

GROW YOUR OWN GARDEN – MONTH BY MONTH

Seasonal notes have been prepared for each month. These notes are heavily based on resources such as Garden Organic “what to do now” website section, The Kitchen Garden magazine online and the book Vegetable Growing Month by Month by John Harrison. However they have been modified to suit growing conditions in the North of Scotland. As such, sowing and planting times are adapted, as well as advice about protecting crops, and what sort of fruit and vegetables to try growing. Additionally, low impact gardening techniques are promoted, such as using your own home made fertilizers rather than synthetic ones, and alternatives to heated propagators such as sowing in trays indoors.



Grow Your Own Garden in December & January

The cold weather arrived with snow before the end of November in 2010. This does restrict what can be done out in the garden, and even just heavy frosts can mean that it is not possible to dig the soil or plant out some over-winter crops, or plant new trees or bushes before the New Year if you miss your window of opportunity! While there is less to do in the garden, it is a good time to plan for the next season, and order your seeds. It is also a good time to plan any changes to infrastructure, such as polytunnels, greenhouse, water butts, raised beds etc. Think about providing for the wildlife in your garden, and make sure that there is some water that isn't frozen available for birds as well as plenty of food. While we need to protect some of our crops from birds such as pigeons, other garden birds will help during the spring and summer eating up slugs and caterpillars. At this time of year, you may also wish to add to the types of food you produce for yourself, and consider giving growing mushrooms a try and also sprouting beans and seeds and growing micro-greens (leafy crops which are sown thickly and harvested when young).

Jobs for December & January

- Begin pruning established apple and pear trees now that they are completely dormant and before they come into growth in early spring. Cut out diseased and crossing shoots and any suckers arising from the stem. Stems growing skywards (water shoots) can be removed to leave a framework of more horizontal fruiting branches. Cut back inward-growing shoots to 10cm (4in). There are many good books and references on pruning, and of course there are different styles and schools of thought which may contradict each other. You can also look online for some videos on pruning to see how it is done.
- Keep some fleece or cloches handy at all times to provide hardy leafy crops such as winter lettuce, mizuna and land cress with some protection in very cold spells.
- Lift winter vegetables while the soil is still workable and consider heeling in crops such as leeks, parsnips and carrots near the path or in a sheltered spot where they are not likely to become frozen into the soil.
- Cover cold frames containing young pea and brassica plants on cold nights with fleece or old carpet to help keep out the cold.
- Order your seeds for the spring
- Feed the birds! Many smaller birds are a great help to us in the spring when the caterpillars and greenfly hatch. Remember to supply the birds with water – thaw out frozen water with some warm water.
- Consider simple building projects for the garden, such as a cold frame. You can do this in the relative warmth of a garage, when there is less outdoor work to be done with your plants in the ground.
- Give your tools some care and attention. Scrub spades, forks and hoes with hot water, then dry thoroughly and wipe over with an oiled cloth to prevent rusting. Blades can be sharpened, a little too.
- Start chitting seed potatoes. Store the tubers in a light, cool, frost-free spot and leave them to sprout. This is known as “chitting”. Egg boxes make good chitting trays so start saving them now. Make sure you put the tubers with the 'eye' end - where the sprouts will grow from turned upwards.
- Check up on any over-wintered peas and broad beans, to determine how many you may wish to re-sow once it warms up.
- Clear out bird boxes ready for spring, and check for any damage or leaks that you can repair.

Sowing in January

- Broad beans
- Salad leaves
- Bulb onions
- Sprouting seeds
- Micro-greens
- Greenhouse / polytunnel tomatoes & peppers (towards end of January)
- Garlic (although better yields are achieved planting late in Autumn)

If you have suitable indoor space, make some early sowings in trays. Try lettuce, summer cabbage and cauliflowers, plus round varieties of carrots, spinach, salad onions and turnips. Germination temperatures of around 13 °C are adequate so a windowsill is fine to get these seeds going.

Planting in January

- Bare-rooted fruit trees and bushes
- Jerusalem artichokes
- Bare-rooted hedging
- Rhubarb

Snow, ice and frost in the Garden

During winter 2010 / 2011 we experienced several episodes of lying snow which lasted for several days or even weeks. The snow can affect your vegetable garden in terms of access to your crops, quality of the crops, and of course your infrastructure, e.g. greenhouses and polytunnels. During the winter months it is therefore a good idea to keep an eye on the weather forecast to know when to expect snow and take steps to protect your garden.

Disadvantages of Snow, ice and frost include:

- Frozen soil - this doesn't help if you want to harvest your leeks and beetroot.
- Freezing, thawing and re-freezing water – This can be bad for plant cells especially if this is happening in the crevices of vegetables or their leaves. It could also cause some diseases like rust or rot if the water it is in contact with the leaves for a period of time.
- Heavy weight – The weight of the snow could break or make plants collapse under its weight and some may not recover.
- No harvesting – Frozen soil, frozen leaves, or weight of snow on fleece are some reasons why harvesting may be delayed. You may need to wait for a break in the weather to be able to start harvesting again.
- No sowing seeds – Not that's there's much that can be sowed in December / January however nothing can be sown into frozen soil and germination rates are extremely slow in cold temperatures even on covered ground.
- Damage to infrastructure – Under the weight of snow, polytunnels may sometimes collapse, and damage may be done to glasshouses.

It is worth bearing in mind that there are some advantages that come with snow in the vegetable garden too.

Advantages of Snow include:

- Insulation - It can provide a cover to protect vegetables against frost and ice,
- Improved flavour - The dip in temperature can make vegetables like Brussels sprouts and parsnips have better flavour and sweetness,
- Pests reduced - Pest populations are hit hard by frosts and many pest communities like aphids will not survive to the spring. However a covering of snow can insulate and protect pests overwintering in the soil from subzero temperatures.

Protecting Your Garden & Your Crops

To protect vegetable plants from extreme drops in temperature they can be covered with:

- mulch (e.g. straw, conifer branches, compost, newspaper & cardboard, old carpet etc)
- polythene sheets / mini polythene tunnels
- Horticultural fleece – although this can become too heavy to lift if covered with dense snow.

While a thin layer of snow on top of your polytunnel or greenhouse may help to provide some insulation to the vegetable plants inside especially during sub zero conditions. It is worth remembering that snow can be rather heavy with a covering of just 2.5cm (1 inch) weighing up to 10kg per square metre . Keep an eye on the depth of snow on your polytunnel or greenhouse, and be prepared to clear the snow off. You may also wish to consider adding temporary timber props to the frame hoops of your tunnel on the inside to help add extra support.

Watch out for pigeons! If the snow settles, and stays for a while, pigeons will come into the garden to feed on the brassicas, like Brussels sprouts. It is safer to net the sprouts, so that the pigeons will be kept off them if they do visit the garden, but be prepared to remove the nets before heavy snow, which could make it impossible to gain access to the plants.

Another aspect of the cold weather to consider is your stored vegetables. If you are keeping your stored vegetables such as potatoes and onions in a shed or garage, be aware that during long cold spells, your vegetables may be frozen and spoiled as a result. You could consider temporarily moving your store indoors or adding some extra insulation to your store.

Prepare the Ground

Once all the snow has melted and the ground has thawed, it is time to prepare for the planting season! The days will be longer (slightly!) into January, and the temperature warmer so it's time to get to the first of the garden work! Preparing your vegetable garden will take a while and energy, but will make planting day so much easier and the harvest more successful! For those with heavy soils, this is the perfect time to dig, so that frosts can help break down newly turned clods. Digging heavy ground is hard work, and is best staggered over a few sessions to save your back.

The very first thing you must do is clean out the garden. Remove any dead plants from the previous gardening year. Some plants and roots will have completely decomposed and you can leave those to improve the soil. If there are any conspicuous stems, leaves or roots from your plants you are going to need to remove those from the garden. Compost healthy looking plant materials, but anything which looks diseased shouldn't be added to your garden compost, and you should either add to the Council green waste for recycling or incinerate in the garden.

Once your garden is clean you are going to need to start preparing your growing areas. If you haven't already done so in the autumn and early winter, then you should look into improving your soil. Some options at this time of year may include adding in your home made compost, seaweed from the beach, farmyard manure, leaf mould or any left over liquid fertiliser from last growing season. There are different approaches to how to add these, which essentially boil down to whether the materials are left on the surface for a period, or whether they are dug in straight away. If you have well drained soil, and you won't be planting out or sowing for a few weeks, which is likely in December / January then you may leave these on the surface, providing some cover. While a fresh application of seaweed for example may not be completely rotted by the time you come to plant out in the ground, it may have protected the soil surface and can be dug in when you are ready to use the ground.

Alternatively you can add your soil improving materials to the soil using a trench method. The same sorts of materials can be worked into the bottom of the trench, where the worms will redistribute it to improve soil consistency. Be systematic: remove a trench a spade's depth (also known as a "spit") deep and take it to the far end of the plot. This second method is more involved, but particularly useful in poorly drained soils, or in "new" growing areas which may have been compressed.

On "new" ground, where you are preparing beds, you can go through the same process. If it is lawn that you are taking up, turn the sod into the base of the trench where they will rot down, but on weed-infested ground you need to fork out live roots as you go. Super-heavy soils can have a generous layer of sharp grit spread over the surface after digging, but light soils are best dug at the end of the winter and the organic matter spread over the surface now. The mulch will protect the soil from winter rains and can be forked in late February and March.

Warm the soil

When winter is in full swing, the time to sow can seem a long way off, but in fact it won't be long before early crops can be sown outside. There are a few tricks you can use to ensure that when the time comes, your soil is in perfect condition to encourage good germination.

After you have prepared your ground by clearing weeds, digging and adding soil improvers, you may wish to get the conditions in your soil just right for the plants that you will soon want to plant out. Good germination outside depends on the soil not being too wet or cold; otherwise the seeds will simply remain dormant in the ground and may rot or be eaten by the local wildlife.

Covering the soil with anything that will keep off the rain and allow the meagre heat from the sun to be trapped, absorbed and kept in the soil will help to bring sowing dates forward a little. Black polythene is good since it absorbs heat and traps it beneath. It

also helps to keep the soil drier during any persistent wet spells and can suppress the growth of weeds.

Cloches or cold frames (see over the page) are also ideal for this and can be placed over the soil that you intend to sow. Remember to 'seal' the ends also to both keep in the heat and keep out the cold. This will also prevent the wind from getting underneath and blowing your cloches away. For the same reason do make sure that your cloches are anchored firmly to the ground. Polythene can be anchored very simply by pushing the edges firmly into the soil with the blade of your spade or of course by holding it down with planks or bricks.

Time to plant fruit

January is the ideal month for planting all sorts of perennial trees and bushes including, of course, fruit. Container-grown fruit trees and bushes can be planted at almost any time providing the soil is not too wet or frozen, but it is at this time of year, when plants are dormant, that specialist nurseries will lift them and sell them on bare-rooted. This simply means that they supply them with the soil removed and often with the bare roots wrapped in polythene to prevent them from drying out. Bare-rooted plants such as this are generally considered superior to container grown plants because they establish better in their new home and grow away more strongly. Bare-rooted plants are also usually cheaper to purchase, although the timing of when they are available can be restricted, as the nurseries will have to lift them once they have become dormant and before the ground becomes too frozen, which means it can be a long wait from ordering fruit and delivery.

Pruning & caring for Fruit

Now's the time to do some winter pruning – some woody plants such as vines can bleed if pruning is left into the New Year. Vines can be pruned hard, back to two buds of last year's growth, to encourage fruiting.

Apples and pears, currants and autumn-fruiting raspberries can be pruned any time from leaf drop until March, but never prune stone fruit in the winter, as the retreating sap can draw in the airborne fungus, silver-leaf. While tending to your fruit it is a good idea to remove any mummified fruits hanging or on the ground under the trees as these will be harbouring pests. Take a note of any of your fruit trees which exhibited scab fungal infections, as you may wish to give these an anti-fungal treatment later in the spring, such as elder leaves infused with water.

Force Rhubarb

If you grow rhubarb, you can cover some of the crowns with a large bucket or a special forcer which will cut out the light and encourage thin, pale and tender early growth, perfect for making crumbles and pies in the not too distant future. It may not seem like it now, but spring is only around the corner!

Sprouting beans and seeds

The younger that plants are when eaten the more nutritious they are, and this is why more sprouting beans and seeds should be grown. Also they can be grown by anyone – you don't even need a windowsill since light is not essential unless you want green,

rather than white shoots – in fact white shoots often have a less bitter taste and add more crunch in your sandwiches and salads.

Sprouting beans and seeds are so easy to grow. You can start them off with nothing more than a clean jam jar, muslin or cheese cloth and an elastic band. Simply pour a couple of heaped tablespoonfuls of seeds or beans into the jar and half fill with water. Cover the top with the cloth and secure with an elastic band. Swirl the seeds around thoroughly to soak them and then pour the water away through the cloth. It will act as a strainer, keeping the seeds inside. It is essential to repeat this process twice a day to ensure that moulds do not colonise the seedlings and to wash away any impurities. Depending on the type of beans or seeds you have used your seed sprouts could be ready in as little as two to three days (e.g. mustard), but larger seeds such as chickpeas may take a little longer.

If you are more serious about your seed sprouting or just want to produce larger quantities, you might like to invest in a purpose-made seed sprouter and these generally cost between £5 and £30.

Most of the seed companies supply a range of sprouting seeds, but this technique also offers a great way to use up leftover seeds at the end of the season. In fact most of the seeds you might sow in the garden can also be used for sprouting including onions, broccoli, beetroot, lettuce and salad leaf mixtures. One exception is the tomato family – tomatoes, peppers and aubergines, the plants of which should not be eaten.

Growing micro-greens

One other way to use up your excess seeds is to grow them as micro-greens. These are now becoming more popular with trendy restaurants, and some supermarkets sell packs of micro-greens too. These are simply seedlings cut just above soil level with scissors once the seed leaves have opened. Micro-greens can be grown in shallow, well drained trays or pots filled with compost. You will need to find a suitable indoor space to do this to achieve the necessary germination temperature. Simply sow into the tray – you can sow more thickly than you might usually do since the seedlings will not have time to become overcrowded. Harvested within a week of germinating, they are highly nutritious and delicious in sandwiches and salads or can be used as a garnish. Later in the year, you can grow micro-greens outdoors too.

There are some commercially available micro-green seed mixes available from many suppliers, or you can use any left over seed from previous growing seasons. As with sprouting, you should avoid the tomato family. Here are a few popular varieties to grow as micro-greens:

- Mustard
- Kale
- Endive
- Arugula
- Beet greens
- Spinach
- Tatsoi
- Radish greens
- Watercress
- Mizuna
- Peas
- Cabbage
- Basil

Unlike baby greens, you won't be able to get additional harvests from one planting of micro-greens. This is because the plants haven't had much time to develop, and you're snipping off everything except the very bottom of the stem, so the plant has no way to generate new growth. You can plant another crop after harvest by simply scattering fresh seed and covering it with soil. You don't need to remove the old roots; they are good sources of organic matter.

<http://organicgardening.about.com/od/vegetablesherbs/a/growmicrogreens.html>

Growing Your Own Mushrooms

Although wild mushroom picking is now finished for the year, you can still think about mushrooms. Maybe you may feel that if foraging seems a little daunting, however you could give growing your own a try. Growing mushrooms at home can be both easy and fascinating to try and it can also be done all-year-round.

Some species can be quite exacting in their requirements and best attempted when you have some experience, but ordinary button mushrooms are good to start with, available in simple, self-contained kits – no fresh logs required as they are with some.

However, if you do wish to try those types, more of which are now readily available from mail order companies and garden centres, suitable logs from deciduous trees such as oak, beech or birch can be cut from now onwards and stored for a few weeks prior to 'sowing' with grains or dowels inoculated with mushroom spawn. It is important to use fresh cut logs since they are less likely to be contaminated with other non-edible fungi. Only use healthy logs, never those showing signs of existing fungal growth. One

supplier is Ann Miller's Specialty Mushrooms, based in Inverurie
http://www.annforfungi.co.uk/shop/dowel-spawn/cat_8.html

Local garden centres may well have button mushrooms and perhaps even shiitake. Kits such as this are very easy to use and come with everything you need. They vary a little between manufacturers with regard to how they are supplied and the way you need to set them up once you get them home, but all are very similar in the subsequent care they need to produce a crop. It may take some time before your mushrooms are ready for harvesting, so while this is something that you can start just now while it is too cold to get out in the garden, you will have to be patient to see the results. The mushrooms growing medium needs to be kept damp – which is possibly where some home-grown mushrooms fail, as they are easy to forget about.

To harvest the mushrooms, simply twist them gently and they should come away from the casing easily.

For further information about growing Shiitake mushrooms, please see Highland Birchwood's information sheet:

<http://www.highlandbirchwoods.co.uk/UserFiles/File/publications/Information-Sheets/Info4.pdf>

The Grow Your Own Garden in February

February is regularly one of the coldest winter months even though it seems as though spring is in sight! Gardening tasks that can be done in February will depend greatly on the weather, so it is important to be aware of the weather conditions and how this may affect germinating seeds and small plants. Don't just follow your seed packet instructions to sow or plant outside in February. If the ground is cold and wet the seeds will not germinate, and will instead just rot. You can take steps to improve the conditions, by warming your soil, by covering it with cloches a few weeks before you wish to plant out. The extra warmth and protection from becoming waterlogged should help to get the soil in better shape to give your plants a good start. You may find that you can also compensate for colder conditions by sowing into trays, which you can move during the day to somewhere light (and warm) for example a sunny greenhouse, or polytunnel, and then somewhere more insulated (indoors, or under cover of fleece inside your polytunnel) for the evenings.

Sowing

Most sowing at this time will be indoors, or in a polytunnel or greenhouse. All early outdoor sowings or plantings will benefit from the protection of cloches or winter weight fleece, and be prepared to re-sow anything that doesn't do so well in a few weeks time.

- Tomatoes
- Peppers
- Summer cabbage
- Summer lettuce
- Salad leaves
- Bulb onions
- Broad beans
- Parsnips
- Early peas
- Radishes
- Turnips



Tomatoes sown in seed compost

Planting

- Soft fruit and tree fruit
- Bare-rooted hedging plants
- Jerusalem artichokes
- Rhubarb
- Garlic
- Onion and shallot sets

Prune currants and gooseberries

Woody soft fruit should be pruned before the buds burst in the spring. Gooseberries in particular are some of the first to get growing as conditions improve.

Red and white currants should have their main shoots tipped back by half of last season's growth to outward-facing buds. Side shoots are reduced to about 2.5cm (1in), again cutting to just above a healthy, well-placed bud.

Blackcurrants are different. These fruit best on one and two year-old stems and so pruning forces the plant to concentrate on producing a constant supply of young growth from the base. Simply cut back up to a third of the oldest shoots to ground level (this

can in fact be done immediately after fruiting if you so wish). Other fruited branches can be cut back to healthy side shoots.

The lower branches of gooseberries tend to bend towards the ground when laden with fruit. Avoid this by cutting back the main shoots by half and reducing all the side shoots to 5cm (2in), to an outward-facing bud. Any shoots which are crowding the centre of the bush should be removed to allow light and air into the bush but also to make picking a little less painful!

Tend to autumn raspberries

All the old canes of autumn-fruiting raspberries such as 'Autumn Bliss' and 'Allgold' can be cut down to ground level now and the area around them weeded, taking particular care to remove perennial weeds. Burn or put into your council garden green waste collections, the old canes as they may be harbouring pests and diseases.

Plant early peas

Peas can be sown direct into well prepared soil now, providing your plot is free-draining and sunny. You will need a cloche to cover the rows until the worst of the winter weather has passed. However, if you have a frost-free greenhouse or polytunnel you could start some early crops now by sowing in guttering or into deep pots such as Roottrainers, or even sow direct into the soil if you have space.

Prepare the ground for asparagus

Asparagus is always very expensive to buy in the shops, making it an appealing choice to grow at home. Now is a good time to prepare the ground for your asparagus bed. Asparagus can be grown from seed or one year old plants (known as crowns) can be bought. Growing from seed is the cheapest method but it is more time-consuming and it will take you an extra year to get a crop. For your asparagus bed, select a sunny, well-drained site and dig in plenty of well rotted organic matter such as manure or garden compost. Perennial weeds are one of the biggest problems with long-term crops such as this (asparagus should crop well for at least 15 years), so anything you are adding to the soil must be weed-free and when making your preparations be sure to remove any weed roots you come across. If your soil is very weedy it might be best to cover the ground for a season with thick ground cover fabric or black polythene to kill the weeds prior to planting. The asparagus bed should be kept weed free and because they are shallow rooted its best not to use a hoe. Hand weeding is best. With this in mind it may be best to mulch the area to stop weeds.

Pre-spring Cleaning

When the spring comes, you will want all your essentials ready for use. Clean your polytunnel, greenhouse and cold frames, and wash your pots. Carry out any repairs needed, and replace any broken panes of glass.

Prepare for brassicas & potatoes

Test the pH of the brassica patch. You want a pH of 6.5 – 7.0. Add lime to raise it up if it needs it. This will give the lime a chance to settle in before you start planting. This year's potato bed will benefit from a little extra well rotted manure spread on the surface as well. You can dig it in next month.

The Grow Your Own Garden in March

March marks the start of the growing season, however as with February you should only start sowing and planting if conditions are right. If the soil is still cold and wet, delay for a few weeks longer and keep your sowings to pots and trays in a frost-free polytunnel, greenhouse or a bright windowsill. The days' length is such that the plants want to get going but the ground must be right for success. Don't panic if the weather is bad, as the plants will catch up. Even if conditions aren't yet great for our vegetables, it can pay to keep a check on the weeds, which will be springing up.

Vegetables for Direct Sowing

- Beetroot (small fast varieties for eating in June rather than larger storing varieties)
- Kohlrabi
- Parsnips
- Carrots
- Radish
- Spinach Beet (Beet leaf)
- Early Turnips
- Cut and Come Again Lettuce and Salad Leaves
- Spring Onions
- Onion Sets
- Shallots

Remember to protect these with fleece or cloches.

Vegetables to start off in modules

- Lettuce
- Sprouts (Early varieties to be ready for September)
- Summer Cabbages
- Celery
- Early Cauliflowers
- Onions from seed (keep around 10 -12 degrees, do not let them go above 15 degrees)
- Celeriac (celeriac needs a long season so best started at the beginning of the month)
- Peas
- Courgette (towards the end of the month)
- Cucumber (towards the end of the month)

Making a Start with Potatoes

There are dozens of different potato varieties, usually described as “early” / “first early”, “second early” and “maincrop” potatoes. These names indicate when they crop and also give you an idea of the space you'll need, how closely and when they can be planted.

Early potatoes can take 13 – 15 weeks before they are ready for harvesting. If you grow these in a polytunnel, they may be ready 3 or 4 weeks earlier. You would probably find that other potatoes other than earlies would be in the ground too long to give precious polytunnel space. Second earlies take 16 to 17 weeks to mature after planting, so you should be able to harvest them from very late June through to the start of

August. Maincrops are ready 18 to 20 weeks after planting, so they can be lifted usually from July through to October. Maincrops take up the most space in the garden, but they tend to be the best varieties to grow if you want to keep some for storage.

Chit potatoes

Chitting is the process of placing seed potatoes in a cool, light place to encourage strong sturdy shoots to grow before they are planted in the ground. Place your seed potatoes with the end with the most eyes uppermost in old egg boxes. Put them in a light, cool (frost-free) place to chit or shoot. Chitting is especially important in early varieties to give them a good start. For maincrop varieties, it is not so important, so if you get hold of your main crop potatoes late, then don't delay planting them in order to chit.



Potatoes chitting in old egg boxes

Mid to late March is the time when the first potatoes – the first early varieties – can be planted such as 'Swift', 'Rocket', 'Pentland Javelin' or 'Lady Christ'. These will provide you with a harvest during June and July and can be harvested in as little as seven to eight weeks from planting.

Planting Potatoes

The conventional way to plant your potato tubers is in trenches. Earlies should be planted about 30cm (1ft) apart in the rows with 60cm (2ft) between the rows. It is important to allow plenty of space between the rows to provide enough soil to earth up the shoots as they emerge. Earthing up helps to protect the tender shoots from any late frosts and also encourages more tubers, which form on the growing stems.

The trench should be a good 12cm (5in) deep to protect them from frosts immediately after planting, but also to encourage strong, long shoots on which the crop will form. This depth and subsequent earthing up also helps to ensure that light does not reach the young tubers to turn them green. Cover the tubers with soil and watch for signs of the shoots appearing through the soil over the coming weeks. If frost is forecast draw a little soil over the shoots to protect them, or sprinkle with a mulch layer or cover the bed with fleece.

Once the shoots are about 23cm (9in) high earth them up with soil to cover as much of the stems as possible, just leaving the shoot tips clear.

Sow salads

Sow some quick-growing salad leaves now in any large pot, window box or tub and keep them in a greenhouse, polytunnel, cold frame, under a cloche or in a mini

greenhouse. At this time of year they should germinate and grow quickly providing you with a crop of fresh leaves for salads and sandwiches.

Sow early carrots

Providing the soil is warm and not too wet a first sowing of carrots can be made under cloches or in the polytunnel this month using an early variety such as 'Early Nantes'. Sow thinly to avoid the need for thinning – seed tapes can make this process easier. If carrot fly is a problem in your area consider sowing a carrot fly resistant variety. Alternatively use cloches to cover your crop immediately after sowing or fleece or crop protection netting.



Raised beds with plastic cover protecting some tender crops

Of course carrots are also ideal for growing in containers in any well-drained compost – a smaller, sweet variety such as the thin-rooted 'Sugarsnax' or a round-rooted variety like 'Paris Market' is ideal.

Start broad beans

Broad beans are hardy and can be sown direct into the soil now, usually in double staggered rows with the beans 20cm (8in) apart in the rows and with the same distance between the rows. You can also sow into deep cell trays or “root trainers” and to plant out later as this avoids the problems associated with cold, wet soil, bean weevils and mice.

Sow singly into the cells using fresh propagation compost and grow on until the plants are well established and the weather a little warmer. You should be able to plant out your March-sown crop by the end of April and to harvest by the end of June. Thereafter sow in the soil at monthly intervals until the end of May for a succession of cropping. Harvests from final sowings in May are ideal for freezing for the winter.

Sowing Greenhouse & Polytunnel Tomatoes and Peppers

If you didn't get your tomatoes and peppers sown in February, you can sow some now. These plants need a long growing season, and also like warm conditions to germinate, so you may wish to propagate them inside the house in a windowsill in a covered propagator tray, or a heated propagator, if you have one. This needn't take much room since you can start them in shallow 7.5cm pots and move them on to individual pots or modules when they are big enough to handle. If you don't have space to grow these undercover or inside on a sunny window ledge, then look for the outdoor bush variety “Red Alert” which should give you a crop here in the North of Scotland. You will find that not all varieties which claim to be suitable for outdoor growing will do well here, but these two have had some success.

Last Harvest for Leeks & Parsnips

Any leeks you have left in the ground should come up now. Parsnips too should come out of the ground in early March before they try and re-grow.

Grow Your Own Garden in April

At last it is possible for all of us to sow seeds of hardy vegetables safely outside in the open soil. Don't forget however, that it is possible to experience frost until the beginning of June, so cloches & fleece may yet be required. Do remember the weeds are springing into action, so keep on top of them with your hoe. Just slide it back and forth slightly below the surface of the soil and you'll stop the weed seedlings in their tracks. There's quite a list to sow and plant outside, especially if March has not been suitable and even if it has been reasonable the successional sowings continue.

Parsnips

Parsnips can be sown from as early as February, but germination tends to be very poor. Slowly warming soils through March and April improve this situation and offer the best time to sow for large roots for winter use. However, the trend for smaller, baby roots means that many gardeners now sow up to the middle of May. To improve germination still further, either pre-germinate (chit) on damp kitchen towel in an old ice-cream tub, or sow in drills and cover with fresh sowing compost rather than soil. Sow unchitted seeds, two per station, 7.5cm (3in) apart and 1cm (½in) deep. Allow 30cm (12in) between rows.

Celery and celeriac

Both of these closely related crops should be sown as soon as possible this month, preferably under cover in trays for planting out when well established, but can also be grown in cell trays in a cold frame. Go for self-blanching celery for ease of growth and plant in blocks in well-prepared, moisture-retentive soil during May and June allowing about 23cm (9in) between plants to encourage blanched stems. Sow in pots or trays 6mm (¼in) deep using fresh sowing compost.

Lettuce

With a little planning and the right varieties you can be harvesting fresh lettuces from the garden nearly all year round. Get the ball rolling this month with a sowing either direct into the open ground (protect with cloches until established), in a cold frame or in cell trays for planting out later, or of course in a tunnel. You can also scatter some seeds fairly thickly in a trough for use as delicious cut and come again leaves. Sow a short row every three to four weeks for a succession of cropping. Sow 6mm (¼in) deep in the soil, pots or the open soil. Sow thinly, thinning out as the seedlings develop. Replant the thinnings or use as baby salad leaves.

Leeks

Leeks are an essential winter standby. They take up space in the garden for many months but are so useful and easy to grow that they easily earn their keep. Either sow in a pot to germinate on a sunny window ledge, a polytunnel or greenhouse, and plant out when they resemble chives, or try sowing a short nursery row in the garden or alternatively sow individually in cell trays for planting out when pencil thick. If sowing direct to the soil, choose a sunny site and protect with fleece if necessary. Once the seedlings are well established, thin them in the rows to leave about 2.5cm (1in) between each plant. The thinnings can be added to salads or stir-fries.

Brassicas

As with leeks, brassicas can also be grown in nursery rows in the garden which benefit from a protective cover to keep warm and to protect from pests. You can also grow these in cell trays in a polytunnel or cold-frame. The latter option is the best since it helps to protect the young plants from a number of predators from birds to slugs and flea beetles. The extra warmth also gets them off to a good start. Sow one seed per cell in a cell tray and grow on until they are about 10cm (4in) high and have four or five true leaves, at which stage they can be planted out.

Your brassicas to plant out:

- Broccoli
- Brussels sprouts
- Cabbage
- Cauliflower
- Kale

Sowing the Peas & Beans

Broad beans: You can sow these into root trainers (long thin planting modules, which split apart so you can easily plant out without disturbing the roots). Then plant them out when the plants are about 10cm (4in) tall and the roots capable of holding the plug of compost together. Alternatively they can be sown in close rows, or wide drills. For drills, dig out a drill in the soil to a depth of 6cm (2in) and 20cm (8in) wide. Sow the seed in two rows, one row down one side of the drill, the other row down the other side. Each bean in a row should be spaced 25cm (10in) apart from the next bean.

Peas: Another sowing of peas can go in

Dwarf runner beans: You can start a few dwarf runner beans in pots to grow in the greenhouse or polytunnel. Unlike the normal runner bean, these dwarf plants will thrive in a large (20cm), pot and provide an early treat.

Runner beans: These are not at all hardy and so you need to plan carefully. Plants outside that have grown too large to protect will be killed if a late frost arrives so start off in pots towards the end of the month. These can then be planted out mid-May and if a frost should strike will still be small enough to protect with fleece or even newspapers.

French dwarf beans: These can be started now, again in pots preferably in the greenhouse, polytunnel or cold-frame. Just start a few because the risk of losing them is high this early in the season and the May sowing often does best, arriving as the frost risk is reduced.

Climbing French beans: These can be started in pots, treat just as runner beans and remember that frost risk.

Borlotti beans: These beans are grown for drying needs the longest season you can provide so if you can only protect a few climbing beans, these are the one to start first.

Beetroot

Sow thinly in rows, thinning to allow 10cm (4in) between plants for mature roots. The thinnings can be used as baby leaves to add colour to salads and sandwiches. Seeds should be sown 1cm ($\frac{1}{2}$ in) deep with 30cm (12in) between the rows. Monogerm types will only produce one seedling per 'seed', but traditional varieties such as 'Boltardy' will produce two or more seedlings and these are usually thinned to leave the strongest to develop. Another option is to leave both seedlings to grow, and then harvest the beetroots when they are young to get some lovely, tender little roots.

Summer radish

This quick-growing crop is so underrated, yet easy to grow and delicious if harvested when the roots are young and tender. There are so many varieties to try and all add a splash of colour and spice to any summer salad. Children enjoy growing radishes as they are so quick, however they do not always enjoy the spicy peppery taste of many varieties. If you are growing radishes with children, look out for some milder varieties, such as the Cherry Belle, or German Giant. The earliest roots can be grown in pots in a cold frame or cold greenhouse or polytunnel from February onwards, but mid-March/April is the time when most of us start sowing outdoors. Sow thinly in short rows; crops mature so quickly (within about six weeks at this time of year) that it is better to sow a small number every three weeks or so, than to have too many maturing at once, when they tend to become woody.

Plant onion & shallot sets

Onions and shallots can be grown from seeds or from immature bulbs called sets. Seeds should really be sown by the middle of March in order to give them the longest growing season possible, but this is a good time to plant sets outside. Many growers in the north of Scotland opt for growing onions from sets rather than seeds due to length of growing season. If you have opted to grow from seed, now is the time that you should be planting out. Choose a sunny spot in well-drained soil for best results and try to choose a bed or patch where you will also be growing related crops such as leeks and garlic.

Onions like a reasonably fertile soil so you should ideally choose a spot where some organic matter, such as well-rotted garden compost, was dug in during the autumn. Follow this up with a sprinkling of balanced fertiliser about a week prior to planting and rake in when making final preparations. The roots of any perennial



Planting out onion sets

weeds must also be removed as they will cause severe disturbance to the roots of the crop when removed later on.

Advice varies on the depth to plant sets, but because birds like to pull the bulbs out of the soil if they can see any part of the bulb above ground. Try burying them so that the tips are just below the surface. This doesn't foil all wildlife (e.g. squirrels), so as an added precaution a layer of netting can go over the onion bed until the shoots are a couple of inches high.

Although onions like reasonably firm soil in which to grow it is not a good idea to push the bulbs into the ground as the developing roots will tend to push them out again. Plant with a trowel or make a drill and pop the bulbs into this, covering over with more soil.

Planting Potatoes, Artichokes

Easter usually falls in April and Easter is the traditional planting date for potatoes, but anytime in April will be fine.

It's not too late to get Jerusalem artichokes planted, although you are pushing the edge now so the sooner they go in the better.

Successional Sowing

Don't forget to keep sowing lettuce and salad leaves every fortnight or three weeks to keep a continuous supply along with radishes and spring onions. A successional sowing of kohlrabi, beetroot, spinach beets and chards can go in along with true spinach.

Carrots do well when they are sown now but the carrot root fly is around. Covering with fleece is the best protection against this pest but do ensure the edges are to the ground so the carrot flies can't sneak in. Try companion planting with any member of the onion family – the strong smell should confuse the carrot flies.

In the Greenhouse or Polytunnel

If you've not already done so, get those polytunnel / greenhouse tomatoes and peppers started early in the month - better late than never. If they don't do well, you may have to buy in some pre-grown plants, but it is worth trying to grow from seed too.

You also start cucumbers, courgettes and marrows off in April, bringing them on to plant out when all danger of frost has passed at the end of May.

Towards the middle or end of the month start the sweet corn in pots or toilet roll inner tubes closely packed in seed trays. This crop will need to be protected when they are planted out in mid-May, as they will be vulnerable to any late frosts. Some years you may find that you don't get such a good harvest from your sweet corn, if the weather has not been great. The difference in taste between sweet corn picked fresh and shop bought sweet corn is great, with the kernels sweet, juicy and full of flavour, is what will encourage you to grow sweet corn.

Grow Your Own Garden in May

May is the busiest month in the vegetable garden as you fill every available space with the bulk of your sowings for summer harvests. Try not to get carried away however – it is best to sow fast-growing crops in small batches to avoid gluts later on and leave some space for the tender crops that will be planted out next month. Do watch out for a late frost, many growers have been caught out and lost their recently planted beans etc. Keep that fleece handy just in case. If you do not have any horticultural fleece you can use old net curtains, bubble wrap and the traditional newspaper as a method of insulation when a cold night is forecast. You need to keep on top of the weeds in May. Just as your crops respond to the warmer weather and longer day length, so to do the weeds, and it can be disheartening to see them take over. Try splitting your growing area into sections and tackle a section a day for a week.

Sowing

- Runner beans
- Dwarf and climbing French beans
- Courgettes, marrows, squashes
- Lettuces
- Chicory
- Radicchio
- Carrots
- Radish
- Coriander
- Sage
- Thyme
- Parsley
- Summer cabbage (early in the month)
- Winter cabbage
- Broccoli
- Brussels sprouts
- Cauliflowers
- Kale
- Spring onions
- Salad leaves
- Cucumbers
- Melons (only for polytunnel or greenhouse growing)
- Sweetcorn
- Beetroot
- Swiss chard
- Swede
- Turnips
- Sweet peas, wild flower mixes, poached egg plants (for attracting pollinators to the garden)

Planting

- Tomatoes
- Peppers
- Aubergines (only for polytunnel or greenhouse growing)
- Potatoes (early in the month)
- Brussels sprouts
- Celery
- Celeriac
- Pot-grown cane fruit
- Strawberries
- Lettuces

Sowing top tips for May

- Rake the soil to break down any clods to form a fine, level seedbed prior to sowing your seeds. Rake in some general purpose fertiliser such as pelleted chicken or sheep manure or Growmore at the rate of around 112g (2oz) per square metre or yard, preferably a week prior to sowing.
- Try and keep things neat; use a garden line to ensure that your rows are kept on the straight and narrow. Wandering rows use up more space and don't look very attractive. It is also easier to see which seedlings are weeds and which are crops if you have sown in neat rows.

- When sowing brassicas or planting onions, both of which prefer firm soil, walk over the seed bed on a board or tread with the feet applying even pressure to the soil prior to sowing. Even out any slight dips or bumps by raking very lightly afterwards.
- Large stones should be removed when raking, but don't be tempted to try and remove too many as small stones can aid drainage on heavy soils.
- Sow your seeds as thinly as possible to avoid the need for thinning later on, however those crops the thinnings of which can be eaten, such as lettuce and rocket, can be sown a little closer together to provide some tender, young pickings.
- If you are short of space to sow your veggies, you can save space by growing some fast-growing crops such as lettuce and radish among slower-growing types such as leeks and sweet corn, or consider growing some space-hungry crops such as potatoes in containers.
- Earth up your potatoes. Earthing up means to move soil around the base of the plants to protect them from turning green and from blight infection. This helps to stimulate tuber production, since potatoes grow from underground stems, not from the roots. Earthing up is done when the shoots of the plants are about 20cm (9 Inches) tall. Break up the soil between the rows with a fork and remove all the weeds, then bring it up around the plant in a tent like shape up to about 15cm (6 Inches). Leave about 5 cm of shoots above the soil.



Using string to mark a straight line for planting

Carrots

For some varieties a March sowing is stated on the packet – but you may find you get better results if you wait until April or May. It is important to sow thinly so as not to attract carrot fly when thinning and although low barriers are often recommended it may be a good idea to combine this with a cover of crop protection fleece. These measures will only work if you aren't growing your carrots where they were last year as carrot fly may be pupating in the soil, so you should remember to rotate your crops. As an added precaution you could also sow a carrot fly resistant variety. Companion planting with a strong smelling plant such as rosemary, sage or any member of the onion family, may also serve to confuse the carrot flies. You could either opt to sow your carrots near where you have already sown your garlic, or sow alongside where you plant out onion or shallot sets. Sow your seeds 6mm (1/4in) deep in well prepared soil to which you've added some balanced fertiliser, but no manure. If you do require to thin your carrots, do this late in the day as the carrot flies will be settling down for the night. Return your fleece cover back over your carrots as quickly as possible.

Peas and Beans

Dwarf French beans: These tender but highly productive crops can be sown this month for planting out when the frosts are over. Sow one seed to a small pot or large cell in a cell tray. The temperature should be kept at or above 10 degrees C. However, if you prefer to sow direct into the ground it is best to delay until the middle of the month so that the plants are emerging in early June when frosts should be far less likely.

Traditionally dwarf beans are sown in rows 45cm (18in) apart allowing 10cm (4in) between the seeds. Make a drill with the edge of a hoe and bury the seeds 5cm (2in) deep. However, these heavy cropping little plants, which grow on a single stem, can become top heavy and require staking on windy sites. To help get over this problem sow in triple rows 30cm (12in) apart, staggering the sowings in the rows to give each plant a little more room. In this way they should be close enough to provide mutual support when cropping, but not so close that air cannot flow around the leaves. Some stakes to the outer plants may still be required.

Runner beans and climbing French beans: These can also be sown this month. Sow in rows under cloches. If you cannot cover them with a cloche then sow towards the end of the month to ensure the seedlings will not be caught by a late frost, or grow in root trainers in a polytunnel or cold-frame to plant out later. If sowing direct, it is an idea to drop in two seeds at each point you intend to use a supporting cane, to ensure at least one plant per cane eventually.

Peas: The maincrop peas are sown towards the end of the month and the beginning of June; these usually climb highest and will need the sturdiest of support. It's worthwhile setting the stakes and netting before sowing because when the plants start growing you may damage them in the erection process.

Chicory and radicchio

Resembling lettuce these crops have never been as popular in the UK as they are on the continent, particularly in Italy, but deserve to be more widely grown. There are two types, forcing, such as witloof chicory 'Zoom F1' and non-forcing types such as 'Sugar Loaf'. A characteristic of the non-forcing types is a bitter taste, too bitter for some, but a few leaves in a green salad can give it a welcome lift. These are usually sown next month while the forcing types are sown now for lifting and forcing in November. Forcing gives them a sweeter taste and they can be used raw in salads or steamed and eaten hot at a time when little else is available.

Sow thinly in rows in a sunny, sheltered site on reasonably fertile soil. Allow 30-35cm (12-14in) between the rows and thin, using the thinnings as a salad vegetable, until there is 30cm (12in) between the plants. Keep the rows well watered in the summer. Plants can be lifted, the heads removed and the roots potted into large pots, five roots per pot and placed in the dark from November onwards in a temperature of 10-15°C (50-60F).

Radicchios resemble round-headed lettuce and come in green and red varieties, the red types obtaining their best colour as temperatures fall in the autumn. They can be sown from now until August and either allowed to mature to form heads or used as a salad leaf. As with chicory they are bitter so only a few leaves are required to add sharpness and colour to summer salads. They are then, best sown in short rows or planted among other slow-growing crops as you won't need very many unless you have a passion for the flavour.

Courgettes, marrows & squashes

More frost-tender crops can be sown now that the long winter is finally a memory. They are best sown indoors (which you can also do in March or April).

They take off quickly so be prepared to pot on if you cannot get them planted out when they are ready. Courgettes are very productive and two or three plants will be quite enough for a family. It is good to grow a few spare, just in case you lose some to pests or disease – any spare can be swapped with fellow gardeners.

If sowing in pots, sow one seed per 7cm (3in) pot or alternatively sow into large cells in a cell tray. Sow using fresh, free-draining seed compost, placing the seeds 1.5cm (3/4in) deep and keep in a propagator somewhere warm. Germination is usually rapid (7-10 days) and as soon as the seedlings have emerged the propagator lid can be removed to avoid the plants from stretching. For the same reason, give the young plants as much light as possible.

Towards the end of May you could try sowing direct to the soil covering with a cloche or a glass jar. If you try direct sowing, you should add some well rotted garden compost to the soil prior to sowing. Sow the seeds on a mound of soil / compost as this ensures that water runs away from both the seed and the stem of the growing plant should the weather turn wet. They are however far more successful planted in pots in the warm.

In the Polytunnel & Greenhouse

Tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers and aubergine (if you wish to try it) can go into their final home now, either in beds, growbags or large pots. It's too early for outdoor tomatoes unless you can cover them.

The Grow Your Own Garden in June

The vegetable garden continues to fill with tender plants, many sown on windowsills, in the polytunnel or greenhouse. These can go out (after hardening off) as the weather begins to warm up. Of course lots of other crops can be sown direct into the ground now with a good chance of success. As with May, we really need to keep on top of the weeds so keep that hoe moving. Take care not to damage soft stems, hand-weeding if necessary close to the rows. This is where sowing in neat rows can pay off, making it easier to tell young crop seedlings from unwanted invaders.

Check your directly sown crops, carrots, parsnips, beetroot, turnips etc and thin as necessary.

This can be a dry month so keep an eye on the need to water. If the soil appears dry then check under the surface either by scraping some soil away with a trowel or pushing your finger in. If it comes up dry, you need to water. Remember that some plants, such as radish, beet and salad leaves will quickly bolt (run to seed) if water supplies are erratic. For more information about when to water, and how much to water your garden, see the notes in the Grow North Topics section. Remember that mulches can not only help suppress weeds, but help to retain moisture. Consider using mulches with your crops – see the notes on Mulching in the Grow North Topics section for more details.

Consider sowing some fast-growing flowering plants this month such as limnanthes (poached egg plants), marigolds and wild flower mixes as these not only add some colour and interest to the garden, but more importantly can help to attract pollinators. Sweet peas are a good companion crop for climbing beans for the just the same reason. If you haven't already sown some sweet peas, you can try now, but it may be an idea to purchase some pre-grown plants at this time.

Don't forget those successional sowings of carrots, beetroot, radishes, turnips, peas, salads and other crops, concentrating on those you use the most or which are most expensive in the shops.

Keep your eyes peeled for pests – and be prepared for them before they get the chance! Slugs and snails will be attacking your plants at ground level so take action to keep them down – there are many methods to choose from, and you may need to combine different tactics if it is a bad year for slugs and snails. Also, don't forget about the birds who will happily drop down and eat your crops – setting up netting should help to deter birds.

The butterflies are about now as well, so keep a check on the undersides of your brassica leaves for the yellow or white eggs that will hatch into caterpillars and devastate the plant. You can squash them, wipe or wash them off easily at this stage. Cover your brassicas with protective mesh.

Plant Tomatoes

If you haven't already planted out your greenhouse or polytunnel tomatoes, you should do so now. You will get better results for tomatoes if you grow under cover (including a sunny window ledge), but if you don't have suitable space for this, then consider outdoor tomatoes. Outdoor tomatoes can be planted out once properly hardened off in June. Many varieties may not do so well in the North of Scotland, but the bush variety "Red

Alert” does quite well. Choose a sunny spot with some shelter from the wind and soil which has been well manured the previous autumn. Plant in pots or in rows 76cm (30in) apart with plants 45cm (18in) apart. The rootball should be a couple of inches below the surface, so burying a length of bare stem below the soil to encourage additional roots to form from the stem to help feed the plant and add essential support. If you wish, you can add a little general feed (such as a homemade comfrey “tea”) to the hole and backfill to get the plants off to a good start. Remember to keep feeding your tomatoes plants as the season progresses.

Insert the stake before planting so that you don’t damage the rootball and once it is in place pop the rootball into the hole and firm the soil gently back around it. Water well. It is a good idea to surround newly planted tomatoes with some windbreak netting to keep chilly winds at bay for the first week or two.

In the polytunnel or greenhouse keep pinching off the side shoots from your cordon tomatoes and keep an eye out for pests such as aphids, whitefly, and red spider mite.

Tend to Potatoes

Keep watch on early potatoes planted in March. If you haven’t already earthed up your potatoes, you should do so early in this month. If the weather is hot and dry when they start to flower give them a good soaking with water to help swell the tubers prior to lifting later this month or in early July. To be sure that they are ready, carefully dig away the soil from around one side of a root to see how the tubers are developing. If they need a little longer, simply cover them up again to prevent them turning green. Check again in a week or so.

Tend to peas

Early peas may start cropping outside this month. Pick regularly to keep fresh pods coming and water the plants well during dry weather or they will soon run out of steam, turning yellow and becoming unproductive.

June is a good month for making sowings for late summer and autumn. These crops can be a challenge as they will be cropping when the disease powdery mildew is common, so choose a mildew resistant variety such as ‘Ambassador’, ‘Meteor’ or ‘Balmoral’. Keep them covered to prevent bird damage.

Prepare to plant courgettes, squashes & pumpkins

Pumpkins and other squashes are very hungry and thirsty plants and need a very rich, fertile soil to crop really well. They will do best undercover, but they grow to quite large plants – so you may wish to train them upwards and provide support, so that you have room for other crops in your polytunnel or greenhouse.

They need a long growing season, so if you haven’t sown yours yet, consider buying in some young plants. If you have seed, try sowing it – better late than never, but be prepared to purchase pre-grown replacements.

In the meantime prepare the planting site. If well rotted compost or manure was not dug in last autumn it is not too late to enrich the site now. Once this is thoroughly incorporated the individual planting holes can be prepared.

Large squashes such as pumpkins require plenty of space to stretch their rambling stems, so allow up to 1.5m (5ft) all around for large varieties, 90cm (3ft) for smaller types such as bushy courgettes. The bed will seem quite empty at first after planting, but the plants are so rampant that they will soon cover the soil with foliage and crowd out all but the strongest weeds.

Dig out a hole which is a spit (spade's depth) wide and deep and fill with more well-rotted compost, manure, mushroom compost or similar. Overfill the holes to leave a mound about 15cm (6in) high into which you will plant (or sow). Water the mound well and leave for a week to settle.

Cut-down drinks bottles come in handy for another purpose here and that is to help with watering. If you wish you can bury a bottle in the soil so that the top lies close to the roots to act as a funnel to water, handy in the summer when water tends to evaporate so quickly.

Protect soft fruit

Early types of soft fruit will be cropping or preparing to crop this month. The first early strawberries should be ripening at the beginning of the month, soon followed by gooseberries and then currants. If you have some strawberries grown under cover, either in your polytunnel or greenhouse, then expect them to crop sooner. The ultimate protection from birds and other fruit-loving wildlife is a fruit cage although making them completely bird proof can be a challenge. But if you have just a few plants a piece of netting may be all you need. A simple framework of canes can be made over a longer run or single bed of plants such as strawberries. Some gardeners cover their canes with upturned glass jars to prevent the canes from poking through the netting to keep the nets at the required height, and also to prevent poking themselves while tending to the fruit!

Mulch around the base of strawberries if not planted through fabric or polythene to help keep the developing fruit clean. Consider methods for keeping slugs at bay, such as creating a barrier that they won't like to cross (such as crushed egg shells, or charcoal) or copper tape, or slug traps.

If not done earlier in the year, feed around the base of fruit bushes and canes with wood ash (or other potash rich feeds), taking care not to dust over the leaves to give a boost to developing fruit.

Weed regularly to reduce competition and the possibility of harbouring pests and diseases and water well to help swell the fruit. Strawberries should not require any feeding now; too much nitrogen in particular will tend to encourage masses of leafy growth at the expense of fruiting.

The beetroot sown at the end of June can be left to swell and store with the root vegetables whilst the earlier sown are taken at golf ball size to go in salads. The swedes go in at this time as do the turnips but remember swedes are brassicas and can be vulnerable to club root. Put extra lime in the soil and start off in fresh multi-purpose compost. Varieties such as Marian show resistance to club root.

Grow Your Own Garden in July

Looking ahead to the rest of the growing year, there are a wide range of vegetables that you can be sowing and planting now. Don't be put off summer / autumn sowings if you don't have a polytunnel or greenhouse, most of these veggies will grow outdoors quite happily, especially if you can provide some protection such as mini plastic and fleece tunnels or traditional cloches. Often just keeping cold winds off your plants is all that is needed to give you a really successful crop.

- **Oriental greens** - milder greens for salads, or tasty mustard greens

There are a whole range of remarkably cold-hardy oriental greens. They are ideal to keep your garden going through the depths of winter, particularly if you don't have the space or time for traditional winter vegetables like Brussels.

Many are good both in salads and cooked - try Pak Choi, Mizuna, 'Pe Tsai' Chinese Cabbage, Mibuna, Tatsoi and Mispoona, all of which can be sown from the end of June through to end September (you can keep on sowing through into the winter if you have a polytunnel or greenhouse).

Mustard greens are even hardier than the milder green - which means that they will keep on growing new leaves even in the worst of weather. Raw they are spicy - so although it is nice to put small quantities raw in salads, they're mostly used cooked. When you cook them the heat disappears, leaving a rich, full flavour, with just a little spicy zing. They are especially useful because they grow so well in cooler weather.

- **Bunching onions**

Bunching onions are MUCH easier to grow from seed than normal onions. They're really quick and useful, providing lots of greenstuff early in the Spring Gap when there's not much else available. Sow them after midsummer for a winter/spring crop

- **Bulbing or 'Florence' fennel**

Sow up to the middle of August. The plants will stand up to Christmas or beyond in milder areas.

- **Kale**

Kales are great for baby leaves (salads & cooked) in autumn, and then left to over-winter for delicious greens through to the following April.

You can sow kale 2 ways:

- 1) In autumn in a tunnel - for tender baby leaves.
- 2) Outdoors before early August - for hardy over-wintering plants.

- **Lettuce**

Winter lettuce varieties are particularly cold-hardy, selected for sowing after mid-summer, for harvest in autumn - and with a bit of protection, on into winter, ideal if you have a polytunnel and want winter salads - or outdoors under a cloche or mini-tunnel.

Also keep on successional sowing summer lettuce varieties in July - August to give you a wide range of salads in autumn.

- **Other salads**

Land cress is great in salads but can also be eaten cooked for example as a substitute for watercress in soup. It is sown in autumn & grown over winter.

Also try Salad Endive, which is hardier than lettuce, and has pretty pale green leaves with a good non-bitter flavour, it can be sown spring, summer or autumn.

And don't forget plenty of mizuna, Chinese cabbage and mispoona, which will give you endless delicious salads through the worst of the winter

- **Cooking Radishes**

These are a fantastic root vegetable that everyone should try. They bear no resemblance to a breakfast radish (the usual small red radish). This is a large root - tennis ball sized and upwards - which you use in soups, stews and stir-fries. They are also great eaten raw grated or sliced finely into salads, with a mild zing to them. Sow them from July to Sept, for pulling all winter.

- **Beetroot**

Beetroot are ideal for sowing outdoors or in a tunnel in July and August for pulling as tender baby beet in autumn.

- **Broccoli/calabrese**

Sow broccoli undercover for an autumn harvest.

- **Cabbages**

Sow Spring cabbage in late August or September and you'll get nice fresh cabbage very early the following spring.

- **Carrots**

Carry on sowing carrots in July and August to pull as tender carrots in autumn.

- **Chards & greens**

Sow leaf beet and chard up until end July for a seemingly endless supply of greens in autumn and into next spring.

- **Summer herbs**

Successional-sow coriander until the end of July for a continual supply of fresh leaves. Parsley can also be sown up to midsummer and will stand through into the winter with a bit of protection.

- **Peas**

Use an early variety to have them ready before the season ends. In the autumn you may wish to try sowing some to over-winter – perhaps best in a polytunnel or other protected area.

- **Turnips**

Sow turnips from mid June through to end July for harvesting through the autumn and into the winter.

- **Swedes**

Sow swedes from early June until mid July for harvest in November/December - they will also store well in a cool place until well after Christmas.

Crop Care in Summer

As the summer progresses, you will want to ensure that your plants are all gearing up to provide you with a great harvest. At this time of year, it can be very dry, and sometimes summer winds can be experienced, both of which can do harm to your harvest, if countermeasures aren't taken. During the summer, you will need to think about weeding, providing support for taller plants, protection from birds, other animals and pests, feeding and watering, and also managing the quantity and quality of your crops by taking steps such as thinning out root crops and fruit from trees, pinching out side shoots on cordon tomatoes and strawberry runners. Bringing in your harvest is also an important task, as many plants (e.g. tomatoes, cucumbers, courgettes and beans) will stop producing if allowed to develop mature fruit or pods. Regular picking extends their useful life. If you are going away on holiday, and have asked for help with watering, consider asking if your helper could also pick peas, beans and courgettes too.

- **Potatoes**

When you harvest your early potatoes take care to remove all the tubers. Any left will not only sprout next year and become a weed (or "volunteer") but will also be a reservoir for disease and potato blight spores. It's often worth forking over a few days after harvesting potatoes because more seem to miraculously appear.

You may also need to earth up your main crop potatoes if you have not already done so. Earthing up means moving soil around the base of the plants to protect them. This is done when the plants are about 22cm (9 Inches) tall. Break up the soil between the rows with a fork and remove all the weeds, then bring it up around the plant in a tent like shape up to about 15cm (6 Inches).

Keep an eye on the potatoes and if you spot characteristic brown blotched leaves remove that foliage immediately and incinerate. There is no cure for blight available to us and once started a spray may delay the inevitable but that is the best we can hope for.

- **Tomatoes**

Tomatoes need some attention this month because the fast-growing plants will run out of steam if not fed often. A comfrey feed is as good as commercial tomato feed and free to produce. Regular training and trimming will be required as plants develop this month and next. This involves removing any side shoots from cordon-trained plants (those growing on a single, upright stem). You do not need to do this with bush varieties of tomato.

Side shoots should be removed while still small so as not to damage the main stem. Some plants will also grow a second main shoot in the growing point and the strongest and best placed of these should be selected for keeping while the other is removed. At the same time twist the main shoot around its string support or tie to the cane. As the trusses ripen you may wish to start deleafing. Only remove the leaves below the lowest truss and if necessary one or two above that if they are shading the fruit and preventing it from ripening.

Potato blight will also strike tomatoes, which seem to suffer more than potatoes. To minimise risk of contamination, try to avoid visiting your greenhouse or polytunnel plants

after handling blighted foliage. More often than not, the greenhouse crops will miss the blight.

- **Peas & beans**

Keep harvesting your peas and beans to keep them producing. Ensure that climbing varieties are supported with canes or sticks.

- **Brassicas**

Now is a good time to plant out brassicas for the winter time such as winter cabbages, kale, winter cauliflower and Brussels sprouts. You may find that in order to make space for these you have to harvest some of your earlier crops. These slow-growing crops can then be inter-planted with fast-growers such as lettuce, radish and salad leaves. If you did not sow any winter brassicas in April/May it is not too late to find ready-grown plants in the garden centres or online or from mail order catalogues. Once planted out, keep covered with fine netting at all times to protect against caterpillars. Be sure to take precautions against slugs and snails.

- **Leeks & Celery**

Leeks should be ready to move to their final position this month. Ideally they want to be about pencil thickness. Celery can go out now as well.

- **Fruit**

Apples and pears are often attacked by codling moths during June and July and the larvae of this pest causes a great deal of damage by burrowing into the fruit as it develops. Plum fruit moth is also active this month and causes similar damage as its pinkish caterpillars eat into the fruit. Both pests can be controlled using pheromone traps which are hung in the branches and baited with the pheromone of the female moth. This lures the males to the trap where they are caught on a sticky card, so reducing the number of eggs laid. Several online or mail order companies and garden centres sell both types of trap.

Plum trees can be severely damaged if the weight of the ripening crop becomes too much for heavily laden branches. Prop them up with poles to prevent breakage and consider thinning the fruit if setting has been very good. This will also improve the quality of the remaining plums. Apples and pears may also have set lots of fruit and although the tree is likely to lose some of this during the natural June drop. More could be removed after a heavy set in order to improve the quality of the remainder. In the case of apples and pears, thin to leave two healthy, well-shaped fruit per cluster with about 10-15cm (4-6in) between the clusters for dessert apples and pears and 15-23cm (6-9in) for cookers.

Once blackcurrants have been harvested the plants can be pruned, removing up to a third of the oldest branches to encourage new growth from the base.

Continue to tie in the new shoots of cane fruit such as brambles / blackberries and summer-fruiting raspberries. Autumn-fruiting varieties of raspberry may need some support.

You may wish to protect your fruit from birds using netting, fleece, or hanging scarers (old cds).

Grow Your Own Garden in August

This can be a busy time in the garden, with much to harvest and enjoy. You will also be thinking ahead now - planning your winter crops, so there is still scope for some sowing and planting out.

Sowing in August:

- Lettuces
- Spring onions
- Radish (including winter types)
- Leaf beet
- Land cress
- Spring cabbage
- Oriental cabbage
- Carrots
- Endive
- Salad leaves
- Kohlrabi
- Autumn onions
- Spring cabbages
- Salad leaves (including late spinach)
- Turnips

Planting out in August:

- Autumn onion sets
- Summer cauliflowers (early in month)
- Winter cabbages
- Kale

At this time it is also important to keep up the effort to get the most from your crops, so stay on top of weeding if you can, and continue to feed tomatoes and cucumbers using a high potash fertiliser to aid fruit development.

Get green manure growing

If bare areas of soil are starting to appear in your vegetable garden, you may wish to consider sowing them with a hardy green manure. Green manures offer many benefits, including helping to protect the soil from having nutrients washed away during autumn and winter rains, and also helping to reduce weed growth. It will also add nutrients and humus to the soil when dug in and as it decomposes. You will need to prepare the ground by removing any weeds. Then thinly scatter seeds of the green manure crop over the surface and rake in gently.

At this time of year you can still sow a range of green manure crops including grazing rye, annual ryegrass, phacelia, crimson clover, fenugreek, mustard and radish. Remember to check the family of your green manure and factor this into your rotation plans, as for example, mustard and radish are brassicas. Rye and phacelia can be sown anywhere. Try sowing some dwarf French beans as a green manure, the seeds are cheap and the plant produces a fair amount of leaf and stem plus the roots. As with all legumes, they have nodules containing bacteria that fix nitrogen from the atmosphere. Free fertiliser as well as organic matter can't be bad. Unlike most green manures, French beans can be used in even small patches.

Be on the look out for pests and diseases

As summer progresses problems with pests and diseases can build up on many crops. Brassicas may be attacked by cabbage white caterpillars and whitefly, aphids will be

found on all sorts of fruit and vegetables. Of course potatoes and tomatoes may get blight, and powdery mildew may be rife on many late summer crops including fruit, peas and squashes. Let's not forget about our old friends the slugs and snails, and of course pigeons that may be partial to nibbling away at your crops too! All these problems are greatly reduced if you keep a regular eye on your crops, so that you can quickly notice, identify and treat them early using your preferred form of pest control. Of course you can also do lots by simply making sure that conditions are right for your plants, while at the same time not being conducive to the pest or disease. For example, regular watering can help to keep powdery mildew at bay and also make plants less attractive to sap-sucking pests such as greenfly (wilting plants have a sweeter, more concentrated sap).

Pests can often simply be removed by taking the tops out of broad beans or pruning back pest or disease-ridden tips of fruit bushes such as gooseberries, or by simply removing badly infested leaves or using the trusted finger and thumb method to squash them.

If you do get an attack of potato blight the best method to preserve the crop is to remove the "haulm" (stem) and dispose of it, then leave the potatoes in the ground for a fortnight to stop the spores getting onto the tubers. It's best to harvest potatoes fairly early in the day, rinse them off as they come from the ground and then leave in the sunlight for a day to thoroughly dry off and harden the skins before storing.

Grow Your Own Garden in September

In September, you will notice that many of your crops are completing their life-cycle. There is a lot to harvest, enjoy eating and storing. However, there are still plenty of jobs in the garden looking after winter crops, and thinking ahead to the following spring. If you haven't sown seeds for some over-winter crops, you may wish to think about buying in some pre-grown small plants whether from a garden centre or from a mail order company.

Sowing now:

- Spring lettuce
- Winter spinach
- Oriental leaves
- Pak choi
- Salad leaves
- Turnips
- Hardy green manures

Planting now:

- Spring cabbage
- Autumn onion sets

September Garden Tasks:

- Pick apples, plums and pears. Pick apples and pears by cupping in your hand and gently twisting. If the fruit comes away easily, it is ripe; if not leave it for a few days before trying again. Always handle any fruit very carefully to avoid bruising and it is important to try and retain the stalk on all tree fruit as this helps to prolong the life in storage. Look out for wasps when picking plums, as at this time of year they are looking for sweet foods, and will be drawn to ripe plums on the tree. You may wish to investigate wasp traps around your fruit trees, if you are worried about being stung. But do remember, that wasps are not all bad as they eat insects and will help out with eating caterpillars from your cabbages.
- Autumn-ripening varieties of raspberry such as 'Allgold' and 'Autumn Bliss' will be ready to harvest now. These can keep producing fruit right up until the first frosts of the year.
- This is a good time to pot up some herbs for autumn and winter, either using new plants from your local garden centre, seeds or by lifting plants from the garden. It is also still possible to take cuttings of some woody herbs such as sage which should just have time to root and establish. Chives and mint can be lifted and potted for growing in a cold greenhouse where the additional shelter will keep them going for a little longer than they would outside in the elements.
- While the bulk of sowing is over for this season, there are a few things that can be started now to provide some variety during the winter months and into the spring. One of these is winter spinach, a nutritious and easy to grow crop. Simply sow direct into the ground in a sunny, sheltered spot or sow into cell trays for planting out when the young plants are well established.
- Look out for autumn onion sets in garden centres, or order them in. These can be planted now giving them plenty of time to establish before the onset of winter. Bulbs such as this may not seem to be growing once planted, but although little top growth will appear this year, the roots will be very active, enjoying the remaining warmth in the soil to establish before the winter freeze. Your bulbs should be ready to harvest in June or July next year.

- If your compost containers are filling up, it may be a good time to harvest your compost, and turn over compost that still needs to be left composting for longer. You can add your completed compost to any beds that you have just cleared, to improve the soil ready for the next crop.
- Keep feeding the tomatoes, peppers, aubergine and cucumbers, the rule being not to stop until the fruit has ceased to develop. Outdoor tomatoes and cucumbers will benefit from shelter unless the weather is exceptionally nice. Remove the growing point from outdoor tomatoes to encourage the existing trusses to ripen, since it is unlikely that there will be time for plants to form many more fruits before falling light levels slow growth too much.
- Harvest your potatoes. Once the potato crop is cleared, leave for a few days then fork over the top 20cm, which will reward you with potatoes that you will be amazed you missed when you harvested. Leave them out to dry before storing (do this indoors if the weather remains wet) and store only undamaged ones in a dark frost-free place, in paper sacks tied at the neck. There is no hurry to reduce the temperature of potatoes immediately after harvest. Temperatures between 10-15 °C promote the development of a layer of protective corky tissue on the skin, and the healing of any minor wounds. After 2-3 weeks move them to a cooler spot, storing them in the dark, at temperatures between 5-10 °C
- Keep picking runner beans, French beans, courgettes and cucumbers regularly to prolong the harvest period up to the first frosts. When your peas are finished, compost the foliage of the peas but leave the roots in the ground as the nodules on them contain valuable nitrogen.
- The last of the onions should be drying now. Once harvested you need to ensure they have dried off to prevent rot in storage. They do best on a rack outdoors allowing air to blow through but you need to keep the rain off in some way without laying sheeting directly on them.
- Small leeks may well be ready to pull in September. Pull alternates from the row, allowing more space around those left to go through the winter.
- Begin lifting root vegetables for storage such as carrots, beetroots and turnips. Parsnips are better left in the ground, as they taste better after the first frosts. To store the root crops, choose only undamaged roots, twist or cut off the foliage and store in boxes between layers of sand or old potting compost.



Freshly harvested beetroots and turnips

Grow Your Own Garden in October

By now we have definitely moved into the autumn with shorter, cooler days. There may even be frosts during this month, so it is time to enjoy your harvest and look ahead to the next season. A lot of work can be done at this time, as you empty your veggie beds working the soil ready for your next crops. Options to consider are green manures, seaweed, farmyard manure, and of course home made compost.

General Jobs for October

- Turn the compost heap to help speed rotting now that lower temperatures have slowed the process. If you intend to spread your compost in the garden, you may need to stop adding material, or at least separate the more recent additions that will not be sufficiently rotted down.
- Continue to pick apples and other fruit, such as pears that may be ripe, using any damaged fruit immediately to eat or to make pies, jams and preserves.
- Cover salad leaves with cloches or fleece to protect the foliage from the worst of the weather.
- In exposed areas consider moving wormeries into a sheltered spot where they will not become too cold. Draw off any liquid to prevent a build-up that may cause the material to become too wet to the detriment of the worms.
- Order your new fruit trees and bushes, as from now till the end of February next year is the ideal time to plant and you don't want to miss out on your favourite varieties. In the meantime, prepare the soil removing weeds and incorporating plenty of organic matter.
- Continue to weed winter crops such as brassicas and leeks to prevent competition for light and nutrients and to remove hiding places for pests and diseases.
- Place a cloche over parsley, to keep up supplies for the winter months. Tired plants may be woken up with a gentle application of nitrogenous plant feed.
- Keep the greenhouse / polytunnel well ventilated in the daytime and carry out any watering jobs early in the day so there is not too much dampness around on cold nights.
- Take every opportunity in dry and sunny weather to open greenhouse doors and ventilators to let the fresh air through. It is the best means of avoiding mould.

Harvesting and Planting jobs

This is also the time to plant out autumn onion sets and garlic, which may need to be ordered in, as not all garden centres stock these, or have them available early enough. You will certainly get a greater choice of variety from catalogue suppliers. Garlic needs the winter cold to perform well, so it is good to get these in now. They spend the winter establishing roots and get the longest possible growing season to help them produce those fat, juicy, pungent bulbs. The cold weather also encourages this hardy crop to produce bigger bulbs. Cloves are usually planted direct into well-prepared soil which is weed-free, gets plenty of sunshine and has good drainage. On heavy soil, add plenty of grit and well-rotted compost to improve drainage and ensure that any hard layers of the soil (pans) are broken up by digging prior to planting.

The onions varieties for planting now are hardy and will in theory over-winter producing a crop about a month earlier than the spring planted onions. A cloche or fleece covering will get them off to a good start and stop the birds from pulling them out.

It may also be worth purchasing some small pre-grown plants, such as some over winter brassicas, such as kale, if you have not sown some earlier.

The late main-crop potatoes will be coming out of the ground now to store away. Lift any potatoes that may still be in the soil to prevent pests such as slugs and wireworms or diseases from taking their toll on the tubers.

It is a good time to harvest remaining carrots and beetroot. However, if you have well drained soil, you may consider leaving some root crops in longer and covering with straw to protect them and to prevent the ground from freezing. This may appeal if you don't have a suitable cool, frost free storage place for your vegetables. As you harvest and store or preserve your produce, remember to use up anything with a blemish or other damage first, and store or preserve only the best. Keep a regular check on any stored apples, pears, potatoes, or root vegetables, as if one becomes rotten, it may spread to the rest, and cause more wastage.

You may wish to cover raised beds with glass or plastic cloches to help extend the good growing conditions.

You can sow hardy broad beans and peas, either in a polytunnel or a cold frame, or under a cloche. This should give them a head start so you could be enjoying crops before spring-planted peas and beans. There is more of a risk sowing at this time of year because in wet soil they may just rot rather than germinate. Always sow a few spares in pots to fill in gaps in the row. If you have a particularly wet and heavy soil it is probably not worth winter sowing, especially if you cannot provide cloches to cover them. Choose your variety of pea carefully – the smooth-seeded types such as the classics 'Feltham First', 'Kelvedon Wonder' and 'Meteor' are the best, although if you can find other smooth-seeded types, you may wish to try them out.

Many gardening books or magazines will suggest removing tomatoes even if they are still green in September. Living further north, it is good to give them longer than this, but towards the end of this month it is good to remove them, red or green. You will want to get these before any frosts come. Pick unripe tomatoes and place them in sealed brown paper bags either on their own (slow ripening) or with a ripe apple/banana (quick ripening). The reason for the apple/banana is due to ethylene gas production, which promotes ripening. You could also make some green tomato chutney, or try out green fried tomatoes (in a light batter).

The runner beans and French beans will come to an end when the frosts start. You may notice that your beans become stringier at this stage of the season. Where you've allowed the bean to develop in the pod, these should be dried out. Spread the pods out somewhere dry – indoors, or a greenhouse to get them dried and then the shelled beans are dried further before being stored in air-tight jars for use in winter soups and stews.

When the beans come off, cut the foliage at the base for the compost heap and leave the roots with their nitrogen store in the ground to release in the next year.

Squashes and pumpkins are usually left on the plant for as long as possible. Once the parent plant does show definite signs of dying back, cut the fruit but leave it in place outside for the skins to become thicker prior to storing, as this should give them a longer

shelf life. Place the fruit on some bricks or a piece of slate or wood to lift it from the wet soil and to deter slugs.

Cut the last of the outdoor cucumbers and courgettes early in the month before the frosts arrive and pull up and compost the plants.

Brassicas are an autumn and winter mainstay. You may well have been harvesting calabrese and early purple sprouting broccoli for a month or so. Remove any yellowing leaves from over-wintering brassicas, they are of no use to the plant and will encourage botrytis to develop, and slugs. Apply lime where necessary, a low pH reduces the resistance in brassicas to club root. Crop rotation and increasing the level of pH to a more alkaline pH7.5 or pH8 will improve their chances. Add 1lb of lime to a square yard (560grams/square meter) for average soil, less for sandy soil, more for clay.

Many gardeners prefer to leave Brussels sprouts until they have been frosted since they tend to have a sweeter flavour after a cold spell, but if there are some sprouts formed, you can start picking, starting at the bottom of the stem and working up. Cabbages can come up now too, they'll keep remarkably well in a shed or garage but beware a slug that may be lurking under the leaves. Check your cabbages thoroughly before storing, and as with all stored fruit and vegetables, keep a regular check, in case there have been some particularly well hidden slugs. One option is to sprinkle the outside with salt as this will deter them from eating away through the winter. Since the weather is likely to deteriorate now, it is a good idea to firm the roots and to provide tall plants such as sprouts and kale with a stake against the winter winds.

Cut down canes of Jerusalem artichokes to about 1ft (30cm). Dig out the tubers freshly as required over the coming months. Where eel worm is a problem, lift the tubers of Jerusalem artichokes and store them as you would potatoes.

Tend to fruit

Once the leaves have fallen from established trees, this season's growth can be pruned. Delay this work if the autumn leaf fall is late as you have until growth begins again in the spring to complete the work.

The autumn can bring strong winds so make sure that young trees are well supported and that any stakes and ties used when planting are still in good condition and doing their job, supporting stems and preventing wind rock. If ties have become too tight, ease them off to prevent 'strangling' the tree.

If growing your trees in a lawn, clear the soil around the trunk for a distance of about 90cm (3ft). This prevents competition from the grass and allows food and water to be applied and to get down to the roots more effectively.

Cut out fruited stems on cultivated blackberries and tie in the new ones. Sever any layered tips and replant elsewhere.

Take hardwood cuttings of blackcurrant bushes using vigorous shoots 12in (30cm) long.

Plant new strawberries, including the rooted runners, into new rows. Prepare the ground using plenty of moisture-retentive compost or manure.

Grow Your Own Garden in November

It's noticeably colder now in the garden, and it is normal to have had frosts by now. There is less daylight, so you will probably find less time to go out into the garden and perhaps less inclination, but there are some worthwhile tasks ranging from planting up some over-winter crops, to tidying up so that your garden is ready to go come the Spring, pruning your fruit trees, bushes and canes and improving and protecting your soil. Think ahead to next year and start to make your plans. You should also keep a check on your current over-winter crops and be on the look out for pests and disease, or if extra support or protection is required. You may also wish to think about seeds, plants, fruit trees or bushes and any equipment that you may wish to order. It is a good time to reflect about what has gone well in the garden and what hasn't worked so well so that you can aim to improve for the next growing year.

Things to do in the vegetable garden this month

- Consider lifting root crops or give them protection from frost if you have decided to leave them in the ground, with straw or bracken, hedge prunings, or horticultural fleece.
- Protect cauliflower curds by folding over and / or tying the leaves. Exposure to sunlight discolours the cauliflower curd and can produce off-flavours. This will protect the cauliflower and keep the cauliflowers a nice creamy white.
- Early Brussels sprouts will be ready for picking now. Remember that you can cut the small 'cabbage' from the top of each plant and eat it too. You may need to net the plants against pigeons if you haven't already done so. Pigeons become an increasing problem as the weather gets colder.
- Finish clearing crop remains and compost them. Most material is fine to compost but do not compost diseased plant material such as onions with white rot or brassicas with club root. Add it to your green waste for collection or take to your local Recycling Centre, where the waste is taken away to be composted at higher temperatures than can be reached by composting at home.
- Check stored crops, potatoes in particular, for signs of disease. Dispose of any showing signs of rot so it doesn't get a chance to spread.
- Put out food for birds; they will reward you by eating pests such as aphids, caterpillars, slugs and snails.
- Clean pots and seed trays now to make the spring rush less frantic.
- Remove any last traces of crops from the greenhouse and clean the glass, staging and floor using a garden disinfectant.
- Make sure that bare ground is covered. Autumn leaves or seaweed make good winter mulch spread over the soil protecting it from heavy rainfall.
- Prune indoor vines after the leaves have fallen, and burn the old leaves to reduce disease. Ventilate well and keep the greenhouse cold. If there are no plants inside that could suffer, leave it open for a couple of months.
- Tend to brassicas - first clear away any yellowing or fallen leaves as these harbour diseases and act as a hiding place for slugs and other pests. Remove weeds at the same time. Next, check over the leaves, squashing or rubbing off as many leaf

pests such as aphids or whitefly as possible. Spray bad infestations if necessary. Then stake any tall or top heavy plants – kale, broccoli and sprouts are the most vulnerable – to prevent root damage caused by wind rock and finally take precautions against slugs and snails using your favoured form of control (traps, barriers or pellets) and of course where birds are a problem, cover the rows with netting or erect bird scarers.

- Order your soft and tree fruit as soon as possible to ensure you get the varieties you want.
- Plant out winter lettuce, rhubarb crowns, onion sets and spring cabbages.
- Check and repair fences, especially rabbit proofing if rabbits are a problem in your area. The netting should be buried at least 15cm (6in) under the ground in an 'L' shape to prevent rabbits digging underneath. Repair fences and broken posts before winter gales blow them over. Wooden posts are less likely to rot at the base if they are not concreted into the ground. Drive the metal spike-type post-holders into the ground and slot the posts into them.
- Start a “compost trench” for sowing runner beans later in the spring. Put fresh vegetable waste in the bottom of a trench, which can later be filled in and be ready for your beans.

Sowing and Planting

Carry on sowing and planting for winter cropping such as winter salads, and for early harvests next season. Use cloches, cold frames, greenhouses and polytunnels to maintain growth over winter.

Garlic

Plant in November - the sooner the better for the best crop. It is preferable to plant named varieties of garlic, such as *Thermidrome* and *Printantor*, rather than using left-over cloves from garlic bought from the greengrocer. This will avoid the risk of introducing disease, and help ensure you are growing a variety suited to the UK. Some varieties of garlic, such as *Printantor*, can also be planted in early spring, but will give much better yields if it goes through a cold period over winter. Plant 7 inches (18 cm) apart.

Broad beans

Broad beans are traditionally sown in autumn (late October to early December) for an early summer crop. Autumn sown plants are also less attractive to blackfly, but their success can be variable; mice and wet conditions can cut plant numbers considerably. You can either sow direct to the ground, or in the greenhouse or polytunnel. If opting for indoor sowing, consider using deep cell trays (Roottrainers) or toilet roll inner cardboard tubes. If sowing outside, make sure that the soil is well prepared, and is not too exposed, windswept or the soil very heavy. For outdoors growing, it is a good idea to cover the rows with cloches to keep off the worst of the winter weather. Sow in double rows with 15-20cm (6-8in) between rows and the same distance between seeds in the row. If sowing on raised beds single rows with seeds spaced at 15cm (6in) intervals is fine. Dress soil with a potash fertiliser if chocolate spot disease is a regular problem. Use extra hardy cultivars such as *Super Aquadulce*, *Aquadulce Claudia*, *Imperial Green Longpod*, or *The Sutton* (a bush variety good for small gardens under a cloche). If autumn sown crops tend to fail in your garden, don't despair; some of the spring-sown cultivars can produce a crop that is almost as early.

Hardy peas

Round seeded, hardy peas can be sown now for a June crop – this is particularly effective if you plant in a polytunnel. Suitable varieties include *Douce Provence*, *Feltham First*, *Meteor* and *Pilot*. They can also be sown in the spring. Pea seeds are a favourite with mice, so it is not worth sowing them now where mice are a problem.

Hardwood Cuttings of Black currant and Gooseberry

While pruning your currants and gooseberries, take some hardwood cuttings. Take cuttings from healthy bushes only – ignore bushes with any signs of disease. Select a healthy looking stem of ripened (brown not green wood) and cut a 25 cm length. The cut should be made just below a bud. Pull off all the leaves from the stem being careful not to remove the stem.

The first year with your hardwood cuttings can be regarded as being like a nursery year - where the hardwood cuttings can develop their root ball. If you were doing a large quantity, you could fit lots and lots of cuttings in a trench, and then dig them up and space them out a bit more at the end of the year. If you have fewer cuttings, you could either put in where you would like to have them ultimately, or they would also be fine in pots for this year. When you plant them, make sure that at least 7.5 cm above the ground.

Make your own Leaf mould

Autumn leaves rot down to make leaf mould - a pleasant, dark brown, crumbly material. Leaf mould is a good soil improver, lawn conditioner and mulch. It can be used in seed and potting mixes too.

Leaf mould is easy to make, is free and saves using peat-based products. It is good for the soil, and cuts down on the need for watering. Use leaves that fall in the autumn. They will be brown and look dead, and avoid evergreen leaves such as holly, laurel or Leyland cypress and other conifers. Autumn leaves are rotted down mainly by the slow, cool action of fungi rather than the quicker acting bacteria that are responsible for composting. This is why autumn leaves in quantity are best recycled separately in a leaf mould heap. Small quantities of dry autumn leaves could be added to your compost heap, to provide a balance to complement your kitchen waste.

Collect fallen leaves from your garden, and from pavements and verges of quiet streets. If you have a dog or are collecting leaves from a public place it may be a good idea to wear gloves in case there may be concealed dog poo amongst the leaves. Don't disturb drifts of autumn leaves under hedges and other out of the way areas. They may be used as hibernating sites by hedgehogs and other creatures. Leaves can be gathered up by hand, using a lawn rake.

Leave the leaves in a suitable container – whether this is black plastic sacks or a mesh / netting container that you can make yourself. You will need to leave the leaf mould for a year or two, and then it will be ready to use when it is well rotten and crumbly. You can use the leaf mould when it is still young as a mulch, winter cover for bare soil or as a soil improver. When it is fully matured options for use include creating seed-sowing mix (mixed with equal parts sharp sand and garden compost) or potting compost (mixed with equal parts sharp sand, loam and garden compost).

For a more developed plant, the spacing is 1.5 - 1.8 meters apart, so that would be for next year. If you made any hardwood cuttings of currants and gooseberries taken last autumn, these can be transplanted into their final positions, after thorough enrichment of the soil in the planting hole. They like a good feed - so some well rotted manure would keep them happy.

Pest & disease watch

- Brassica whitefly can be a major problem for winter brassica crops - Brussels sprouts, broccoli, cabbage, kale etc. Where infestations are severe, a couple of sprays of insecticidal soap may be necessary. Pick off any yellowing lower leaves before you spray, which is where most of the young whitefly scales will be found. Remember to spray under the leaves too. Insecticidal soap must come into contact with the pest in order to be effective.
- Net Brussels, broccoli and other winter brassicas to protect them from pigeon damage. Secure the base to prevent any birds getting caught up in the netting. Support the nets above the plant tops so that pigeons don't just land and eat the leaves through the netting.
- Leek rust - a fungal disease of leeks. Red/orange pustules develop on the leaves and stems. Sheltered sites, poor drainage and planting too close together can exacerbate this problem. Cold weather can halt the progress of this disease. In a mild autumn the disease may continue to develop, turning leaves yellow and resulting in reduction of plant size.

Review your growing year so far

As you think about ordering seeds, plants, fruit trees and bushes or equipment it is a good chance to reflect on how things have gone in the garden so far. Here are some questions you can ask yourself.

- Did you have a good garden site? Did you get enough sunlight? How was your drainage?
- Was the garden large enough, or was it too large or too small?
- Were the vegetables you planted worth the space they used up, or the time you spent on them?
- Were there any vegetables that you did not like to grow or eat?
- Were there any varieties that did better than others?
- Could you have planted more of certain vegetables?
- Did you plant too much of any crop?
- Did you plant the vegetables varieties at the right times? Too early? Too late?
- Did you have problems with insects or pests? Which vegetables were affected?
- Did you have any disease problems? With what vegetables?
- Did you have all the tools that you needed? Are they still in good shape?
- If you tried some new techniques such as mulching, how did it work out?
- Did you have as much fun as you thought you would gardening?

Keeping a record of your gardening can be a very useful activity, and if you find that something seemed to be planted out too early or too late, noting down when you did will help you decide when to plant in following years. If you haven't already kept a note or journal of your gardening tasks, consider starting one. It can be useful to note down first frosts of the autumn and winter and also the late frosts in the spring, so you can build up a picture of what to expect in your garden.