroot, carrot, potato - mulching with straw or bracken can help a lot. Mulching also makes a nice home for pests like slugs, the sword has two edges. Snow is generally beneficial (soil beneath less frozen, crops protected) but pigeons and the like can't get at food and may devastate brassicas not covered by snow - I don't begrudge them this, they are only pests here when survival demands. Rats and mice tunnel under any garden protection like carpet, stones, bits of wood etc, and will happily chew on anything yummy (potatoes, carrots, turnips...), effective cats or poison are the only real solution if they become a severe problem. Strong wind can hurt bad, protection / staking the only real answers.

Checking stored crops

You store a crop, some of it will go bad, catch it before it spreads. A first check 3 or 4 weeks after harvest will likely pick up about half of those which will decay (moulds, rots, pests). Subsequent checks at about 6 week intervals advised. Applies to any stored crops: potatoes, onions, shallots, garlic, apples, pears, squashes...

Winter jobs

Generally nothing to do with working or walking on soil. Tree and shrub planting, transplanting and pruning (only for those that want winter pruning) is probably best done early (November) or late (early March) in winter, though if the weather threatens to be warm it could be wise to make the early later and / or the later earlier - dormancy is your friend. Defenses, repairs, cleaning tools pots etc, clearing brush / undergrowth, fencing, cutting back hedges and trees. Avoid removing weeds / grass unless you'll be short of time in spring; do what you can over winter rather than have it eat your time when you'll need it most.

Seed processing

Cleaning is iterative, any process that changes the proportion of seed to detritus is a step in the right direction. Make sure it's properly dry, store impervious to external moisture, cool, dark.

Perhaps surprising perennials / Plants wanting kind homes

Capsicums, runner beans / Tea Tree, several sage and rosemary that would like adoption.

This Year / Next Year

I hope you've learned things this year, make sure you don't forget - write some notes, especially if you haven't been doing so as you go along. Plan what and where you'll grow next year, do rotate crops like brassicas, onion family, potatoes. Check through your seed: make an inventory, what do you need, try some new varieties.

Thinking of Buying Seed?

Do and don't! Do think about it: what you'll need, what varieties and suppliers, most cost effective buying strategy. Don't buy yet - wait till the new year at least (unless there are varieties likely to be in short supply that you really must have), let the new season's supply get into stock. After all, you're not going to be sowing anything before late January at the earliest. Seed suppliers: the well known ones you see in shops tend to be expensive and rather meagre in quantity so try some other good ones. Do come to the TBI seed swap.

Practicals

Walk round, what's cropping now and will be over winter, cropping strategies.

Checking stored crops (potatoes, onions, shallots, ...)

Protecting crops in situ.

Processing / cleaning seeds (probably beans, kale; maybe tomatoes, lettuce)

Seed handout? Potatoes for tasting handout?

Suggested seed suppliers

Stormy Hall Biodynamic seeds that often germinate and grow more rapidly than others, control their own seed production - now distributed by the Seed Cooperative (seedcooperative.org.uk)

Seeds of Italy / Franchi (franchiseeds.co.uk) Long established family company that produces their own seed mostly in northern Italy. Not cheap (or expensive) but huge packet quantities, big and different range that often do well here.

Sow Seeds (sowseeds.co.uk) Nice if limited range, fair prices, good quality

The Real Seed Catalogue (realseeds.co.uk) Produce own seed in Pembrokeshire, promote seed saving, some unusual varieties, fair prices and quantities.

Suffolk Herbs / Kings Seeds (kingsseeds.com) Excellent herb range, good vegetable range. The Kings arm supply bulk seed esp. peas, beans, potatoes, onion sets, shallots for garden centres to sell on. Have a very good sweet pea range.

Poyntzfield (poyntzfieldherbs.co.uk) Our excellent local herb nursery produces seeds as well as plants, biodynamic, almost exclusively herbs.

Tamar Organics (tamarorganics.co.uk) Good range of organic seed, fair prices.

D. T. Brown (dtbrownseeds.co.uk) Good range and quality at reasonable prices, have a 99p range.

Lidl While I generally discourage buying seeds from shops Lidl sell ultra cheap (many 29p) seeds for a few weeks from about mid February that have performed quite well for me.

Amazon and **eBay** can be cheap and have unusual varieties, I've had mixed results but would consider for novel varieties that wouldn't matter too much if they failed.

Mainstream companies

T&M huge range, very expensive, sometimes have some reasonable offers

Suttons very good quality, expensive

Dobies very similar to Suttons

Mr Fothergills very expensive

Unwins expensive

Marshalls justly reputed for peas and beans which are OK value, otherwise expensive.

If using shops try to buy as early as possible in the new season when fresh stocks have come in. Warm temperatures and humidity can reduce seeds' lifetimes from several years to a very few months in not many weeks.