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WELCOME



These are exciting times for *Kitchen Garden* magazine and its readers. Firstly, because the days are slowly drawing out and it will soon be time to get those early sowings underway and secondly, because this is the first issue in which we incorporate *Grow It!* magazine. This gives me the opportunity to welcome lots of new writers to the fold over the coming months. These folks join our established panel of experts to bring you the most knowledgeable team on the topic of growing your own you will find anywhere. To fit everything in we've expanded your mag to 116 pages, you'll find more information about the changes in our news pages this month. I hope you enjoy this issue and as always your feedback is very welcome.

Back to the plot and we have lots on making final soil preparations for spring, as well as top tips on potatoes, tomatoes, microgreens, beetroot and forcing for early crops.

I am writing this in mid-December having just lifted my yacon plants; I can't believe how productive they are. Just hope the family like the taste! Happy plotting,

Steve **Steve Ott, editor**

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Hello from the new *Grow It!* team members...



BEN VANHEEMS

Gardening writer Benedict specialises in promoting home-grown fruit and veg. He tends an allotment near his home in the Cotswolds. In this issue he explains how to prepare your plot for an early start (p24).



ANNE SWITHINBANK

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



CHARLES DOWDING

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



JOHN WALKER

Gardening writer and author, John is creating a 'climate-friendly' food garden at his home in Snowdonia. His unheated greenhouse is powered year-round by free and renewable 'modern' sunshine (p72).



JULIE MOORE

Julie Moore is a keen biodynamic gardener and chicken addict. She enjoys practical projects using green ideas and upcycling. This month she makes a functional potting bench from recycled pallets (p84).



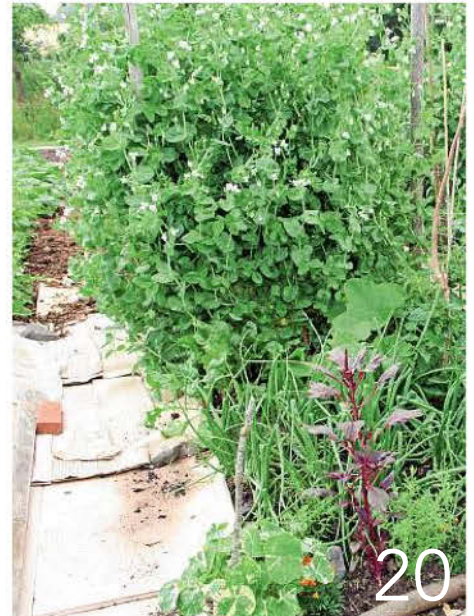
LYNNE MCDONAGH

Lynne has been an organic grower for more than 20 years. She is a qualified gardener, freelance writer and photographer. On her large allotment in Devon she grows unusual veg in a wildlife friendly way.

SAVE ££s: FOR MONEY-SAVING OFFERS & GIVEAWAYS – SEE PAGES 75, 96 & 98

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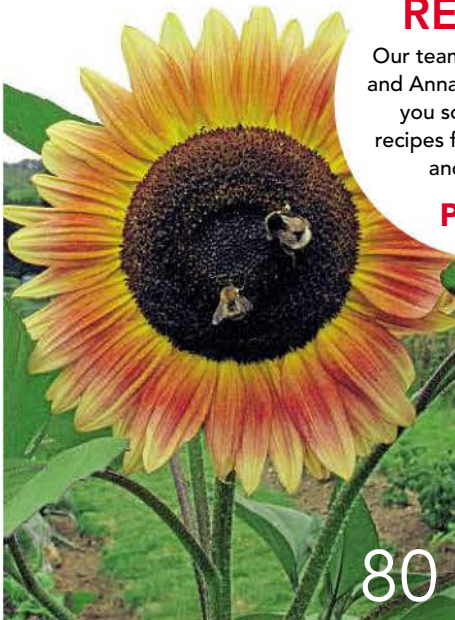


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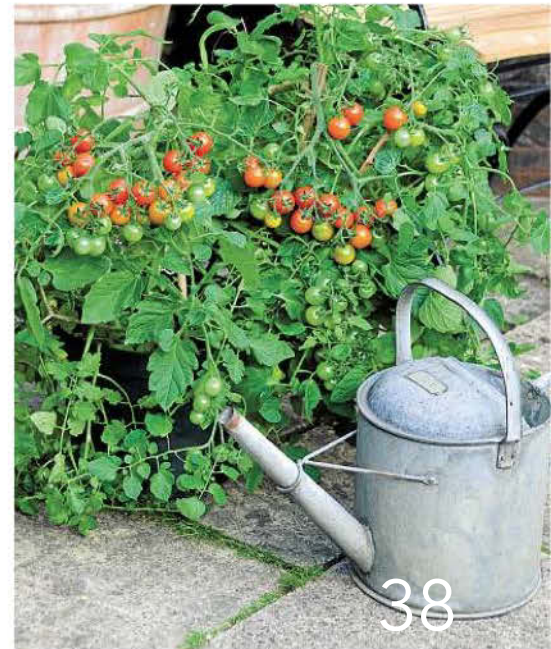
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JOBS THIS MONTH...

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

Whatever the weather above ground the soil is still cold in February, usually too cold for seeds to germinate successfully outside, but there is still plenty to do to prepare for the coming months. If the weather is kind, or if you live in a warm or sheltered part of the country you could take a chance and sow some pots or tubs with early crops such as salad leaves

and cover with some glass or polythene until germinated. Of course there are some things you can do to warm your soil a little earlier and allow some direct sowings a few weeks ahead of your neighbours and these are discussed by Benedict Vanheems starting on page 24 this month.

TOP TIP

Don't have room, or budget, for a greenhouse? Buy a mini greenhouse or cold frame in which to start early crops. Insulate it with a covering of bubble polythene.



10 minute jobs for February



SOW PARSNIPS

If you live in a mild area of the country it is possible to sow parsnips outside now. However, if the soil is still very cold or if you garden on an exposed site, delay sowing until March or for baby roots, even April before getting the seeds in the ground. To improve germination you could consider pre-germinating your seeds on some damp kitchen towel in a Tupperware box and sowing once the first signs of the little root has appeared. Sow thinly allowing 30cm (12in) between rows and thin plants to 15cm (6in) apart.

PLANT JERUSALEM ARTICHOKE

This hardy crop produces small potato-like tubers which can be left in the ground until required. Not to everyone's taste, some consider their nutty flavour to be delicious when roasted or boiled. Plant 15cm (6in) deep and 30cm (1ft) apart in a sunny spot. The plants grow tall and make a great windbreak along the edge of the plot.



SOW ONIONS

Onions are one of the most useful ingredients in the kitchen and always in demand so it is well worth growing some. They can be produced from sets which are sown in the autumn or again from now and through March when conditions allow, but you can also grow them very successfully from seeds sown indoors and planted out in April/May when weather conditions will be more favourable.

Sow as soon as possible to give your crop the longest possible growing season. Either scatter the seeds thinly on to the surface of the compost in a seed tray or pot, or sow individually into the cells in a cell tray. To produce small bulbs you can also sow up to six seeds in a small group and plant them out without splitting them up.

Give your seeds some gentle heat in a propagator (15°C/60°F is ideal) and cover with a propagator lid or some clear polythene, uncovering once your seedlings emerge. Grow them on inside in as bright a position as possible and keep the compost moist but not wet. Plant out into a sunny spot once your young plants are well established and about as thick as a pencil.



SOW NOW

Salad leaves, bulb onions, parsnips, broad beans, summer cabbage, summer lettuce, early peas, radishes, turnips



PLANT NOW

Soft and tree fruit, bare-rooted hedging plants, rhubarb, Jerusalem artichokes, onion and shallot sets, garlic



HARVEST NOW

Leeks, winter and savoy cabbages, Brussels sprouts, broccoli, celery, celeriac, leaf beet, salsify, scorzonera, spinach, swedes, turnips, endive, parsnips



FROM STORE

Beetroot, potatoes, carrots, apples, pears, onions, garlic

...ON THE VEG PATCH

CHIT POTATOES

As soon as your seed potatoes arrive stand them in old egg boxes or seed trays, rose end upwards and place them in a cool, but frost free, light place.



KG top tip



Consider planting some comfrey plants in an isolated patch on the plot. The leaves can be harvested to make liquid feed or laid on the ground as a mulch.

SOW A SALAD

Although it is too early to sow most things in the ground, it is worth trying some quick-growing crops in large pots now. Salad crops stand the best chance of success at this time of year such as radishes, winter lettuce, mustard, claytonia, beet and spinach. Keep your pots under cover, in a cold frame or sheltered place for best results.



PROTECT HERBS

Herbs such as parsley, marjoram and mint can be protected from the worst of the winter weather and encouraged to regrow a little faster in the spring by covering individual plants with a bell cloche, or larger patches with ordinary cloches or polythene or glass.



SOW EARLY PEAS

One of the many incentives to encourage you to grow your own fruit and veg is the taste of fresh-picked produce. The taste of home-grown peas is right up there with the flavour of your own strawberries, sweetcorn and tomatoes. Choose an early variety and sow individually into cell trays, lengths of guttering or under cloches in a sheltered spot in the open soil. Outside take precautions against mice which love to eat the young shoots and will dig up the seeds.



HARVEST WINTER VEG

You may still be enjoying crops of winter veg such as leeks, parsnips, Brussels sprouts, winter cabbage and so on, but as these crops come to an end it is time to get them cleared as quickly as possible to make way for spring sowings. Some, such as parsnips can be lifted and heeled in out of the way if you are anxious to get started and others such as leeks can be chopped and frozen or made into soups. When lifting make sure you remove any crop debris such as old leaves etc.

and pop them into the compost bin along with any weeds which may have established themselves among these long-term crops. If you intend to dig your soil, get work under way as soon as possible and incorporate plenty of well-rotted organic matter at the same time as loosening compacted soil. If you prefer not to dig, simply spread the organic matter over the surface having removed weed growth.



MAKE YOUR OWN POTS

We often recommend starting crops off in pots and trays to give them an early start indoors and to protect them from pests. Plastic pots are expensive, but it is easy to make your own or to recycle suitable containers. Here are some ideas.

Newspaper can be made into the ideal biodegradable containers for sowing larger seeds such as sweetcorn, beans and peas and there are several kits on the market to help you.

■ The Potta System is an ingenious yet simple product (www.pottasystem.co.uk). It consists of a simple grid which is placed over a seed tray and rolls of newspaper several sheets thick are inserted into the holes. Remove the grid and the tubes slip out and expand in the tray holding each other in place (with the help of some string run around the outside).



■ The Paper Pot Maker has been around for some time and is an even more simple piece of equipment. Various versions are available on the Internet or from good gardening stores.

■ Of course the familiar loo roll holders, yoghurt pots and the like also make good temporary containers for small numbers of plants. Start collecting now for the spring.



More February tasks

PLANT FRUIT TREES AND BUSHES

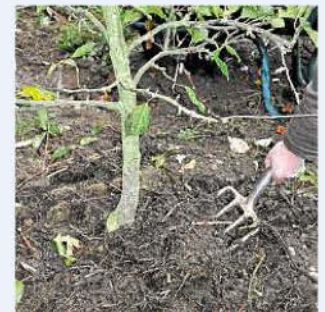
Most types of fruit can still be planted now and will be supplied by specialists as bare-rooted plants up until March. These often establish more quickly than pot-raised trees and bushes, but need ordering and planting as soon as possible. If you don't have much space consider growing your trees as cordons along a sunny fence or wall.

FEED FRUIT TREES

Established fruit trees need attention now. Complete winter pruning without delay. Then turn your attention to the base of the tree. Remove the grass from around the trunk, if possible right out to the full extent of the branches. Scatter sulphate of potash evenly over the soil and rake in gently. Follow with a mulch to help retain moisture in the summer.

PRUNE AUTUMN RASPBERRIES

Autumn fruiting raspberries can be cut back to ground level now. Follow this with a dressing of Growmore or pelleted chicken manure (57g/2oz per sq yd) before adding a generous mulch of well-rotted garden compost.



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Top jobs for February

- Set up a propagator or clear a warm sunny windowsill
- Make early sowings for indoor and outdoor crops
- Wash dirty pots and trays
- Feed over-wintered plants
- Clear any plants that are past their best and no longer providing useful pickings
- Pot on or plant out any overcrowded seedlings

February can bring some of the coldest weather so be prepared. If snow settles to cover the greenhouse or polytunnel then be sure to brush enough off to keep light levels up. Over-wintered plants will be rushing towards new growth at this time of year and they need as much light and warmth as possible. Of course they need water too, but don't over-water if the soil is still cold.



...IN THE GREENHOUSE

WITH JOYCE RUSSELL



Pictures by Ben Russell.

TIME TO SOW TOMATOES

These do really well from a late February sowing, provided they can be kept warm. A steady temperature around the 20°C (68°F) mark is ideal for germination. Spread the seeds on the surface of a pot or tray filled with good compost and scatter a thin layer of compost on top. Water lightly, so compost is just damp, and cover pots with a polythene bag (unless they are to be put in a very small propagator).

Seedlings should appear in six to 10 days; these can be pricked out to grow on in individual pots, but take care not to damage the delicate stems.

I like to grow several varieties. 'Sakura' and 'Sungold' are two of my favourite cherry varieties, 'Country Taste' is a superb beefsteak variety and 'Cristal' is an excellent cropper with medium sized fruit. (For more on growing tomatoes see page 38.)



OTHER SOWINGS

- Peppers can take around three weeks to germinate and grow slowly enough after that. A February sowing increases the chance of early fruit.
- Sow aubergines if you didn't do so last month.
- Lettuce, spinach and a wide range of salad leaves can be sown now for fast spring crops.
- Early carrots and salad potatoes can both do well from February sowings, but use horticultural fleece or bubble wrap to protect the emerging foliage.

TIME TO POT ON OR PLANT OUT

- Prick out aubergine seedlings and pot into individual 8cm (3in) pots. Keep at 20°C (68°F) if possible.
- Plant out any pot-raised plants from January sowings of peas, beans and lettuce when they are 3cm (a little over an inch) tall.

AN EARLY START FOR OUTDOOR CROPS

I sow beetroot, celeriac and leeks in the polytunnel in February. Seed can be sown in trays or cells and young plants won't suffer if transplanted outdoors a few weeks later. You can cover trays with bubble wrap or use a propagator set to kick in if temperatures fall below 8°C (46°F).

The aim is for slow, steady growth to produce hardy plants.



WASH THOSE POTS!

Most of us have a stack of pots that come into their own as the growing season starts up. Or maybe I should say most of us have a stack of dirty pots that need some attention.

A fine bright February day is a good opportunity to get scrubbing. You don't have to be fanatical, but it is a good idea to remove any compost that is stuck to the walls of pots. Some pots may need no more than a squirt with a

hose, but if you want to reduce the spread of disease from one year to the next then it's best to be more thorough.

I fill a wheelbarrow with hot water to which I add a dash of washing up liquid and another squirt of an environmentally friendly disinfectant.

Use a washing up brush to scrub each pot. Hose off the suds and spread pots in the sun to dry.



Reduce the problem of plant diseases by washing pots thoroughly.

PROBLEMS TO WATCH OUT FOR THIS MONTH

■ Slugs can be active in a mild month. Check under pots of seedlings and be particularly vigilant if early carrots start to poke through (these are at the top of the slug 'best snack list'.)

■ We can still get damaging frosts, winds and falls of snow in February. Check round the structure of the greenhouse and polytunnel and repair any small problems before they become major ones. As a temporary measure, a lot can be done with a roll of strong tape.

■ If over-wintered plants are slow to put on growth, or if the colour of leaves is less than it should be, then they might need a pick-me-up. This is a good time to use liquid feeds for under cover plants. Liquid feeds reach the roots, are taken up by the plant, provide a nutrient boost and can correct imbalances, much faster than other feeds. You can make your own feed by soaking a bag of manure in a bin full of water.



BROCCOLI

I grow a few purple sprouting broccoli plants in the polytunnel and these always crop around three weeks ahead of the outdoor ones. It's a long growing season, but this crop is well worth the wait.

An important harvesting tip: don't pick out the central spike too early; if you wait until this spreads and several side-shoots appear, you'll get a bigger harvest from each plant.



Delay the harvesting of broccoli until sideshoots appear.

STRAWBERRIES

Look after strawberry plants now if you want to get early crops in a couple of months' time. I find that strawberries do really well in pots under cover and they can be moved outdoors to free up space when the crop is finished. Plants come back under cover again after they have been exposed to a couple of frosts and at this point of the year they should be starting back into growth.

Give all plants a thorough look over. Remove any discoloured leaves and nip out any early flowers that have darkened from low temperatures. Check that remaining leaves are healthy and that there is a good growing point. If compost levels are low in the pot then you can top up, but it is often better to tip the plant out and add more compost underneath. Water lightly at this stage and the plants should produce plenty of flowers next month.



Healthy young strawberry plants.

START TO VENTILATE

It may be cold outside, but temperatures can rise under cover on a bright day. You won't see the high temperatures that the summer months will bring, but plants can struggle between warm days and freezing nights. Don't be tempted to leave doors and windows closed in order to force growth on sunny days; it's safer to ventilate a little and to keep daytime temperatures in the low to mid teens.

Cloches and propagators may need to be opened up too if seedlings aren't to overheat, but close everything up before temperatures drop in the evening.

HOT TOPICS

NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF GROWING YOUR OWN FRUIT AND VEG

KG WINS ACCOLADES AT THE 'GARDENING OSCARS'



Kitchen Garden magazine was recently nominated as a finalist in the prestigious Best Magazine category at the Garden Media Guild Awards held at the Intercontinental Hotel on Park Lane in London.

The awards, which are known as the horticultural equivalent of The Oscars, are designed to celebrate excellence in gardening communications whether via print, websites, blogs or broadcasting.

KG regulars Sue Stickland and Toby Buckland also picked up nominations in the Best Practical Journalist category and Naomi Slade, another familiar face to regular readers, was recognised for her work with a finalist spot in the best digital media section for her blog naomislade-electricgreen.blogspot.co.uk.



KG editor, Steve Ott said: "I am very proud that KG has been given this honour. It is a real testament to the great knowledge, skill and dedication of everyone involved from our wonderful panel of writers to the team at Mortons which puts the title together, ensuring it always delivers the very best gardening advice to our readers."



GIY COMES TO DORSET

Grow it Yourself International is a global movement of food growers that started in Ireland and aims to create a healthier, happier, world by encouraging everyone to grow some of their own food. There are now more than 50,000 GIYers worldwide and over 800 food growing projects involved in the movement.

The latest GIY group has started up in Dorset and will meet on the first Wednesday of each month starting from February 5, 2014. The meetings are free and are at the Woodhouse Gardens Pavilion at Blandford Forum. Group organiser, Wendy Pillar, told KG: "GIY Dorset is a social group where everyone interested in growing food can get together, learn from each other, and swap seeds, tips, recipes and plants. We will be putting on regular expert guest speakers and visits to kitchen gardens."

For more information see www.giyinternational.org/giy_groups/group/9701/ or contact Wendy at jwpillar@aol.com or 01258 817883.



Wendy Pillar, group organiser of Grow It Yourself, Dorset.

JOIN THE SARPO CROWD

The Sarvari Research Trust has been breeding the blight-resistant Sarpo potato range for more than 10 years and during that time has attracted a loyal following. However, the availability of the varieties has sometimes been an issue.

To address this problem the trust is launching its own company – Sarpo Potatoes – to ensure that demand can finally be met.

Apart from a powerful long term resistance to blight, Sarpo varieties' in-built virus resistance means they remain productive without the need for spraying against the aphids that spread the disease. This makes them ideal for organic gardeners who want to grow great-tasting spuds in a natural and sustainable way.

To launch Sarpo Potatoes, a crowdfunding appeal has begun for £250,000 to get production and sales off the ground. Backers are being asked to donate or loan sums (which attract interest) in return for rewards such as free potatoes, Open Days and entry into a £5000 prize holiday draw.

Backers can support the crowd for as little as £5 at www.buzzbnk.org/SarpoPotatoes

Dr David Shaw, Director of the Savari Trust: "We want to move potato production away from its highly intensive, current form to a more sustainable one."



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

TV CHEF PHIL VICKERY JOINS SHOW LINE UP

TV chef Phil Vickery will spice up The Cookery Theatre at The Edible Garden Show, this year.

Phil, who raises his own pigs and is a passionate fruit and veg gardener, will give cookery demonstrations on Saturday, March 29 at the event which is putting down new roots at Alexandra Palace in London.

Tickets cost £12 in advance (£16 on the door).

For more information visit:

www.theediblegardenshow.co.uk or ring the ticket hotline on 0844 338 8001

For your chance to win a pair of tickets to the show, see page 75.



TV chef and keen veg plotter Phil Vickery is a favourite on shows such as Ready Steady Cook.



The champion Faverolles is assessed by the judge.

FABULOUS FAVEROLLES

The Poultry Club of Great Britain held its National Show in November, an amazing gathering of more than 6000 feathered fowls.

One particular breed caught the eyes of the judges, the French Faverolles. This was first brought over to the UK from the Faverolles region in France in the early 1900s and has unusual muffling under the chin, five toes and feathery legs.

After a lot of deliberation Williams National Show Champion Faverolles was a large salmon Faverolles female that "was a well presented bird that didn't have a feather out of place". It was owned by Miss Nichola Williams from Stoke-on-Trent.

For more information on the National Show and anything else poultry visit The Poultry Club of GB website www.poultryclub.org

by KG's poultry expert, Karen Pimlott

THE FUTURE OF GARDENING UNDER THREAT

Research released by home improvement store Homebase has revealed fresh concerns over Britain's next generation of gardeners.

Two-thirds (64 per cent) of 16-25 year olds are put off by a job that exposes them to the elements in case they get cold or wet, while one in three (33%) simply don't want to get dirty.

All is not lost though, as almost half of the youngsters questioned (47%) claim to have planted vegetables or flowers, and one in four (25%) have looked after their own vegetable patch, allotment or garden.

To change perceptions around outdoor careers, Homebase has joined forces with five-time RHS Chelsea Flower Show Gold Medal winner Adam Frost to create the Garden Academy which hopes to do for gardening what Jamie Oliver did for cooking.

'ALLOTMENT' TO SET SAIL IN JUNE

Ocean rowers and scientists Sarah Weldon and Susannah Cass are busy making preparations for their epic trans-Pacific row which starts on 7 June this year. The pair will row from Monterey Bay, California to Cairns, Australia, a distance of some 7200 miles, stopping only in Hawaii on their journey which is expected to take eight months. However, their expedition will be highly unusual that they hope to grow their own food on the way.

Sarah told us: "Not many ocean rowers grow plants on their boat, but we got the idea from our patron, Roz Savage, as she grew seed sprouts on her ocean rows, as a way of getting something fresh and protein-rich. We'll have to use a desalinator to turn sea water into drinking water, and will use some of our rations to rinse the sea water off the sprouts, and to water them each day. They will then get cooked up with a variety of condiments as a refreshing change to our usual diet of freeze-dried food."

The pair are keen to grow some other plants on the boat, and to do experiments on these as part of their regular education sessions with their students, who will be following them online. "We would love some suggestions," Sarah told KG. "Mint was one idea as we know it is quite hardy,

and we could then use that to make tea and to chew on to help us with a range of issues. Whatever we grow will be something simple, along the lines, of growing cress."

"During the row we'll be undertaking research, teaching more than 17,000 young people worldwide live from our boat, and raising funds to provide free, online education to some of the most disadvantaged young people worldwide, as well as UK students.

"In February we'll row along the River Thames from my home town in Henley, to Stratford, London (Olympic Stadium) where our boat, Mr Toad, will be on display to more than 200,000 visitors for Technopop London. We'll be answering some of the more unasked questions about ocean rowing, from a female perspective."

The pair would welcome any suggestions from KG readers as to which plants they should take or grow in their boat either as food or for welfare purposes, so if you have any ideas please send them to sott@mortons.co.uk and we will pass them on to Sarah.

To find out more about Sarah and Susannah's epic voyage, to follow progress or to sponsor the pair please visit www.oceansproject.com



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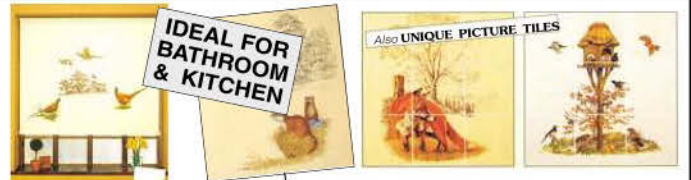


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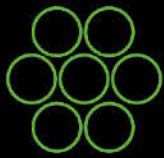


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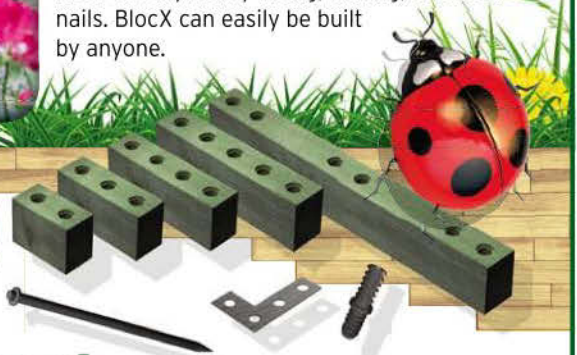
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THE AUBERGINE THAT THINKS IT'S A CUCUMBER

Unfortunately it's been 'one of those years' this year, but I did eventually manage to get something growing in my polytunnel, albeit rather late. One of these was the aubergine 'Black Enorma' which I grew from seed.

However, one of the fruits decided to have an identity crisis and decided it actually wasn't going to be an aubergine but a purple cucumber instead as you can see from the picture. Each one of those larger tiles is just over two inches, so this aubergine is about nine inches long.

Jacqui Armitage, Sudbrooke, Lincoln



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HAVE YOUR SAY

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DIY BED COVERS

Have you ever tried to protect growing crops or seedbeds from cats, squirrels, birds and the cabbage white butterfly, to name a few, particularly if you are using raised beds or straight lines on the flat? Difficult, is it not? For the last two years I have been bothered by all four. So I devised a method of keeping all four at bay. I always use the bed system on the flat by forming 3ft 6in beds with a spade's width path between each bed. I bought 5x2m lengths of black plastic conduit tube and 10 inspection bends to fit.

I then cut each length of tube the width of the bed less an allowance for the two inspection bends. I cut the offcut into two equal pieces for the two legs and then joined the three pieces together to form a rectangular shaped hoop, 3ft 6in span. I space these hoops across the bed about a metre or 3ft 6in apart down the bed, pushing the legs into the earth a bit at a time until they are stable. Then I cover the bed with 1cm square netting, pegging it down at the ends and at its length. Use steel tent pegs or make your own wooden pegs but paint the tops white or yellow so they can be quickly found when removing the mesh or dismantling. The hoops only cost me £13 plus the netting, but this idea only suits netting, not polythene.

Geoff Heal, Weston-super-Mare, North Somerset

WINTER SALADS – SLOW BUT SURE

I sowed some salad leaves in a cold frame and in some pots in the greenhouse during autumn. It is December as I write and I have actually got a few leaves I can harvest. I notice they are not putting on a lot of growth now but I imagine once the light levels start to improve and we get some warmth in early spring they will really romp away – hopefully.

Alex Beard, Richmond, London



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BRUSSELS RECIPE

I am trying to track down a recipe that featured in your magazine which used Brussels sprouts and blue cheese. It sounded delicious.

Are you able to help me with this?

David Needham by email

THE EDITOR SAYS: We featured the following recipe from Gaby Bartai in our February 2013 issue.

Baked Brussels with blue cheese

This is a richly indulgent dish – but it's February and comfort is called for. It would work well alongside chicken, turkey or boiled ham if you're a meat eater, but is quite substantial enough to be the centrepiece of a meal. Serve it with baked or mashed potatoes to double up on the comfort complement.

Serves 2

- 300g (10½oz) Brussels sprouts, trimmed
- 15g (½oz) butter
- 2 cloves garlic, peeled and crushed
- 150ml (5fl oz) crème fraîche
- 50ml (2fl oz) vegetable stock
- 110g (4oz) blue cheese, crumbled
- ½ tsp freshly grated nutmeg
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 20g (¾oz) Parmesan, grated



1. If your sprouts are large, halve them vertically; leave smaller ones whole. Steam them for five to six minutes until they are just tender enough to yield to the point of a knife, then drain them.
2. Melt the butter in a frying pan, then add the garlic and sauté it gently for two minutes. Add the crème fraîche, stock, blue cheese and nutmeg and cook, stirring, until the cheese has melted. Season to taste with black pepper.
3. Put the sprouts into an ovenproof dish. Cover them with the sauce, then sprinkle the Parmesan on top.
4. Put the dish into the oven at 180°C/350°F/gas mark 4 for 20 minutes or until the sauce is bubbling and the topping is nicely coloured.

YACON IS BIG SUCCESS

I grew a couple of yacon plants this year. One I grew in a large pot and the other I didn't get round to transplanting so it stayed in its one litre pot.

They both grew well and made large leafy plants. When I

came to empty the smaller pot I was expecting it not to have produced any tubers. I was amazed the tubers had grown so big the pot was distorted and I could hardly get it out. I can't wait to see what the larger pot has produced. Next thing I need to do is eat them?

Anyone know what to do with yacons?

Julian Medwell, London



MOUSE THAT THINKS IT'S A BIRD

I was given a bird feeder as a Christmas present recently. I wanted to see if the birds had got used to it yet and if any blue tits had got up the courage to make use of it (it is a squirrel-proof one where the seed holder is inside a 'cage'). The feeder is very close to some ivy which climbs up my fence and into the laburnum tree on which my feeder hangs. Imagine my surprise when a tiny mouse crept out of the ivy, along the branch of the tree and into the feeder, all a good 10ft above the ground. It then disappeared back into the ivy. I watched for

a good half an hour as it went back and forth collecting seeds.

Joe Hayes by email



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Kitchen Garden

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ON MY PATCH

SHARING THE EXPERIENCE: *KG* READERS TELL US ABOUT THEIR PLOTS

From tip to top plot

Lol and Jenny Power inherited two untidy allotment plots and clearing the second one filled two skips before they could get growing but the transformation is clear to see



Out of the wreckage emerges a wonderful growing space





LOL'S Q&A

WHERE ARE YOUR ALLOTMENTS?

We work on two half allotment plots in Wigston, Leicester. We have had one plot just over two years and the second one 20 months.

WHAT ARE YOUR PLOTS LIKE?

Our first plot we have turned into mostly raised beds. Most of the root vegetables are grown there with cabbages, onions and runner beans. Our large shed is on this plot with our tea making facilities. Also we have our 10 hens in our homemade 10x12 chicken house, made by my brother.

On the other plot we have a 20x10 polytunnel which the family helped put up in the spring. We have been growing salads, cauliflowers and large onions in the first year. We would not be without one now. There are more tunnels going up on the site as I speak.

The rest of this second plot is used for potatoes, Brussels sprouts and fruit. We also grow lots of herbs.

DO YOU GROW FLOWERS ON YOUR ALLOTMENT?

The top part of the plot has been taken over by my wife and yes, you guessed it, flowers. There are dahlias, daffodils, sweet Williams and sweet peas.



The hens enjoy scratching for grubs and insects.



The polytunnel has been a huge success.



Jenny enjoys growing flowers on the allotment.

HOW DO YOU TAKE CARE OF YOUR SOIL?

We have had three loads of manure dropped already with one more on the way as the ground was very hungry looking. When we took on the first plot it was in a poor state and took quite a lot of time to get it how we wanted it, building raised beds and woodchip for the paths.

The second plot was in an even worst state. With the help of several plot holders we filled two 4cu m skips. As you can see in the photos it has been quite a transformation.

WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR INSPIRATION?

We are very keen on the garden and do tend to go to most of the gardening shows. BBC Gardeners' World, Tatton Park, Harrogate and others.

IS THERE A GOOD SENSE OF COMMUNITY ON YOUR ALLOTMENTS?

There are many plot holders that will always give a hand when you have a project to do.

The members held an open day again this year in which a lot of members and children took part.

ABOVE LEFT: A healthy crop of brassicas.

ABOVE RIGHT: Lol and Jenny created many raised beds.



Lol takes a moment to enjoy his plot.

SEND US PICTURES OF YOUR PLOTS AND WIN A PRIZE

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Lol & Jenny win Spear and Jackson tools worth £25

From pasture to plot without digging

Grow it!



Charles Dowding is known as a keen advocate of no-dig beds which he practises at Homeacres, his plot in Somerset. Here he describes how he created fertile growing beds straight on top of weedy pasture



This is about clearing perennial weeds, not just keeping them at bay. When you actually see couch grass appear no more, that is a great feeling and you save so much time and effort for years to come, so it is worth being thorough from the beginning. In my new garden of Homeacres I cleared most perennial weeds within a year, including couch grass, dandelion and buttercup; only some bindweed lingered (see below).

Starting with a quarter acre of weedy pasture in early 2013, I created beds on undisturbed soil by simply placing compost on top. This piece is about clearing weeds in one year: many of the methods are not necessary in subsequent years. Look on the first year of taking on a weedy plot as an exercise in clearing ground at the same time as growing whatever you can. In subsequent years you reap the benefits of being thorough in your first year, because so much less time is needed for weeding and growing is easier.

PREPARING THE PATHS

First a word on mulching pathways because this is often overlooked, and if you have perennial weeds such as couch grass in your paths, they will grow back into clean beds. Therefore I mulched my pathways with thick cardboard from removal boxes or two layers of thinner cardboard – and sometimes with wood shavings on top to improve access in wet weather when cardboard is punctured by walking on it. Every sheet of cardboard must overlap the next sheet by 15cm (6in) to stop weed leaves creeping out.

Worms eat cardboard as it softens and especially when the weather is warm and damp, so after about three months I lay another sheet on top. The result is all weeds gone except for field bindweed.

The cardboard cover is for the first year only, until weeds have died. My next step is to spread a one-off application of 5cm (2in) municipal compost in the pathways to create a clean surface which is easy to weed and for vegetables to feed into.

PATH SIZE?

My paths are narrow at 45cm (18in) and most of my beds do not have sides, to save money and reduce slugs. This increases the importance of weed-free paths. If your beds are wooden sided, it is possible to have grassy paths or wood chips.



The land before beds were created.

KEEP WEEDING

To be rid of couch grass, all new shoots need removing continually for a few months until the roots are exhausted. If you leave new growth for more than a few weeks, the new leaves feed the roots below which remain alive for longer.



Spreading manure on to the ground, smothering the weeds to create the beds.

Technique 1 COMPOST ALONE

You can create beds with a 15cm (6in) mulch of compost or soil and then sow and plant straight away. If making the beds in early spring this is ideal. I made many beds like this but for the first three months or more, use a trowel to remove the weakened regrowth of weeds springing up from the soil below. Then by July I found that most of the initially vigorous buttercup and dandelion had stopped regrowing at all, and couch was greatly weakened.

Only bindweed continued (see below).

HOW MUCH COMPOST?

Ideally a thicker mulch is good (15cm/6in); although looking a lot at the time it soon settles to a soft layer of half that depth, creating a lovely dark surface. Ask around for sources of animal manure, which is often the cheapest type of organic matter in this quantity. You get your money back in higher yields. You can use a lighter mulch of

5cm (2in) of compost but this is then best covered with polythene or cardboard.

WHAT COMPOST OR TOP SOIL?

I have experimented at Homeacres with various combinations of municipal compost, one-year-old home-made compost, year-old or older manure from horse and cow and topsoil. All grew good vegetables, including salads, carrots, potatoes, beans and brassicas. All are good for mulching perennial weeds, but have differing amounts of seeds of annual weeds.

Topsoil often contains lots of weed seeds and I spent more time weeding a soil-filled bed than any other. Also its quality varies so it's risky to buy; I was lucky to have fresh soil from another part of the garden, full of worms.

Animal manure has plenty of nutrients and my harvests from beds filled only with cow and horse manure have been excellent, of all different vegetables. It needs to have been



Some of the soil had many couch roots.

stacked for 6-12 months so that nutrients are stabilised by composting and do not leach out. Weed seeds vary from few to many according to the source of manure, for example horse manure often has more weed seeds from the hay diet.

Home-made compost often looks lumpy but usually has plenty of nutrients. Weed seeds are often a problem so regular hoeing may be needed in spring, and using thicker layers is good (as in filling a whole bed) in order to reduce the proportion which is exposed to light.

Municipal compost (green waste) varies in quality and price. I pay £90 per tonne including delivery and often it is full of wooden pieces. Initial growth may be weaker as wood uses the compost's nutrients to decompose, so woody compost is ideal for paths once cardboard and other covers have done their job.

Mushroom compost varies in price and availability, like municipal it is weed free; great if you can find some at a good price.

Leafmould more than 12 months old has good structure but less nutrients and works well with some animal manure added. ►



Beds created with 6in of home-made compost on left, cow manure on right.

Technique 2 COMPOST AND/OR COVERS

If applying shallow mulch of compost (5cm/2in) cover with polythene or cardboard to keep the weed growth down.

The main advantage of polythene covers is complete darkness underneath, so that weeding is thorough and does not need any subsequent help from a trowel. Two important conditions are that the polythene is thick enough to exclude all light, at least 500 gauge, and that it is in place for enough time. It is also easy and quick to lay but if used alone without any compost beneath, it obviously does not feed the soil.

HOW LONG TO LEAVE ON?

The answer depends on the time of year. February until March is a good time to start because many perennial weed roots are just stirring into life and will exhaust themselves more quickly in spring than in winter as their succession of new leaves fail to find light under the cover. I found that two months of complete cover killed buttercup and lawn grasses, four months killed dandelion, celandine and other perennial grasses, while couch needed up to six months in darkness depending how vigorous it was before mulching.

If couch, bindweed and marestail are abundant, a whole year of covering is worthwhile with no cropping, and you will be repaid in years to come. Lesser amounts of the vigorous perennials could be cleared with covers on all year and growing some wide-spaced crops such as winter squash through small planting holes,



as long as you keep pulling all weed leaves which pop up through the holes. This requires actually hunting for them under vegetable leaves so they never have time to feed the parent roots.

WHICH COVERS?

Black polythene of 500 gauge thickness or higher is good but best used where ground is moist at time of covering, because rain cannot pass through.

Mypex allows water through and is 99% impermeable to light, but is expensive; if you make planting holes, use a blowtorch to burn them rather than cutting with a knife, which results in loose plastic shreds because mypex is a woven material.

Landscape fabric is cheaper and can have holes cut in it, but allows 20% light through and does not kill perennial weeds unless you lay cardboard first and the fabric on top.

Biodegradable polythene made from corn starch is not thick enough to kill weeds pushing up and it splits easily, so bindweed and couch often reappear. Also it degrades so slowly and looks so ugly that it feels like having lots of plastic waste in the garden.

Comparing with cardboard, polythene covers are quicker to lay but more expensive and difficult to recycle. Cardboard is good if you can find large, thick pieces; and I tried a few under the beds in my new greenhouse, where the builder had discovered a tangle of white couch-roots in every turf layer he scraped off while digging a trench for the walls. Although in February the whole area was just full of couch grass, by July I had seen little regrowth and my combination of cardboard with a 20cm (8in) layer of compost on top had paid off, saving so much time, also from bindweed.



Making beds with 5cm (2in) of manure then polythene on top and cardboard too – it all worked to stop weeds regrowing.



Early March and the paths are mulched and beds ready to plant.



Some polythene cover has been removed and it is ready for planting Brussels sprouts and salads.



Some first plantings include squash planted through cardboard in early June.

BINDWEED

I have left this to last as it is often the final weed to keep growing. Sometimes I have cleared beds 99% of bindweed, maybe even 100%, but it remains present because roots are so persistent in nearby areas and travel horizontally underground.

There are two different types:

■ Hedge bindweed has large white flowers and the more dramatic roots – bright white, fleshy and often near the surface, especially after mulching. This makes it easier to combat and I am almost rid of it at Homeacres after one year. In one area I covered a horribly weedy border with polythene for the whole growing season, and upon removing the polythene in November I found just a few white roots close to the surface which I pulled and eased out with a trowel. In a neighbouring bed I grew flowers and needed to go through the whole bed with a trowel every week in summer, looking for and removing 5-10cm (2-4in) of root wherever I saw new growth. By the end of summer, new shoots were weak and rare.

■ Field bindweed has small pink flowers and less obvious main roots of grey and brown colour, twisting and brittle so difficult to dig out, even if you find them. These roots appear to have an inexhaustible supply of energy to send up thin, white roots of almost any length (1.5m/5ft is my record) until they find light and quickly develop leaves. Mulching slows growth and causes the white roots to coil endlessly under any surface they cannot penetrate, growing slowly weaker but rarely giving up. The 20cm (8in) compost mulch in my greenhouse, with cardboard underneath, turned an area of rampant field bindweed into none at all until July, after which it appeared consistently but with weak shoots. Beds outside where compost mulches were thinner needed more work with the trowel, but cardboard in pathways has been helpful in preventing most new growth until it pops out of the edges after a long voyage horizontally towards the light.

SLUGS

A problem with mulch covers is their habitat for slugs to keep moist by day and then feed on plants by night. I was fortunate to be mulching through a dry spring and summer, and I made the most of it by growing a full range of vegetables at the same time as clearing difficult weeds. I feel this is a risk worth taking for just one year, to clean soil thoroughly. The good news is that mulches of compost, well-rotted manure and topsoil do not increase slug populations, and by the second year you are mulching to feed soil rather than kill weeds. ■



Cardboard used to create paths.



Healthy crops with little weed growth to be seen anywhere.

Under starter's orders

Winter may still be firmly in charge but it won't be long before it's full steam ahead on the productive plot. Benedict Vanheems shares some ideas to give you a head start



February isn't renowned for being particularly warm but by the middle of the month the days are noticeably longer – a welcome change after many weeks of darkness. The extra light and just about perceptible lift in temperature on sunny days can be turned to the kitchen gardener's advantage. If like me you're itching to get spring started, by all means do so; there are plenty of jobs to press on with right now that if completed will place you in pole position when the busier months of spring appear. So it's best foot, fork, rake and dibber forward as we get a head start on the 2014 growing season.

Grow it!

**10
WAYS**
to get a head
start on the
growing
season!

1 WARM UP YOUR SOIL

Black absorbs heat, so laying down black plastic sheeting over prepared ground is a great way to trap the sun's heat and warm the soil. Non-permeable sheeting has the added benefit of helping to dry the soil out in the process, meaning that cold, claggy soil needn't hamper early outdoor sowings. Use recycled compost bags (cut open with black interior facing skywards), weed membrane or silage sheets for the job. You'll be able to get a one to two week head start on sowing and any annual weeds that germinate beneath the sheeting in the meantime will simply run out of steam and fail. Tuck the edges in with the blade of your spade or weight down the sheeting with stones.



2 MAKE A RAISED BED

Raised beds are better draining, which means they warm up quicker in spring. It's easy to make one on the cheap using old lengths of timber or, if you can find one, wood from a broken-down pallet. Simply screw the sides of your raised bed to corner uprights using three screws per join. Beds should be at least 15cm (6in) tall for salad crops, while a depth of 30cm (12in) will enable you to grow root crops such as carrots. Fill with a mixture of topsoil and compost, raking in a few handfuls of organic fertiliser such as chicken manure pellets a few days before sowing or planting.



3 ENJOY EXTRA-EARLY STRAWBERRIES

Strawberries mark the start of the summer but you don't have to wait until June or July to begin picking. Simply pot up garden or bought-in strawberry plants into containers of compost and bring them in under the cover of a cold frame or greenhouse. The added warmth will coax your strawberries into flower and fruit up to a month earlier.

You can also get a few weeks ahead by popping cloches directly over outdoor growing plants. Remember to water plants during dry spells and lift the lid on cloches on warm days to allow good air circulation. If pollinating insects can't access the flowers, give them a helping hand by gently jiggling a soft painter's brush into the centre of the flowers to mimic pollination and ensure good fruit set.



4 START OFF SPUDS

Early varieties of potato such as 'Accord', 'Lady Christl' and 'Swift' will give you the first longed-for nuggets of earthy delight. Start them off now by chitting seed tubers in a relatively warm place that's light but out of direct sunlight – a north-facing windowsill for example.

Once they have produced stubby shoots plant them into pots of compost, allowing two to three seed tubers per potato growing sack or dustbin-sized container. Lay the tubers on to a 10cm (4in) layer of compost and cover them over, topping up with more compost as the plants grow. You can plant chitted spuds as early as March if you have a greenhouse, porch or conservatory. Cover the foliage with layers of fleece should a hard frost threaten. The potatoes can be moved outside once all danger of frost has passed.



5 SOW HARDY VEG

Given the protection of cloches or horticultural fleece there are some vegetables that can be sown so long as the soil isn't frozen hard. First early peas such as 'Feltham First' and hardy salads including mustards and mizuna will get under way to give you a cut of fresh leaves as soon as April. Sow into well-prepared soil that has been raked to a fine tilth.

Most broad beans can be planted now if you didn't get round to it in autumn. Shallots are another hardy stalwart – simply plant the bulbs 15cm (6in) apart, allowing twice this distance between additional rows. The tips of the bulbs can be mistaken as juicy worms by hungry birds, so cover your shallots with netting or fleece to keep them at bay until they have rooted into place.

6 MAKE SOME CLOCHES

Get ahead of the curve ready for planting out time in spring. I love to use clear plastic drinks bottles as free cloches popped over recently set out cold-sensitive plants such as courgettes or tomatoes. Simply peel or wash off the label then cut the bottles in half and stack ready for use. Larger cloches, made from bulk drinking water bottles, can be kept windproof by securing in place with a length of bamboo cane. Use your recycled cloches to warm up patches of ground for early sowings of salads such as radish. ➤



Picture: Feltham

7 SOW TENDER CROPS

Some vegetables need a long growing season to guarantee a decent harvest, particularly given our notoriously fickle summers! Tomatoes, peppers, aubergines, cucumbers, many types of winter squash (e.g. butternuts) and chillies all fall into this category. Sowing seeds into heated propagators set to 18-20°C (64-68°F) will give speedy, trouble-free germination.

Most can be planted into shallow trays of seed compost and then pricked out into their own 7cm (3in) pots. However, cucumbers and squashes hate root disturbance so sow these larger seed one to their own pot. Seedlings will need to be kept warm – acclimatise them to cooler conditions gradually and, of course, keep them frost-free.



8 DIG A SQUASH PIT

Greedy members of the squash family, which include perennially gluttonous courgettes, will put on a good show if they're given something to sink their teeth, or rather roots, into. In a similar vein to bean trenches, the solution is to dig a pit and fill this with organic matter. I make my squash pits around 45cm (18in) wide and deep, filling the excavated hole with kitchen scraps otherwise destined for the compost heap. Keep on filling then cap off with compost or well-rotted manure if you can get it. Pile the soil back over the top to form a mound that will settle over time. Mark each pit with a stick or cane so you remember where they are.

By starting your pits off now all those peelings and trimmings will have started to decay and release their embodied goodness by the time you come to plant your squashes.

9 FINISH SOIL PREPARATIONS

Long spells of cold or wet may have put paid to ground preparations this winter. If that's you, be sure to get outside and finish soil preparations as soon as conditions allow – the ground shouldn't be saturated or frozen.

Clear weeds then dig over the soil, keeping an eagle eye out to remove any perennial weed roots you come across. Adding compost to your soil will improve its water-retaining ability and nutrient content. Beds that have already been dug can be forked over then raked to a fine tilth in preparation for sowing to commence in a few weeks' time.



10 MAKE A COLD FRAME

Cold frames offer the ideal halfway house between greenhouse and the great outdoors. Perfect for hardening off plants started off under cover, you'll wonder what you ever did without one. If you haven't the funds to buy one, make one yourself. This is a great way to recycle old window frames, which can be used as the lid to your cold frame. Make the walls of your frame from timber cut to fit the window frame/s, ensuring that the lid faces south and slopes from back to front to catch the sunlight. Fix the lid to the back of frame using hinges and screw draw handles to the front to lift the lid. Ensure a nice, tight fit to keep plants inside snug. Use timber batten to prop open the lid on hot days. ■

NEXT MONTH: Ben looks ahead to the summer as he makes some strawberry beds

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QUESTION TIME

GOT A FRUIT OR VEG PROBLEM? ASK KG FOR HELP



with
**BOB FLOWERDEW &
ANNE SWITHINBANK**
WRITERS & CONTRIBUTORS
TO RADIO 4'S GARDENERS'
QUESTION TIME

SCALY LEMON

I have a 'Eureka' lemon tree which is about 6ft high and has a good crop of lemons; some small lemons and some flowers.

Unfortunately, it also has scale insect. I have tried using soap and water a number of times but with a large number of leaves it is impossible to get them all. I have also tried Provado Ultimate Bug Killer twice but am reluctant to use it again even though I try to avoid spraying the fruits.

Do you have any suggestions as to how to get rid of them? I usually bring it into a heated conservatory during the winter. Would leaving it out a bit longer in the autumn help? It is supposed to be hardy down to -5°C.

Janice Harwood, Bexley, Kent

ANNE SAYS: Citrus are famous for being infested by scale insects and they are not easy to shift. The key, as ever, lies in knowing your enemy. Adults lay eggs under their scales which are then protected from pesticides. However, when these hatch (some are born live) they enter a 'crawler' phase and disperse, eventually settling to feed. At these stages, their soft bodies are more vulnerable.

I use products based on plant oils and extracts and apply them regularly. Examine the problem at close quarters using a magnifying glass, then spray thoroughly. When you see more young scales, spray again and so on. When the weather warms up to



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14°C (58°F), you can apply a biological control in the form of a scale nematode (Green Gardener 01493 750061

greengardener.co.uk). However, you will have to observe a gap of at least 8-10 weeks between the last application of Provado (which has a systemic action) and introducing the bio control (this 'ban' does not apply to the more natural pesticides). Although your lemon can withstand temperatures as low as -5°C (23°F), it will go dormant and possibly drop fruit so I would opt to keep it warmer.



CAULIFLOWER CATASTROPHE

Please could you identify what has happened to my cauliflowers. The ones grown earlier in the year grew well. But these have all grown as the attached photo shows. They have all been fed and watered and not grown in a bed which has had brassicas before. Many thanks,

Shiv Panchalingam via email

BOB SAYS: The leaves look fairly healthy, possibly a tad pale, but small; the curd has failed to develop properly and is bolting. Starting off too late or a serious check to growth can cause this to happen. Unfortunately, bird and slug damage have reduced the leaf area and there is bacterial rot causing the pinkish tinge, all of which I suspect to be secondary problems. As well as

timing this could be aggravated by a soil problem. Probably it's too light, not rich enough and too acid, needing lime adding; and finally I suspect a nutrient deficiency of boron and/or other trace elements. Thus I'd add more well-rotted manure, lime or chalk (added at different time to muck) plus either seaweed meal, calcified seaweed or seaweed solution.

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ALIEN TOMATO

I left this tomato sitting on the side in the kitchen wondering what the strange things were under the skin. Imagine my surprise when seedlings started popping through! Any idea what causes such behaviour?

Ivor Agnew, Beckenham, Kent

ANNE SAYS: One would be tempted to describe this as vivipary. This is when seeds germinate from their fruits while they are still attached to the parent plant, a typical example being mangrove, when seedlings drop straight into the swamp. In tomatoes, germination from within the fruit generally happens off the plant and is triggered by either cold storage or over-ripeness. Both events can reduce the hormone responsible for seed dormancy and often, when warm, moist germination conditions are met, seedlings appear.

SHADY PLACE POSER

I have a small patch on my allotment approx 1.5m x 3m that is rather shady. Trees shade the morning sun and a shed and greenhouse shade it around midday. I have successfully grown runner beans there, and this year chard, beetroot and spring onion all did well. Lettuce, although useable, did not do so well.

As I am keen to rotate my crops, I am looking for suggestions of other things I might grow in this patch before I come back to beans etc. What about cauliflower?

Jo Ashley, Bristol

BOB SAYS: I don't think you will succeed with cauliflowers as they require the best conditions to do well. Instead I suggest cabbages, 'Minicole' may do better, or perhaps sprouting broccoli.

If you can keep the soil well fed and watered you might grow leeks. Carrots, turnips and broad beans might also do. Sugar snap peas where you eat the whole pod are a possibility. Soft fruit is another alternative; strawberries, blackcurrants and raspberries can all succeed in partial shade.

SHIFTING ASPARAGUS

I planted asparagus in May this year and would like to change the position to the other side of the garden as it receives more sunshine. When is the best time to do this?

Murray, via email

ANNE SAYS: If moving the asparagus is definitely the best decision, lose no time in making sure the new bed is ready and well nourished with well-rotted manure or compost. Excavate the fleshy roots carefully in February or early March when soil conditions are good and set crowns on mounds within a trench in the traditional way so their roots can sit comfortably without being bent. On heavy soils, keep the crowns high in their rows so that you end up with a ridge just above soil level to help with drainage.

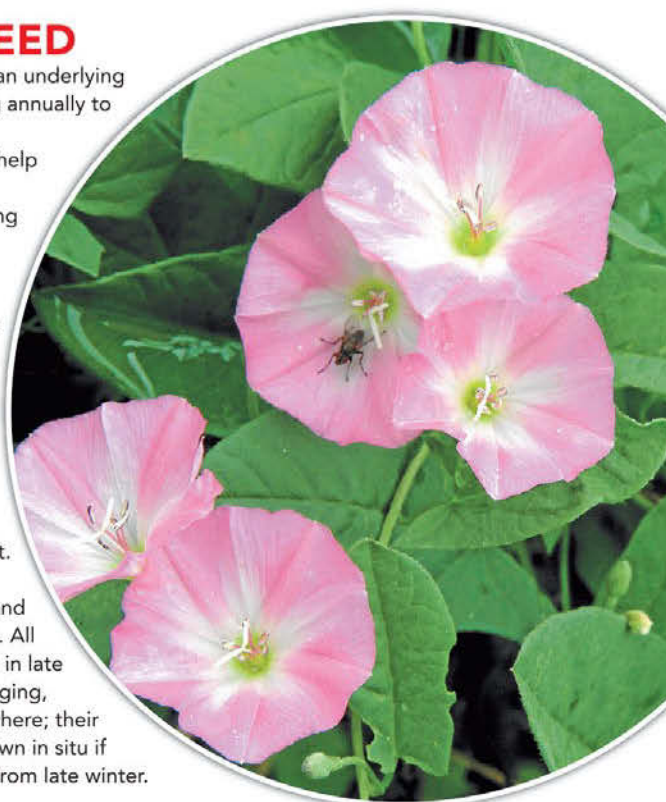
HELP WITH BINDWEED

I tend an eight-rod plot on light loam with an underlying problem of bindweed that requires digging annually to keep it under control.

I have read of planting green manure to help avoid nutrients leaching out of the soil. Approaching my 70th birthday, extra digging is a problem so can you recommend green manures that can be hoed off and composted to be dug in in late winter?

Mr R Chantlet, Maidstone, Kent

BOB SAYS: Green manures are an excellent idea, often badly implemented. Most of those on offer such as tares, vetches, rye grass and clovers are from agriculture and although benefitting the soil are tough to dig in and prone to regrow. I find mustard and borage excellent. Claytonia, the miner's lettuce, is good and also a tasty salad. Valerianella (corn salad) and *Limnanthes douglassi* are other contenders. All of these can be sown in autumn and dug in in late winter to incorporate easily. Or, to save digging, they can be hoed off and composted elsewhere; their roots do not regrow. All are quick to rot down in situ if covered with plastic sheet or a geo textile from late winter.



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Tried & tasted Unusual beets

Last year Joe Maiden trialled round, red beetroot varieties, yet there are many more with which you may be less familiar. Read on to discover how they performed

Beetroot are not difficult to grow yet they always maintain a good price in the shops and markets. However, you are only likely to find the standard round, red roots for sale in major outlets; I have never seen long beetroot for sale in a supermarket. This is a shame as they are fantastic for slicing and don't squirm out of your hand as you try to slice them like a small round beet. The down side is you need rather a large pan to cook them in. I also find the cylindrical types very tasty.

So I decided to choose the best red variety from last year's trial, 'Pablo' (see KG March 2013) and grow it along with the more unusual types to pick out a winner.

Another great advantage of growing these varieties including the long cylindrical ones and the different coloured ones is that if you were lucky enough to find them in the shops they would be very seasonal. By growing them yourself however, you can harvest over many months or even store them through winter. Just imagine different colours and shapes to go with cold meats at Christmas time.



Joe prepares the soil for sowing his beetroot.



Joe thins his seedlings in two stages.



Some show vegetables are grown in dustbins.

GROUND PREPARATION

In order to try and grow some very long roots that might even be suitable for the show bench I grew some of the variety 'Cheltenham Green Top' in a raised bed. This bed has a depth of 60cm (2ft) and is filled with top quality topsoil and 50% old growing-bag compost. The same soil grew some excellent potatoes last year. The mixture has a pH of 6.2 and was dressed with 57g (2oz) per sq yd of Vitax Q4 which contains trace elements.

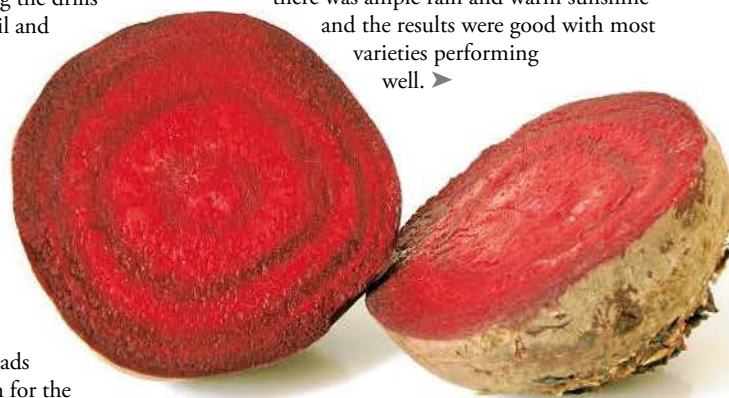
SOWING IN THE GROUND

For those varieties grown in the soil, ground preparation was easy; I chose the site which had grown my overwintering broad bean 'Aquadulce Claudia'. This site had been well manured for the beans so when these had finished all that was needed was to dig over the area and take out the few weeds which had escaped.

The sowing date outside was to be mid-June. Drills were taken out 40cm (14in) apart and since it was a dry, warm month the night before sowing the bottom of each drill was watered. After sowing the drills were covered with dry soil and this trapped enough moisture where it is needed around the seeds until the seedlings appeared. The seedlings germinated well in most cases and after 12 days all had come through. I tend to sow quite thickly and if germination is good I thin in two stages using the thinnings in salads and leaving enough room for the

developing roots. My trusty Bulldog hoe was used immediately the seedlings emerged to keep them at bay.

The season was brilliant for beetroot, there was ample rain and warm sunshine and the results were good with most varieties performing well. ▶



ROOTS FOR THE SHOWBENCH

As well as the raised bed some varieties were sown in clean 45 gallon plastic barrels in order to grow the longest roots possible for exhibition. These had the bottoms removed and were stood directly on the garden soil. The barrels were filled to the top with damp river sand; then boreholes were made in the damp sand with a crowbar (the bar was inserted to the base of the sand and moved sideways and round and round until a conical shaped hole measuring about 10cm (4in) at the top was produced. These holes were filled up to the top with a very fine compost made of equal parts of J1 No 3 and multipurpose compost.

The compost was tamped down with a cane to avoid air spaces. Eight planting stations were made in each barrel and four seeds were sown at each station. When these had germinated they were thinned down to one seedling. My sowing date was May 1 (long beet of course can be sown in March or April), which would give me good long roots with a shoulder measuring 20-25cm (8-10in) in circumference by late August or early September. Being good keepers they will remain in good condition during the late autumn, early winter. I have also in the past had good success with June sowings.



Long rooted beetroot such as 'Cheltenham Green Top' are popular with exhibitors.

VARIETIES ON TRIAL

Picture: GAP Photos/Chris Burrows.



■ **'CHELTENHAM GREEN TOP':** Long, tapering roots up to 60cm (2ft), longer with the tap root intact. (Organic Gardening Catalogue, Exhibition Seeds, Terwins Seeds, Kings Seeds, Nicky's Nursery).



■ **'BULL'S BLOOD':** Often used for ornamental foliage in bedding plant displays. If allowed to mature it does form red roots, but more often the leaves are used as baby salad leaf. (Kings Seeds, Organic Gardening Catalogue, D T Brown).



■ **'CYLINDRA':** The tops of these long, cylindrical roots often push themselves out of the ground. Expect to harvest roots up to 20cm (8in) long. (D T Brown, Suttons, Plants of Distinction, Mr Fothergill's, Terwins Seeds, Kings Seeds).



■ **'FORONO':** A half long stump-rooted type. It is said not to become too corky or soft if harvest is delayed for any reason (Organic Gardening Catalogue, Sea Spring Seeds).



■ **'WHITE DETROIT':** Pure white flesh and a conical shape. (Terwins Seeds, Organic Gardening Catalogue).



■ **'BABIETO DI CHIOGGIA':** A traditional Italian type with white rings when sliced. (Widely available also as 'Chioggia')



■ **'ALTO':** A half long stump-rooted type with excellent colour and uniformity. (Suttons, T&M)

THE RESULTS ★ = Joe's pick

VARIETY	GERMINATION	FLAVOUR	SWEET	EARTHY	FLESH COLOUR	SHAPE
'Cheltenham Green Top'	Poor	Good	✓		Dark red	Long
'Bull's Blood'	Good	Poor		✓	Red	Round
'Babieto di Chioggia'	Excellent	Excellent	✓		Red with white rings	Round
'Alto' ★	Excellent	Excellent	✓		Very dark red	Half long stump-rooted
'White Detroit'	Good	Very good	✓		Pure white	Round
'Cylindra' ★	Excellent	Excellent	✓		Dark red	Half long stump-rooted
'Forono' ★	Excellent	Excellent	✓		Very dark red	Half long stump-rooted
'Pablo'	Excellent	Very good	✓		Dark red	Round

JOE'S PICK OF THE CROP

All the varieties grew well although 'Cheltenham Green Top' did not germinate as well as the other varieties.

'Forono', 'Cylindra' and 'Alto' proved to be excellent; they were easy to grow and had great flavour. In my opinion they were comparable, if not better in flavour to the best round beet in last year's trial. For something different try 'White Detroit' or 'Babieto di Chioggia', both of which have great flavour and are very unusual. As an added bonus the white varieties such as 'White Detroit' do not suffer from a loss of colour in the pan or stain other food on the plate as red varieties can do. 'Cheltenham Green Top' is the best long red beetroot for exhibition and roots sown in the plastic barrel were lifted with clean, long roots which won several red cards for me in 2013. ■

Don't miss! YOUR FREE PACKET OF BEETROOT 'CYLINDRA', TOGETHER WITH ANOTHER OF JOE'S FAVOURITES, PARSNIP 'WHITE GEM', NEXT MONTH ON THE COVER OF KITCHEN GARDEN MAGAZINE.

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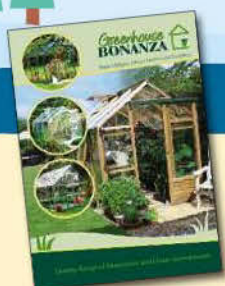
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The lowdown on...

Apricots

Perfect, fragrant apricots may be easier and harder than you might think says Lucy Halliday

Apricots: What to do when

January: Planting time for bare roots but provide a good mulch.

February: Feed by lightly raking in a general purpose fertiliser around the roots.

March: Mulch around tree with a 5cm (2in) layer well rotted manure, frost protection.

April: Protect blossom from frosts.

May: Spring pruning can be undertaken.

June: Ensure trees are well watered in hot weather.

July: Harvest, prune and keep an eye out for infections of silver leaf or bacterial canker.

August: Harvest and prune as needed.

September: This is the best planting month for container grown trees.

October: While not too cold for fiddly work, erect training wires and tie in for winter.

November: Plant new trees from bare root stock now while dormant.

December: Planting time for bare roots but provide a good mulch.

Surprisingly undemanding, apricots have just a few key requirements. In fact, 2013 was somewhat the year of the British apricot with supermarket giant Marks and Spencer supplying its stores for the first time with commercially grown British fruit and if it can do it so can you. Despite their reputation, apricot trees are fully hardy; however, their blossoms will be damaged below -1°C, making them vulnerable to frost at an important time of year thanks to their early flowering. This means choosing a site in the warmest part of the garden. A sheltered south facing wall is good; however, many growers prefer a sheltered east facing site away from prevailing winds and subject to the earliest morning sunshine. This is because a warm south facing wall can cause blossom to come early, further increasing risk from frost. A bonus of our cooler climate is that cool nights increase the beautiful rosy blush to the skins. Apricots need a fertile, deep, free draining but moisture retentive soil, ideally on the alkaline side. Apricots are self fertile

so you need only one tree. That said, a little hand pollination goes a long way to increasing yields so is always worth the effort.

Apricots are generally grafted on to the rootstock 'St Julien A' and sometimes 'Torinel'. These both produce semi vigorous trees suitable for training. A fan trained tree on 'St Julien A' can expect to grow to 3.5m (11ft), where as an orchard tree on an apricot seedling rootstock will reach up to 6m (20ft). Prepare a generous, well cultivated planting hole and dig in a bucketful of well rotted manure or compost. Planting is best between November and March while trees are



TRY THESE...

■ **'APRIGOLD'**: A delicious dwarf tree perfect for a patio pot, reaches only 1.5m (5ft) after 10 years but give it good soil and regular mulching for prolific crops. Thompson and Morgan

■ **'ALFRED'**: A tasty, traditional American fruit with rich orange flesh that needs good soil and a very sheltered site to thrive. Pink tinged blossoms. R V Roger.

■ **'GOLDCOTT'**: A rosy blushed fruit with blossoms reputed to be hardier than most. Robust and reliable in cold wet climates this is a recent introduction from the US. R V Roger.

■ **'TOMCOTT'**: Great for the British climate, this prolific cropper has very early large, blushed, intensely sweet fruits in mid-summer. Pomona Fruits.

■ **'GOLDEN GLOW'**: A Worcestershire bred variety which is hardy and copes well in damp areas as it is resistant to canker. A good choice for a free standing orchard tree. Pomona Fruits.



Apricot
'Aprigold'.

Picture: Thompson & Morgan

Suppliers

■ **R V ROGER**: 01751 472226,
www.rvroger.co.uk

■ **POMONA FRUITS**: 0845 6760607,
www.pomonafruits.co.uk

■ **THOMPSON & MORGAN**: 0844 573 1818
www.thompson-morgan.com

FAST TRACK TO SUCCESS:

DELICATE BLOSSOMS

Remove flower covers of fleece or polythene during the day to allow light and pollinators to the tree.

HAND POLLINATION

Take a soft paint brush and over several dry, sunny days, swizzle it inside each flower to increase yields.

RIPENING SPACE

Thin out heavy crops when fruits are hazelnut sized, removing damaged or deformed fruitlets and those facing the wall if trained.

GOOD DRINK

Water newly planted trees regularly through their first spring and summer, especially during drought and once fruits start to swell.

POTTED PLEASURES

Choose a dwarf variety for pot growing, move it to the warmest areas and then protect in a cold greenhouse or shed over winter.

Garden ripened apricots, warm from a sun lit branch, simply one of life's high points!

dormant for bare roots, however pot grown trees thrive best when planted in September or May. Ensure soil falls between all the roots, firm with a heel to exclude air pockets and water in. Apricot trees grow well in the UK when trained against a wall for shelter and warmth. Fan training saves space and allows plenty of light in to ripen the fruit. To start training you will need to erect training wires to tie in to before planting your tree. Prune only when sap is rising in May or July/August. Aim to keep a good open shape for air flow, removing dead, damaged or diseased wood or crossing branches. Apricots fruit on last year's wood and on older spurs so a framework, once established can last for four years, with subsequent pruning used to develop new spurs. To protect flowering trees in spring, cover with polythene or horticultural fleece, using canes if needed to support as the cover should not contact the blossoms. The delicious fruits are ready when they soften and detach readily from the branch. ■





This is the number one vegetable that all gardeners grow. Why? Because home grown tomatoes are easy to produce and yet taste so much better than those bought in the shops. Andrew Tokely has all the advice you need to get started

KG Beginner's Guide

TOMATOES

You can always find a tomato to suit your taste buds; some gardeners like them sweet, some with a little bit of a tang, others with a high acidic content just like the tomatoes of yesteryear. With so much choice and varieties suitable for growing under glass, outside, in a basket or container, this the perfect crop for new veg gardeners to try.



WHEN & HOW TO SOW

First decide where you are going to grow your tomatoes. If you have a heated glasshouse sowing can begin now. Those with only a cold or unheated glasshouse or plants destined for growing outdoors should not sow the seed before March or April.

Tomato seed is of a good size and is quite easy to handle. Sow the seeds into 9cm (3in) square flowerpots filled with moist multi-purpose compost. Once filled, lightly firm down using a piece of wood the same size as the inner of the square pot (or the bottom of an identical pot). This leaves a small rim around the top, so there is enough space to sow the seeds. Before sowing, water the pots using a can fitted with a fine rose and then allow them to drain.

The seeds are then sown thinly over the surface of the compost (left) before lightly covering with a layer of fine grade vermiculite – you will find this in your local garden centre. The pots are then placed into a heated propagator or in a warm place indoors at a minimum temperature of 18-20°C (65-70°F), where germination usually takes 5-10 days.

NURTURE SEEDLINGS

Once the seedlings have germinated, prick them out (transplant) before they get too large into individual 10cm (4in) pots filled with multipurpose compost. When handling the seedlings it is important to always hold them by their seed leaf and never by the stem. Also always plant them into the compost so the seed leaves are just touching the surface of the compost. This will ensure you get a sturdy plant, as extra roots will naturally grow out of the main stem as it matures. These seedlings are grown on in a heated glasshouse or on a sunny windowsill at a minimum temperature of 10-15°C (50-60°F) until ready for planting.

Take care when watering these young plants once they have two sets of true leaves. These have more deeply cut edges than the simple seed leaves. Give them water when the compost is dry and the plants are just at the point of wilting. This method will ensure the plants remain short and sturdy and not push them on too fast.

TOP TIP

On a windowsill where light will only be reaching the plants from one side, turn the pots a quarter turn each day to encourage even growth

YOUNG PLANTS THE EASY WAY

Some mail order companies now offer plug plants (strong young seedlings). These are delivered in April or May and require potting on for a few weeks when they arrive before being planted out.

In recent years grafted tomato plants have been made available. These are young tomato plants that have been grafted (joined) on to a tomato rootstock which gives the grafted variety added vigour and is a technique used by many commercial growers. The rootstock also gives the plant a better resistance to soil borne pests and diseases, which is a real plus for gardeners who grow tomatoes in the greenhouse border soil rather than in growing-bags. It can also give a higher yield although the plants are more expensive initially due to the extra cost of producing them.



Andrew plants his tomatoes into bottomless pots and grows them over growing-bags.

AFTERCARE

When growing plants under glass, the easiest method is to grow your crops in slightly adapted growing-bags. Simply flatten out each bag, after shaking it first to loosen up the compost. Then cut out three holes in the top of each bag. A bottomless 20cm (8in) pot is then pushed into each hole in the bag about 5cm (2in) deep, and the pots are filled with more compost from another growing-bag. Plant a tomato into the top of each pot as deep as possible so the bottom two leaves are just touching the compost. In-between the larger pots cut two small holes in the growing-bag and insert a 10cm (4in) flower pot. This pot allows you to water and feed directly to the roots, as well as being able to water in the top of the larger pots. Ideally the growing temperature of the glasshouse should be kept at 10-15°C (50-60°F) during this stage.

Once all the tomatoes are planted tie string loosely around the base of each and take it up to a pole that is fixed to the greenhouse roof where the strings are tied. These strings offer a quick and easy way to support your plants. As the stems grow simply twist them gently around it in an anticlockwise direction.

GROWING OUTDOORS

Plants for growing outdoors are planted into rich fertile soil that has had a dressing of Growmore fertiliser added at the rate of 60g per sq m (2oz per square yard) prior to planting.

Planting does not start until the first week in June, once all risk of late frosts has passed and each tomato is planted next to a 150cm (5ft) bamboo cane and tied as it grows while removing all sideshoots if it's a cordon variety.



Grow outdoor tomatoes in a sunny spot.

WATERING & FEEDING

Approximately two to three weeks after planting you will notice how well your plants are growing by a slight curl in the top of the plant. At this point it is important to water them regularly so they are kept constantly moist, but not too wet or too dry.

Then once the first truss has set (flowers start to show a small fruit) water them with a general liquid feed such as Liquinure or Miracle-Gro (both rich in nitrogen), to help build up a strong growing plant. After this initial feed change to a tomato food (rich in potash), applied once a week throughout the fruiting season. In between feeds, plants are watered regularly to keep the compost evenly moist. ►

Don't panic! Healthy young plants often have a slight curl to the growing point as it develops.

GROWING IN CONTAINERS

Some varieties of tomatoes do not grow tall, instead remaining low and bushy. These are therefore known as bush tomatoes and are ideal for planting into containers and growing on a sunny patio. Bush tomato varieties are the easiest to grow as they do not require any sideshooting or plant supports.

There are also some very good varieties that will grow in hanging baskets. These too require no sideshooting and should be hung in a sunny position to get the best crop.

Plant three bush-type plants into a 36cm (14in) basket or three to a 45cm (18in) diameter patio container, filled with growing-bag compost. Tomatoes grown in baskets and large containers will need regular watering and feeding as they can dry out very quickly during the summer as they start to crop.



Bush tomatoes such as 'Terenzo F1' are ideal for patio containers or hanging baskets.



TOMATOES AT A GLANCE GUIDE

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

ANDREW'S PICK OF THE VARIETIES

Cherry types



■ **'SUNGOLD F1'** – A heavy crop of thin-skinned rich orange fruits of the sweetest flavour and suitable for sowing and growing early or late under glass or as an outside crop. (Widely available).



■ **'SUNCHERRY PREMIUM F1'** – From the same breeder as 'Sungold' but with shiny red cherry tomatoes, producing a heavy crop of sweet fruits on long trusses. (Simpson's Seeds, Seeds of Distinction, T&M)



■ **'SWEET APERITIF'** – Possibly the sweetest cherry tomato available with up to 150 fruits per plant. (D T Brown, Suttons, Seeds of Distinction, T&M)



■ **'SANTONIO F1'** – A heavy cropping red cherry plum with a thicker skin and an exceptional flavour that provides a distinctive acidic bite and delicious lingering sweetness. (T&M)

Medium to large

■ **'FERLINE F1'** – The blight resistant tomato with great flavour and a heavy crop. A must for outdoor growing. (T&M, Plant World Seeds, Mr Fothergill's, D T Brown, Nicky's Nursery, Simpson's Seeds, GrowVeg.com.)

■ **'ALICANTE'** – Ideal variety for beginners, producing a heavy crop of high quality well flavoured fruits. Suitable for growing under glass or outdoors. (Widely available)



■ **'TAMINA'** – A superb early fruiting variety with outstanding taste and ideal for outdoor cropping. (Suttons, T&M)



Beefsteak

■ **'COUNTRY TASTE'** – Delicious fruits which can reach weight of over 227g (1½lb), one slice will fill a sandwich. (Marshalls, Kings, Dobies, D T Brown, T&M)

Grafted

■ **'ELEGANCE'** – A vigorous variety, producing heavy trusses of standard size fruits. (Suttons)

■ **'TOMTATO'** – Tomato grafted on a potato, enabling harvests of both white potatoes and tasty red cherry tomatoes. (T&M)



For baskets & containers



■ **'LOSETTO F1'** – A vigorous bush variety with good blight resistance, and tasty red fruits. Ideal for growing in baskets or containers. (Seeds of Distinction, T&M, Unwins, Simpson's Seeds, simplyseed.co.uk)

■ **'TERENZO F1'** – Produces high yields of sweet red cherry tumbler like tomatoes on cascading plants ideal for baskets. (T&M)

■ **'CHERRY CASCADE'** – Masses of sweet and juicy currant sized fruits cascading from baskets or containers. (T&M)



PEST & DISEASES

The most common pest of tomatoes is whitefly. Control by spraying with a suitable insecticide, or use a biological control available via mail order called *Encarsia formosa*.

Plants may show signs of magnesium deficiency; this is indicated by yellow marks between the leaf veins, mainly near the base of the plant. Diluting two teaspoons of Epsom salts in a gallon of water and watering the plants will soon overcome this problem.

One of the most common problems beginner gardeners come up against is blossom end rot. This appears at the base of fruits, especially the larger fruited or beefsteak types. The cause of this is usually poor or infrequent watering. If watering is erratic the plants cannot take up enough calcium – an element which is essential for building fruit. Without it the fruits develop a black scar. Keep on top of watering and if you are likely to be away consider installing a watering system or stand your pots in saucers of water.

In some years blight can be a big problem on potatoes and this soon spreads to outdoor tomatoes (the two crops are closely related). It quickly appears when the weather is warm and humid and symptoms appear first on the foliage in the form of pale spots, these quickly spread and soon the fruits turn an unsightly brown colour.

Prevention is better than cure with blight and one of the few controls left to gardeners is the copper based fungicide Bordeaux mixture. There are also some blight resistant varieties available. It is important to note however that these show resistance, but are not immune as the blight spores are constantly evolving and new strains to which plants are not resistant are developing all the time.

See my pick of the varieties for some blight resistant tomatoes. The problem is far less common under cover where plants are protected from airborne spores to a certain degree.

HARVESTING

Picking the crop is easy, simply twist the ripe fruits so they come away cleanly from the trusses with the calyx still attached. Once picked, wash them and pop them in the fridge.

As the days get shorter some fruits take longer to ripen. To speed up the process pick off the green fruits and lay them in trays on a sunny windowsill, adding an old banana skin to release ethylene gas helps the ripening process. ■



Late fruit can be encouraged to ripen if placed with a ripe banana or banana skin.

SAVE ON TOMATO SEEDS - SEE P98-99

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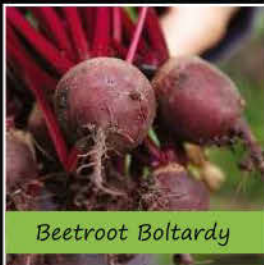
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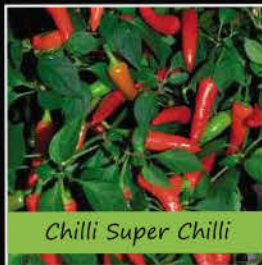
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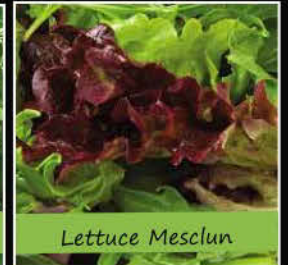
Chilli Super Chilli



Courgette Atena



French Bean Montano



Lettuce Mesclun



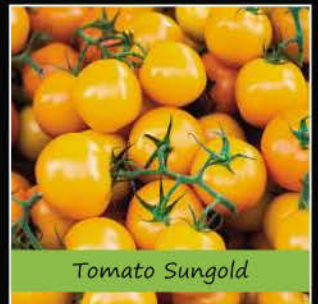
Mange Tout Sweet Horizon



Early Potato Arran Pilot



Runner Bean Equator



Tomato Sungold

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GET GROWING



Mini veg^o to harvest in 7 days



Professional kitchen gardener Sharon Louise Allen explores the thoroughly modern world of trendy microgreens with expert tips on growing them



TOP: Leaf Beet 'Flamingo'. ABOVE: Oxalis, one of the unusual varieties that is popular with chefs.

Micro herbs or microgreens are plants with two fully developed cotyledon leaves and one pair of very small, partially developed true leaves. They are a very high turnover crop. I have spent many an hour sowing seemingly endless rows of seed for plants that will never reach maturity, destined to be snipped off by chefs' scissors after a couple of weeks, or only days. In fact, eat at any high class restaurant and your meal is bound to include some dainty microgreens. Hailed by some as a super food, they are considered indispensable in all superior eateries. So just how have they become so popular?

Modern life seems obsessed with smallness, distilling things down to reach their tiniest, prettiest and purest form. This combined with the drive of the high end food industry has propelled the microgreen to its current status as a must-have for any smart plate.

Surprisingly, microgreens have been served in top restaurants for over 20 years now. No longer seen as a faddy foodstuff, they have stood the test of time and are still a must for top chefs across the world. Some, like Raymond Blanc, have gone so far as to grow their own. But where did it begin?

THE MICROGREEN MOVEMENT BEGINS

Back in 1984, Richard Vine, then pioneer of baby salad production, now horticultural consultant, was experimenting, inspired by the tastes of seedling vegetables, growing chards, spinach, watercress, kale, red cabbage, chicory and amaranth. He was friends with a chef who spurred him on and bought all that he could supply. Within six weeks of starting his enterprise he was supplying the likes of Gordon Ramsay, Coutts Bank and The Dorchester. Described by Raymond Blanc as "...probably the very best and most creative grower in this country." he has gone on to develop vegetable production at some of the world's finest eateries, as having your own growing larder is, of course, the natural extension of this preoccupation with optimum taste and freshness.



A colourful array of micro leaf growing in the polytunnel at Le Manoir; all have been rigorously taste tested by Raymond Blanc and his chefs.

At Raymond Blanc's Le Manoir in Oxfordshire, a whole polytunnel in his extensive organic garden is devoted to micro production and he has even flown his head chef and also head gardener Ann Marie Owens over to America to study their growing technique. He is passionate about them and Ann Marie is dismissive of claims that this growing technique is a fad: "...for top chefs it's about creating an experience. Food is totally their business, they have to be the leaders. They look at things entirely differently to your average grower, it is not driven by fashions but entirely by taste. The Olympians of the restaurant world are competing at a global level to create the best taste..."

MICROGREENS EN MASSE

Not all top restaurants are lucky enough to have their own living larder and filling that gap is 'The Modern Salad Grower'. Sean O'Neill started his business 15 years ago and has been growing, cooking and hobnobbing with the top people in the industry ever since. He is a true innovator, supplying a mind-boggling array of delicate fancies like purple triangle sorrel, bronze fennel frond and Alaskan nasturtium to crown the dishes of hotspot eateries like Jamie Oliver's Fifteen, The Fat Duck or River Cottage. Sean understands the culinary giants and their need to be at the creative forefront, describing himself as "...a conduit between nature and the chef."

Sean's vegetable gems are cultivated on a Cornish farm using natural organic methods with produce reaching London's high class kitchens in just six hours.

Increasing demand for these little delicacies means that over the last few years a rash of suppliers has emerged, all selling high priced trays of tiny leaves, many of which are grown on a truly industrial scale.

**"THE
OLYMPIANS OF
THE RESTAURANT
WORLD ARE
COMPETING AT A
GLOBAL LEVEL
TO CREATE THE
BEST TASTE"**

Most are marketed as high end adornments to dishes, with lots of classy close-up shots of pretty jewel-like leaves. Competition is high and efficient growing technique becomes all important to drive on the steep profit curves.

One wholesale giant of the industry is WestlandsWow, founded seven years ago and now despatching up to 9000 punnets of microgreens per day. Three and a half acres of glasshouse contain an almost fully automated 'mobile bench system' where seeds are sown on huge two by four metre trays covered in either a paper- or carpet-like growing medium. These 'benches' are manoeuvred around the immense glasshouses on rails forming a high tech production line. Lights are used but only to extend the day length, thus enabling a constant supply of around 30 different microgreens. Constituents of growing mediums and the methods employed by such growers are closely guarded secrets as revenues can be enormous; typically sold in 30g punnets, these petit plate embellishments are not cheap. ►



These radish will be spicier than compost grown plants.



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Lighting helps to prevent the microgreens from stretching and speeds production.

GROWING YOUR OWN

The vegetable growing world is a traditional one, an outdoor pastime for robust folk, with the emphasis on bigger and better crops. But we live in modern times and there is a niche for these miniature crops, especially in our urban sprawls.

Tasty miniature garnishes for tight spaces, microgreens need some light but most can manage on a windowsill.

You can grow an amazing array of baby leaves and it is great fun discovering new tastes. Seed can work out expensive so maybe use up half-filled seed packets left over from your plot, providing you are sensible with your choices. Tomatoes and peppers are not recommended!

WHAT TO GROW

Turnaround is quick for most microgreens, especially if you use heat. With one variety, 'Buckshorn Plantain', I had germination in just two days; this varies dramatically depending on what you sow and when you sow it.

Cheapest, easiest and quickest to get to cutting size are generally the spicy cresses, radishes and mustards; they can be sown all year round. Next come cabbage, broccoli and kales, they have a very green flavour. Basil and herbs pack a flavour punch but need a higher constant temperature. See Sharon Louise's favourite microgreens to grow in the panel below.



USING LIGHTS

For growing during the depths of winter you could buy a small lighted set-up such as the Garland Grow Light Garden (see picture above). The nutritional benefits may not be the same though. It does use energy, but that is a matter of personal choice; you can be sure the supermarket shelves contain leaves grown under lights. Remember though you are harvesting microgreens very young so some stretching due to lack of light is not a huge problem.

WHERE TO GROW

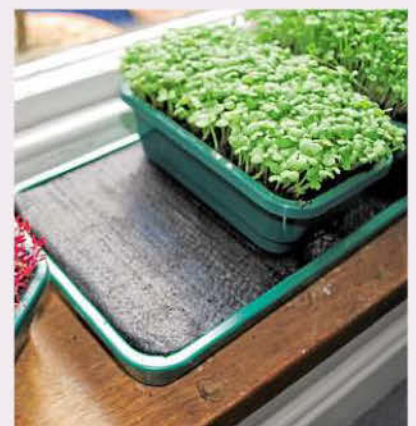
A windowsill is a good place for several small trays of microgreens, or spare polytunnel space is ideal for a few rows. Open ground is more challenging with cooler, wetter conditions and problems with slugs and snails although it will give the most flavoursome, nutritious crops. If you are worried about waste, perhaps alter your technique allowing some seedlings to grow on; or why not prick some out – one person's microgreens are another person's thinnings. No need for much growing medium and everything can be composted. ➤



GROWING TIPS FROM THE PROFESSIONALS

Richard Vine

- I use a basic compost with perlite added. I very rarely use lights if at all, essentially growing what's seasonal, with minimal inputs.
- Cover seeds with black plastic to aid germination.
- Water only from underneath seed beds.
- Use fleece in frost conditions and an insect netting if there's a pest problem.



A self watering tray with capillary matting helps keep the containers watered.

Ann Marie Owens

(HEAD GARDENER AT LE MANOIR)

- Seeds are covered with black plastic to avoid the compost/micro leaf sandwich, as plants are grown so close together compost can rise up leaving the micro leaf underneath. The plastic is taken off after germination and the seedlings left for a couple of days as they are ugly and distorted at first.
- Keep everything cool and vented to guard against damping off which is the biggest issue. Observation is key... keep track of the weather, a hot sunny day means more venting, shading and watering.
- Watering is very important, overly wet conditions cause more damping off and problems of compost flies etc.

Sean O' Neill

- Recycle compost, use it as soil conditioner elsewhere.
- Allow some of each species to reach their full potential somewhere and collect the seed.
- Watch out for the changing of the seasons, spring into summer and autumn into winter, and pay extra attention to watering at those times.

Sharon Louise's top crops



■ **RADISH 'RAMBO':** Big and fleshy. Grows quick and attractive. Can be sown thickly and grown on a self-watering mat.



■ **BASILS:** Many different varieties available. Germinate with heat and grow on cool to prevent damping off.



■ **LEEK:** Easy and deemed by my whole family to have a wonderful super fresh taste.



■ **ORACH 'MAGENTA MAGIC':** Not one for taste but really gorgeous.



■ **'HUAUZONTLE' OR AZTEC BROCCOLI:** Another jewel for your plate!

SHARON LOUISE'S GROWING METHOD

You will need to experiment to get the best results in different environments.

I trialled over 50 seed varieties, growing in tight spaces in the home, using seed trays on windowsills etc. I sowed in September and most success came with cool conditions using small, clean seed trays with a bit of depth to them. Seed was sown not too thickly (i.e. not touching with a decent gap between each) on a fairly shallow but well firmed layer of compost. This was then covered with black plastic (not compost) which is removed on germination.

The lighted set-up worked very well, giving reliable crops, but the microgreens lacked a bit in flavour. Heat made seeds 'bomb up' super-fast but damping off was increased with some etiolated plants. Remember if you wish to 'grow on' sow on a decent depth of compost of good quality. Also, turn your crops regularly or they will lean to the light source, and finally water from below or you will get damping off.



The little sown trays are placed in another tray of water until the compost is fully wet.



Experiment with containers, but you only need small ones and sow little and often.

INFORMATION & SUPPLIERS

Suitable seeds are available from most seed suppliers (see page 101). We thank the following for their help in this feature:

■ **REAL SEED COMPANY**
www.realseeds.co.uk
 ■ **GARLAND**
www.garlandproducts.com
 ■ **LE MANOIR AUX QUAT'SAISONS**
www.manoir.com

■ **MOLES SEEDS**
www.molesseeds.co.uk
 ■ **SEAN O' NEILL**
<http://themodernsaladgrower.co.uk>
 ■ **WESTLANDSWOW**
www.westlandswow.co.uk

KG MINI GROWING GUIDE

Veg at a glance

Aubergines

Aubergines are becoming increasingly popular often for growing in pots on a patio. They will produce fruit outside in a good summer especially some of the newer varieties, but they will do even better if you can grow them inside.

SOWING THE SEED

Aubergines need a long growing season and are best sown from February to May for indoor plantings or in March or April if you intend cropping them outside. Sow seeds in multi-purpose compost or John Innes seed compost and cover with 6mm (¼in) of compost or vermiculite. Water well and place in a propagator or in an airing cupboard. Maintain a temperature of about 18°-21°C (65°-70°F). Check seeds daily after a week if they are in an airing cupboard. As soon as you see the first seedling just emerging, remove from the propagator or airing cupboard and place in full light. When large enough to handle, transplant each seedling into small 7.5cm (3in) pots or similar. Grow on, on a warm, bright windowsill.

TOP TIP

Soak seed in warm water for 24 hours before sowing to aid germination

SOWING TIME:
February – early May

GROWING ON

From mid April it should be safe to move the young plants to an unheated greenhouse bench but give some extra fleece protection if cold nights are forecast. By late April the young plants should be fine in an unheated greenhouse. If you haven't got a greenhouse, place the plants outside during April and May on warm sunny days and bring in at night. From the end of May, providing there are no frosts, you can leave the plants outside somewhere sheltered. ►

PLANTING OUT

Aubergines can be planted into their final large pots (about 30cm/1ft diameter) or two per growing bag from late April in a greenhouse or from late May to early June if placing on a patio. They could also be planted in the ground from early June at about 90cm (3ft) apart.



TOP TIP

When plants are flowering, open up cold frames or the greenhouse to encourage pollinators to enter and fertilise the flowers



PESTS & DISEASES

■ **RED SPIDER MITE:** This pest can be a serious problem for aubergines, particularly those in a hot, dry greenhouse. Red spider mites are small but can just about be seen crawling on the undersides of the leaves. Fine webbing will also be seen on the leaves and in the leaf axils. The leaves will start to turn speckly yellow which is often the first symptom you will spot. The mites do not like humid conditions so misting the plants regularly will help. Apply biological controls at the first sign of red spider mite or use organic sprays to try and keep the numbers down.

■ **WHITEFLY:** Another troublesome pest of aubergines and the little white flies will fly up if the plants are tapped. Use biological controls at the first sign of the pest or use sticky traps or organic sprays.

■ **APHIDS:** These can sometimes be a problem and will be seen gathering on the young tips of the plants. Remove with finger and thumb regularly or use organic insecticide sprays.



VARIETIES TO CHOOSE

■ **'POT BLACK F1':** Described as exceptionally early by seed supplier Thompson & Morgan. Compact 60cm (2ft) plants produce masses of mini shiny black fruits.

■ **'OPHELIA F1':** Golf ball sized black fruits are produced in abundance. They are described as having no bitter aftertaste and are produced on compact plants. Ideal for pots.

■ **'BLACK ENORMA F1':** A traditional full size aubergine with large fruits. Ideal for the greenhouse or outside but plants are quite large and will need staking.

■ **'LISTADA DE GANDIA':** A stripey purple and white fruited aubergine. Fruits up to 15cm (6in) long. Makes a compact plant.



Growing tips

■ The larger varieties may need some staking to keep the plants upright, the compact varieties less so.

■ Once flowering starts, feed fortnightly with a high potash feed such as a proprietary tomato feed.

■ The large fruited aubergines may need to have some flowers removing after five or six fruits have started to grow to put all the energy into making these a good size. This is not needed for the compact small fruited varieties.

HARVESTING YOUR CROP

The fruit should be ready from August onwards.

Aim to wait until the fruit are nicely coloured and shiny and then cut when required. ■



How to make an obelisk

If you grow climbing crops such as beans, or like to include some flowering plants such as sweet peas or roses in among your edibles, they'll need supporting. Joyce Russell has a simple weekend project that can help you do just that.

Photos: Ben Russell

I like growing runner beans, climbing French beans and sweet peas, to name just a few of the plants that twine upwards in my garden. In order to support these plants, as they reach for the sky, I make wigwams of hazel poles and frames of bamboo. This is fine for a large vegetable garden with rows of crops, but if you want something smaller then perhaps you should consider an obelisk.

The name doesn't matter much; you can call it an obelisk, a bean frame, a plant support or a tower. You can buy one made of metal or plastic, but it is remarkably easy to make one yourself. The structure is simple and elegant, so it doesn't look out of place in the flower border, at the centre of a potager or as a feature in the vegetable patch. And there really is a specific pleasure in watching plants twine round the legs of an obelisk that you have built yourself.

Climbing plants with plenty of leaves will soon start to cover the structure. Runner beans may obliterate it entirely, but climbing French beans have lighter foliage. ➤



Step by step

WHAT WILL YOU NEED?

TOOLS: Saw, drill, 4mm drill bit, tape measure, screwdriver, pencil, sandpaper (and a flat wooden block).

MATERIALS: Pressure treated timber will last longer than untreated timber, but look for a non-hazardous treatment such as Tanalith E. I used 35mm x 18mm Spruce at the following lengths:

- 4 @ 1800mm for uprights
- 2 @ 470mm & 2 @ 510mm for lower horizontal braces
- 2 @ 320mm & 2 @ 360mm for middle horizontal braces
- 2 @ 160mm & 2 @ 210mm for top horizontal braces
- 4 @ 185mm for top surface
- Optional: timber preservative, outdoor paint or wood stain
- 12 @ 3.5mm x 30mm screws
- 20 @ 3.5mm x 40mm screws



STEP 1

Cut the timber to length. The horizontal braces can be left a little longer; these are cut to the correct size at steps 5 and 6, after they are fixed in place. Use some sandpaper to smooth rough edges and to remove splinters.



STEP 2

Measure and mark: 40mm in from each end of 510mm, 350mm, 210mm pieces. 10mm in from each end of 185mm pieces. 25mm in from each end of 470mm, 320mm, 160mm. Use the 4mm drill bit to drill a pilot hole at the centre of each of the marked points.



STEP 3

Take two 1800mm pieces and, measuring from the top of each one, mark a line at 35mm, another line at 685mm and a third at 1335mm. These two uprights will be slightly splayed and joined by fixing the shorter bracing pieces. Use 3.5mm x 30mm screws to fix a 160mm piece across the top of two uprights. The bottom edge of the 320mm piece goes at the 685mm

point and the 470mm piece goes at the 1335mm point. There should be a small amount of overlap at each end of the bracing pieces.

The marked lines will be at an angle to the bracing pieces, but choose a centre point when locating the bottom edge of the bracing piece on the line. Repeat with the remaining pieces to give two flat frames.

TOP TIP

Try not to cut one end of each of the uprights. These will be the 'feet' that are in contact with the soil. If the 'foot' end is cut, then you risk exposing untreated timber which will more easily rot than a sealed, treated end.

**STEP 4**

Use the edge of the upright as a guide and saw off any surplus timber so the bracing pieces are flush with the uprights. This is an easy way of cutting the correct angle on the ends of the bracing pieces.

**STEP 5**

The two frames are assembled by fitting the remaining bracing pieces in place (these are slightly longer and should overlap the ends of the bracing pieces cut in step 4). Use 3.5mm x 40mm screws to secure these pieces.

**STEP 6**

Use 3.5mm x 40mm screws to fix the four 185mm pieces evenly across the top. Leave wide enough gaps between these slats to allow water to run away.

**STEP 7**

The structure can be painted to match a garden theme or to stand as a signature colour of your choice. The flat top makes a good plinth for a sculpture or even a gnome!

**STEP 8**

Put the obelisk in place. Push the feet down into the soil to give added stability and adjust as necessary to ensure it is perfectly upright and not leaning over.

AN ODD LITTLE NOTE

I liked the look of an egg-shaped beach pebble and a pottery cup that my daughter made when she was small, so I chose to put them on top of my obelisk. They brought a smile to my face every time I spotted them and all the more so when a young robin chose this as his favourite perching place. He's a friendly thing and seems quite unafraid of any humans in the garden.

He sits on top of his perch and watches whatever activities are happening.

Imagine my surprise when I was weeding nearby and he flew from the obelisk to land on my head. I could feel his small feet in my hair as he made himself comfortable. He must have

stayed for a minute or two while I held my breath and hoped that

Ben would wander into the garden with his camera. No photo alas.

Over the summer my robin's red breast has developed more fully and his feathers are sleek and flat. He has learned to be wary of the cat and more wary of humans as well. I don't think he will sit so

comfortably on my head again, but the sight of my obelisk, and the perch on top, is a constant reminder of the joys that a day in the garden can bring.

TOP TIP

The screws should be long enough to make a strong structure, but short enough that they don't break out of the other side of the wood.



Joyce's friendly robin.

NEXT MONTH: Make a bumblebee nest with Grow It! writer Andy Cawthray

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A man with short grey hair, smiling, wearing a brown leather vest over a red and white plaid shirt. He is holding a large bunch of freshly harvested, slightly dirty potatoes in both hands. The background is a lush green garden with trees and a wooden fence.

Toby's tips for early spuds

Toby Buckland reveals his favourite early varieties and offers essential growing advice to help you grow your best crop ever!



Kelp was the secret to a good crop for uncle Bob.

My first foray into vegetable growing and the thing that first got me into gardening was helping my uncle Bob plant his spuds.

Rather than plant potato tubers straight in the soil, uncle Bob, like his father before him, bedded his potatoes in trenches filled with seaweed gathered from the local beach. In our part of Devon, bladderwrack, sea lettuce and kelp are washed ashore in winter in glossy ribbons that run the length of the beach. Gathering enough to fill the back of my uncle's Cortina was a job of just minutes. Then it was back to the garden where he would dig the trenches and under instruction I would set the tubers among the slippery piles of seaweed leaves and covered the lot with soil. The adventure of it was thrilling but the real magic came in June when I was back – fork in hand – to help Bob with the harvest. When we dug into the soil, instead of finding seaweed there were dozens of pearl-white potatoes. A miracle I always remember whenever I plant or gather spuds from the soil.

PERCY'S FAVOURITE

My uncle's potato of choice was 'Sharpe's Express' – a Nineteenth century variety selected for cultivation by Charles Sharpe Seed Co of Sleaford in Lincolnshire for its speed to swell but more importantly because it was a firm favourite of the late, great Percy

Thrower. I'm a fan too as the oval tubers have an earthy 'bite' and because they have a high dry matter content they are great for roasting – something that's unusual for early potatoes.

The texture of a potato dictates how to best use it in the kitchen. Those described as dry or floury have more starch and will absorb oil into their surface and therefore turn crispy when

fried or roasted and soak up butter to make a creamy mash. Their dryness, however, makes them prone to crumbling to a mush if over-boiled. Steaming is a way of getting around this but better each and every time are spuds with a waxy flesh that holds together when cooked in water and remains firm when cooked.

*“THE
TEXTURE OF
A POTATO
DICTATES
HOW TO BEST
USE IT IN THE
KITCHEN”*

Toby's pick of the early potatoes

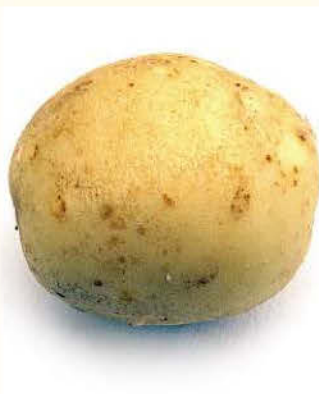
Every spring I plant rows of different varieties to test them for speed, quality and above all flavour. Taste when it comes to spuds isn't just a matter of... er taste; soil-type, temperature

and above all rainfall all affect flavour. During a wet year the dry matter in spuds increases giving them a stronger flavour as well affecting how well they roast or boil. That said

there are some varieties that I always grow because of their versatility in different situations and meals. Plus by growing a range I'm guaranteed pickings over a long time.



■ **'ROCKET'** a waxy variety from the 1980s has its downsides: the flavour isn't great; if left through the summer the skins tend to crack and yields aren't large – you get five or six good sized spuds and lots of tiddlers. That said it's still worth growing as it is very early. The tops are short so don't flop over the sides of pots.



■ **'SWIFT'** is similar to the popular 'Rocket' but has a more pronounced flavour and produces larger spuds. It also has better disease resistance, particularly to scab – a disorder common to alkaline soils that causes rough patches on the skins. Swift is a waxy type ideal for boiling. Ideal for containers.



■ **'PENTLAND JAVELIN'** makes a good partner to 'Rocket' or 'Swift' as it bulks up two to three weeks later and makes heavier crops. The flesh is white and waxy with a pronounced earthy 'new' potato flavour. 'Pentland Javelin' will keep well when grown on as a maincrop, too. Some resistance to eelworm and viruses.



■ **'SHARPE'S EXPRESS'** This heritage variety dating back to 1901 and was introduced by Charles Sharpe of Sleaford in Lincolnshire. It produces oval shaped tubers with white skins and pale lemon coloured flesh. This is the early spud to plant for chipping and roasts, it can be a bit crumbly for boiling.



Floury potatoes make the best roasties.

WHAT ARE EARLY POTATOES?

Early potatoes are varieties bred to bulk up early and crop fast in just eight to 12 weeks depending on the variety. Second earlies take 16 weeks and main crops up to 20. Having thinner skins and a lower starch content compared to maincrops they don't store over winter but being up and out of the ground before fungal diseases like blight have chance to take hold they're more reliable. Harvest while the tops are still green for loose skins and the best flavour.

TOP TIP

Replant tubers with shoots attached for a second crop of 'new' potatoes later in the summer



Picture: Thompson & Morgan



■ **'WINSTON'** is a wonderful early variety as it's the first to produce decent sized spuds big enough for baking. Its texture is described as 'firm' meaning it's halfway between floury and waxy. Once lifted it won't keep – that said it stays in good condition if left in the soil right through until autumn.

■ **'ARRAN PILOT'** is an old favourite with undulating oblong tubers and a fabulous new potato flavour, especially if it's cooked as soon after lifting as possible. Most new potatoes are okay to keep for a few weeks after lifting but 'Arran Pilot' seems to lose its essence very quickly.

■ **'EPICURE'** is a good early for cold gardens as it bounces back well if the tops are frosted. The tubers are floury and roast/chip well. They are also lovely when boiled or steamed when the superb new potato taste is at its best. This heritage variety dates back to 1897 and was bred by James Clark in Hampshire.

■ **'RED DUKE OF YORK'** is a red variety that has been around since 1942 and was a 'sport' (genetic offshoot) of 'Duke of York'. It's great for roasting in its skin which being much rougher than other new potatoes clings on to the oil. If you do take the time to peel, it also makes a brilliant mash. An Award of Garden Merit holder. ➤

GROWING TIPS

■ **RUB OFF EYES** – before planting rub off all but three eyes from your spuds for fewer but larger potatoes.

PLANTING

Earlies are particularly good for pots. Set a few spuds on a few inches of compost in the base of a bucket-sized container and as they grow top up with compost around the stems. In the soil, if your ground is good you can just plant them 15cm (6in) deep straight into the ground. If you're adding manure or seaweed it's easier to dig and line it into the base of 20cm (8in) trenches and then plant the chitted seed-spuds 40cm (16in) apart on the top. Cover with soil and if in the ground as they grow, pile up earth around the stems to smother any weeds. Otherwise leave alone as 'earthing-up' doesn't make a big difference to yields.

CHITTING

The process of setting spuds in seed trays in a light, cool and frost free spot to sprout is well worth doing for 'earlies'. It does reduce yield, but because the stems are growing when they go into the ground tubers form faster – and when it comes to home-grown, speed is more important than waiting for quantity.

Chitting encourages earlier harvests.



■ **FEEDING** – in pots add a high potash granular feed to the compost as you cover up the stems. It makes a big difference to yields. If growing on poor soil, (like my sand) a high-nitrogen pelleted chicken feed a couple of weeks after planting gets the spuds off to a flying start. Otherwise use a high potash like tomato or comfrey feed to avoid excessive leafy growth.

■ **WATERING** – the critical time to water is when potatoes are running up to flower as this is when the subterranean tubers are swelling. If necessary use a hose taking care to keep water off of the foliage to reduce the risk of fungal diseases.

HARVEST

Early potatoes are ready to crop eight to 10 weeks after planting when the blue/violet flowers appear. 'Rocket' bulks up earlier and it's worth scrapping around in the soil before the buds open to check if they're up to size.

Suppliers

The varieties mentioned here should be freely available from the seed suppliers on page 101, from garden centres or from one of the many potato days held around the country this month (see pages 100-101).

Harvest earlies when the flowers appear.

Sure-fire winners

Steve Ott visits the Royal Horticultural Society's Wisley Garden where veg varieties are put through their paces to see which deserve the coveted Award of Garden Merit. He receives some insider info on the process behind selecting a future winner for us to grow.



This trial of onion sets involving 21 varieties was also repeated at RHS Rosemoor, Devon.



Vegetable trials officer Karen Robbirt checks over plants in the latest trial of calabrese.

In a corner of the beautiful Wisley gardens in Surrey and open for visitors to wander are the main trials grounds where RHS experts put 25-30 types of flowers, fruit and veg to the test each year.

The trials are closely monitored and carefully assessed and the aim is to produce a list of varieties that you and I can refer to when choosing our seeds and plants, safe in the knowledge that only top-notch garden varieties are included. The best from the trials are awarded an RHS Award of Garden Merit (AGM) and the suppliers and breeders are permitted to use the AGM logo on their packets or in their catalogues as a recommendation of quality. I've always found it a great help when making a selection from the bewildering array of varieties on offer and I know many other gardeners who do the same.

STAYING AHEAD OF THE GAME

New varieties are made available all the time, so in order to ensure that the award remains relevant, trials are repeated on a regular basis and seed suppliers and breeders, with whom the RHS works closely, are invited to submit their



latest offerings for assessment against existing award winners. If an existing winner performs less well against newer rivals then its award may be rescinded. This is often a sign that the variety's days may be numbered and that it may soon disappear from our seed catalogues.

The task of deciding which crops to test and overseeing their care to ensure that the trials are fair and accurate falls to a small, but vastly experienced team based at Wisley including Kylie Balmain, head of horticultural trials, Mark Heath, trials development manager and Karen Robbirt, vegetable trials officer.

Under Kylie's supervision Mark and Karen are part of the team that co-ordinate the trials, which also include fruit, herbs and flowers and also the judging which is carried out by seven committees of horticultural experts with about 10 people in each. Our own Colin Randel is deputy chairman of the committee responsible for vegetables and you can see his latest report starting on page 61.

Each trial is usually judged twice, once part way through the growing cycle and again at harvesting. In addition many of the vegetables are taste tested by the committee to ensure they taste as good as they grow.

The trials field at Wisley Gardens in Surrey is on a sunny, south-facing slope.



A trial of runner bean varieties thrives in the Surrey sunshine.

WORKING WITH THE INDUSTRY

Kylie explained that there are some 7500 plants from magnolias to runner beans which carry the AGM and last year the RHS set itself the enormous task of reviewing the list of award winners and the process involved in selecting them. Previously the society aimed to repeat trials every 10 years to refresh the list of award winners, but in this age of information technology it was thought desirable to start working in 'real time'. So now each of the seven committees is directly responsible for constantly maintaining their part of the list. All this represents a big investment in terms of time and money – about half a million pounds a year – yet the RHS hopes to increase this investment in the future, such is the value placed on this aspect of its work.

Kylie told me: "The AGM award is getting much more recognition and is a great asset to the RHS. This is all about the education of gardeners and non-gardeners about what varieties to buy and we certainly see that on the vegetable side and increasingly with the fruit where much breeding work is being done. But the RHS is also looking at working more closely with the buyers who source plants for garden centres, DIY stores, and supermarkets to educate them about the AGM and the benefits of selling varieties with proven qualities."

Mark added: "It is also with the breeders that we want to maintain good connections because they are at the start of it; they want to put their product into the market and we want to try and help them pull it through if it has good garden merit."

GETTING STARTED

Mark explained a little of the process behind the trials: "The fruit and veg committee has a representative who is linked with the trials

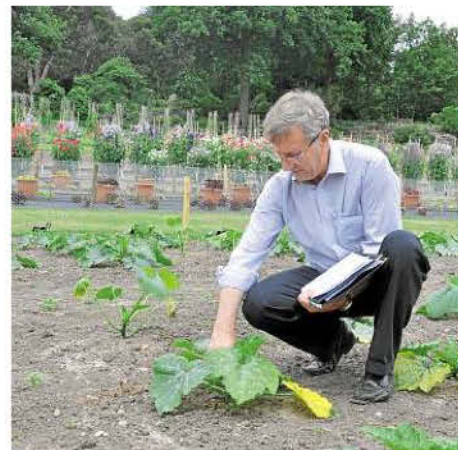
office and plans are made for which trials we should be looking at. With veg it is easier to decide which trials to assess at relatively short notice; some fruit or flower assessments have to be planned several years ahead, but with vegetables it will be a matter of months. Then a proposal will come out of that committee and a discussion is had with the head of horticulture and the curator to see how and where we can fit the trials in.

"The primary reasons why we run the trials are to look for AGM material, to ensure we are up to date with the varieties available on the market, but also to look at the trends in the market. We look to see if there are new and important crops to explore, such as herbs and oriental vegetables – what does the consumer want us to trial in order to be able to supply the information they need to grow these crops successfully? Then we try to fit that in here (at Wisley) or at Rosemoor if a different soil is needed. Or, if we want to see how well it may grow further north, we may run the trial at Harlow Carr (in Yorkshire), all to do our best to make sure we are looking at trials that are necessary for our members and to educate the public."

"Once a trial has been approved then the trials officers work with the committee to source the seeds or plants from the new varieties and also existing award winners.

"In considering a variety for an AGM the committee checks availability, how easy it is to grow, whether every plant from a batch of seeds or plants is true to type (has the same characteristics), if it is relatively pest and disease free and if it has any resistance to pest and disease problems."

If a variety meets all these criteria the committee will award it an AGM and the supplier is permitted to display the AGM logo on the packet for all to see.



Trials development manager Mark Heath inspects the courgette trial.



This plant is part of a trial of black raspberries, many of which have decorative silver stems and require only simple supports. Potentially a very popular crop for the future. Inset: Information boards dot the site to inform and educate visitors.

AGMS FOR ALL

The RHS is so keen that all concerned should benefit from its work at its various trials grounds that it offers everyone the opportunity to see the results, whether or not they are RHS members. So if you are confused about which variety of veg to try this year or are looking to try something different, a visit to www.rhs.org.uk/Plants/Plant-trials-and-awards/Plant-awards/AGM-plants where you can view or download a list of current Award of Garden Merit holders is highly recommended.

Turn the page for the latest AGM report fresh from the trials field at Wisley Gardens. ➤

Summer radishes that make the grade

Colin Randel, deputy chairman of the vegetable trials committee (now Vegetable Trials Forum) brings you the results of the latest trials into one of our most popular salad crops.



Judging of the radish trial gets underway.

BELOW: (Front row) – ‘Amethyst’ (AGM), ‘Zlata’, ‘Francis’ (AGM), ‘Lunar’ (‘Ping Pong’), ‘Pink Celebration’. (Back row) ‘Escala F1’ (AGM), ‘Sparkler’ (AGM) and ‘Bacchus’.

Radishes remain a popular, fast-maturing summer salad crop with traditional ‘French Breakfast’, ‘Scarlet Globe’ and ‘Cherry Belle’ still the leading varieties. However, selections of these heritage cultivars can vary considerably in root quality, flesh texture (pithiness) and uniformity and more reliable F1 hybrids have been available for some years. Recently the breeding programmes have increased considerably with the result that 19 of the 49 varieties in this trial were F1 hybrids.

THE TRIAL

The soil was cultivated, raked and seed was sown once soil temperature reached 9°C (48°F) on April 15. The seeds were sown thinly 13mm (½in) deep in rows 30cm (12in) apart. The seedlings were thinned as necessary to 25mm (1in) apart on April 25. There was evidence of flea beetle and cabbage root fly damage on some roots, but not excessive.

A second sowing was made on April 29 and covered with Enviromesh crop protection netting against flea beetle and root fly and this remained in place until the roots were ready for lifting.

THE JUDGING

The judges looked for earliness, uniformity of roots and colour, pithiness, taste, size of tops (leaves).

The first sowing was lifted on May 16, except for a few roots of each variety which were left untouched to assess their bolting resistance. No bolters were recorded when the judges returned to assess the second sowing on June 5 and this was in part put down to the weather which had been cold and wet since sowing.

The second sowing showed slightly stronger tops due to the Enviromesh cover and the warmer temperatures. Again no bolters were recorded. However, pithiness was more evident in the second trial, showing as small hollows, which causes the flesh to be spongy thus affecting the texture and taste.



THE RESULTS

Most of the previous AGM cultivars were included in this trial – ‘Cherry Belle’, ‘French Breakfast 3’, ‘Scarlet Globe’, ‘Sparkler’, ‘Rougette’, ‘Mirabeau’, ‘Rudi’, ‘Amethyst’, ‘Celesta F1’, ‘Lucia F1’, ‘Lunar (aka ‘Ping Pong’), ‘Rudolf’ and ‘Zlata’. As a result of the trial several of these have now been superseded or did not show sufficient uniformity and quality in these two sowings and lost their AGM status. These were ‘Cherry Belle’, ‘Lucia F1’, ‘Rougette’, ‘Scarlet Globe’, ‘Zlata’, ‘Mirabeau’ and ‘French Breakfast 3’.

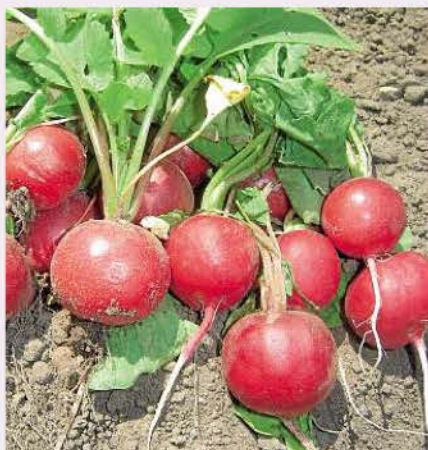
Seven new varieties were awarded an AGM, six of these F1 hybrid ‘Cherry Belle’ types which showed advances in quality and uniformity over the traditional open pollinated types. These were:

■ **‘ESCALA F1’:** Sister line to the leading commercial cultivar ‘Celesta F1’ with all of its attributes – neat tops, round, bright red-skinned roots with a thin tap root, strong skin which does not damage on washing and has clear white flesh with no pithiness. It has a crisp, pleasant taste. Available from DT Brown.

■ **‘MERCURY F1’:** Similar to ‘Mars F1’ – roots slightly less rounded, but with all its attributes. Not yet available retail.



‘Escala F1’ showed no signs of pithiness.



Radish ‘Saturn F1’.

■ **‘MARS F1’:** British breeding with similar appearance and quality to ‘Escala F1’ and the solid flesh was crisp, but juicy, with a mild and pleasant taste. Not yet available retail but T&M have trialed for consideration in a future catalogue.

■ **‘MONDIAL F1’:** The variety with the neatest tops. Uniform, rich red-skinned round roots with fine tap root. Juicy but crisp pure white flesh, taste a tad hotter than some. Available from Tuckers Seeds.

■ **‘SATURN F1’:** Another of the planet names with identical qualities to ‘Mars F1’ and ‘Mercury F1’ in these trials. Not yet available retail.

■ **‘VINARA F1’:** Neat tops. Shiny bright red-skinned round roots with a mild pleasant tasting white flesh. Excellent uniformity with thin tap roots. Not yet available retail.

■ **‘FRANCIS’:** A non hybrid ‘French Breakfast’ selection. Mid length cylindrical, stump ended red skinned roots with a small white tip and thin tap root. Not yet available retail but T&M have trialed for new catalogue consideration.



The British-bred variety ‘Mars F1’.



A non-hybrid selection of ‘French Breakfast’.



Plants growing well from the first sowing and behind the second batch under covers to protect them from pests.

A RUNNER-UP WITH POTENTIAL

One cultivar which stood out was ‘Bacchus’ a rich aubergine purple-skinned variety, slightly flatter than round roots and with pure white flesh. The roots showed a little variability in shape. A shade later maturing than the ‘Cherry Belle’ hybrids, the leaves (tops) were also much darker green. Certainly a more purple skin than ‘Amethyst’ which had its AGM reconfirmed. ‘Bacchus’ I thought was visually stunning, but sadly no AGM.

The pink skinned ‘Pink Celebration’ was also later maturing than the red skinned and had long tap roots, also showed a pinkish-red tinge in the flesh, as did a very few other cultivars when the roots were sliced. This was likely weather related, and still perfectly edible.



Radish ‘Bacchus’ is one to watch for in the future and has the most beautiful purple skin colour.

NEXT MONTH:
Potatoes in bags for the patio.

Keeping it real

Gaby Bartai meets a couple with a mission to promote non-F1 seed varieties bred for small-scale growers.

What to make of a company which actively discourages repeat business? The Real Seed Catalogue sends out seed-saving instructions with every order and tells its customers, 'There's really no need to buy new seed every year – you can just save your own.'

"It's about encouraging people to take control of their own seed supply, so that we have a really diverse resilient supply of seed at the national and at the local level," says Kate McEvoy, who runs the company with her partner Ben Gabel. "The idea is that we're giving people seeds that they can take and grow and enjoy, so they don't necessarily need to buy seeds every year." Of course, being gardeners, their customers come back anyway; Real Seeds' collection is very hard to resist. "That's the trouble with gardeners, they always want something new. I'm as guilty of it as anybody else. We're growing blue tomatoes this year. How cool is that?"

But behind the delight in collecting and growing unusual varieties, Real Seeds has a serious agenda. "If we're wanting to see biodiversity maintained, and the availability of all these varieties – which have a lot to recommend them, both to individual growers now and as a spectrum of biodiversity for the future – then the more people that are growing and saving them, the better," says Kate. It's set to get a lot more serious if the new EU seed law, currently at the draft stage, makes it on to the statute books. As it stands, it threatens the work of companies like Real Seeds

and the survival of many of the varieties they sell – something I'll be coming back to in detail in a future issue. (For up-to-date information and details of how to get involved in the campaign to amend the law, see www.realseeds.co.uk).

There's also the argument that open-pollinated varieties are, on the whole, better for gardeners. "The majority of the garden seed trade is essentially seed that has been bred for large-scale growers, of which a small amount then gets packeted up for home growers. And that isn't really that appropriate for small-scale organic growers," says Kate. Watch out, for instance, for descriptions telling you that a variety is 'good for freezing'. What it means is that it was bred to ripen all at once for machine harvesting, so you'll get a glut. Open-pollinated varieties are much more adaptable to local conditions and – given that gardeners want a good yield over a long period – they are often more productive than hybrids when grown on a garden scale.

The Real Seeds collection includes many heirloom varieties, but they're not its raison d'être. "We're not in the business of saving seeds for the sake of it," says Kate. The criteria for inclusion is that a variety is suited to home growing, particularly organic home growing. That encompasses many old varieties, but it also embraces new breeding done with the needs of gardeners in mind. In the States, the resurgence of market gardening has fostered a renaissance in seed-breeding for small-scale growers, and in



ABOVE: This is what a seed catalogue really looks like...

FAR LEFT: 'Fahrenheit', the new blue tomato, is available in small quantities this year.

LEFT: 'Rugoso Friulana', in its first year of trials, is an Italian courgette. "It's amazingly tasty," says Kate. The fruit here has swollen to seed size; you eat it at courgette size.





SO WHAT ARE 'REAL SEEDS'?

By 'real seeds', the company means that they are open-pollinated; none of its varieties are hybrids. Open-pollinated varieties breed true, allowing growers to save their own seed, as people have been doing for as long as they've grown crops. It's only over the past couple of generations that we have relinquished control of our seed supply. Producing hybrid ('F1') seed is a job for a specialist, and seed saved from the plants will either be sterile or produce a random mix of progeny, meaning that growers need to buy new seed each year.

Britain and Europe any number of small companies and individuals are breeding new open-pollinated varieties – including Real Seeds itself.

COMPANY HISTORY

Real Seeds' collection has been 15 years in the making. Ben and Kate met at university, where he was studying plant science and she economics – though, having grown vegetables since childhood, she was actually the more experienced gardener at that stage. Kate adds: "We had an allotment, then we had two allotments, and we started growing more and more weird and wonderful vegetables, and obviously you have to collect seed of them, and then you swap it with people.

"One of our absolute favourite chillies is 'Alberto's Locoto'. It came from this guy called Alberto, who was a Bolivian refugee living in Cambridge. His mum used to post him peppers to cook with. And we said, maybe we could grow them, so he took the seeds out and gave them to us, and they grew perfectly well on our allotment. So then we could give him peppers and he didn't have to get them sent from La Paz, and then he gave us other seeds that his mum posted to him. A lot of our stuff came to us like that. You get into this kind of underworld of plant swapping and seed swapping."

From Cambridge they moved to Spain to rebuild an old smallholding. Needing an income, they considered offering

gardening holidays to people interested in their collection of unusual vegetables, but quickly realised that it made no sense to encourage people to clock up air miles in order to visit their eco-friendly smallholding. The answer, they realised, was for the seeds to do the travelling, so they started offering their unusual varieties for sale.

At first, they grew all of their own seed – or, to put it another way, they sold what they grew. There was, however, a catch, one which a number of small seed companies have discovered. Gardeners want unusual varieties, but they also want the convenience of being able to buy all of their seeds from the same place. "They didn't want to come to us just to buy their tomatoes, their carrots and their beans, or whatever we had available," says Kate. So they started offering standard vegetables alongside the unusual ones, buying in some seed in order to be able to offer a full range.

They returned from Spain in 2004, initially joining the sustainable living community at Brithdir Mawr in Pembrokeshire, and in 2009 they bought land of their own nearby. Moving the seed crops to their own land has been a gradual process, completed over the past year, and the Brithdir community continues to produce seed for them. They still grow as much as they can themselves, but it's not realistic for them to grow everything, so they have a network of local growers who produce seed for them and also buy some varieties from commercial sources. Sweetcorn, for example, can't be grown for seed in their ►



Picture: Real Seeds

'Wa Wa Ga Choi' Zha Cai stem vegetable, aka 'The Thing', is billed as 'definitely our strangest new vegetable'. It produces a swollen stem with a flavour like broccoli; stems and leaves can be sliced into salads, stir-fried or pickled.

area, because it would cross with local maize crops, so that comes from a biodynamic seed producer in Austria.

On their new site, they have three fields for outdoor crops. Their first 21m (69ft) polytunnel is now up and running, and they have planning permission for a second. Undercover space is essential if you are growing seed crops commercially in the UK, because getting ripe seed from many of the more tender crops requires a longer and drier season than is likely outdoors. Their construction project for this winter is a barn, with plenty of space for drying seed and a polished concrete threshing floor. Beneath it will be a traditional root cellar, for biennial crops like beetroot and parsnips which need to be stored out of the frost for replanting the following spring.



BELOW LEFT: The polytunnel in September, with the seed harvest well underway.

BELOW: Much of the seed processing is done by hand – “there’s a lot of stomping and rubbing and sieving.”

BOTTOM LEFT: Ben demonstrates his home-made seed winnower.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Ripe crops – on the right are the giant achochas – waiting their turn to be processed.

SEED TO SEED

The seed year starts in November, with the launch of the new catalogue – not, says Kate, in September or October, when the bigger catalogues come out. “That’s a really silly time to make a seed catalogue, because we’re still harvesting stuff. The reason the big people can do it is because they’re selling last year’s seed. Even in November we’re still harvesting, but by then we know what we’ve got.” Seed orders start to pick up in December, and then, after Christmas, “all hell breaks loose.”

“It starts to calm down a bit in March, but then we start running round in circles because we’re starting to plant things.” They tend to plant a little later than you might at home, because they’re not aiming for the earliest crops – in fact, early crops tend to contain less good seed. “But through March we’re well into planting. April we’re still sending out seed and getting everything ready on the field.”

“By May seed sales start to quieten down. June, July, August, September, we’re out growing things. In September, we’re starting to think about the new catalogue. That intensifies in October, and we’ll start working on the website. And we’re harvesting and harvesting and there’s seed drying everywhere. The seed harvesting carries into November, and then we get to the catalogue again.” It’s an ideal work cycle, says Kate, office-based in the winter and field-based in the summer. “And then in spring and autumn we run around a lot, and do both.”

When I visited in September, the seed harvest was well underway. We were surrounded by crates of crops, tubs of deseeded vegetables (and grateful neighbours calling in to





Picture: Real Seeds



collect them), jars of fermenting tomato seed, seed in buckets waiting to be rubbed out, sieved and winnowed, trays of seed drying, and seed in tubs with silica gel to draw out the last of the moisture. Much of the processing and packeting is done by hand, but the winnowing is now done at speed and in style. Kate set their new machine up for me to admire. “Ben built it. We looked at them, to buy, and they cost thousands of euros, and Ben looked at it, and he looked at it some more, and said, well, that doesn’t look too complicated. It cost him about £5. The wood and the perspex was reclaimed, but he did have to buy some screws for it.”

“It’s actually a combination of two different machines. I took pictures off the internet, and measured them very carefully, and then sort of amalgamated them,” explained Ben, whose understanding of ‘complicated’ is clearly not the same as mine. Suction is provided by a Hoover plugged into the top, and an ingenious arrangement of wider and narrower channels causes the air pressure to drop at strategic points, so that heavier, good seed falls down one chute and lighter, empty seed (or chaff) down another. If you want to know more, you’ll find instructions and diagrams on their website.

PICK OF THE CROP

The Real Seeds collection is larger than the catalogue, and they don’t list every variety every year – but of course they don’t need to. Customers can save favourite varieties for themselves, so the whole enterprise becomes collaborative. “It’s always tempting to expand, but we do try and go for a ‘one in one out’ policy, because actually, why do you need 30 varieties of carrot?” says Kate. Their aim, instead, is to offer the best variety of each type that they’ve found. “So for example, you get a green climbing bean, a yellow climbing bean, a purple climbing bean, a bean that’s particularly good for using as dried seed... you don’t need six purple climbing beans – if you want to grow a purple climbing bean, here’s the one we think is good,” adds Kate.

That’s not to say that varieties don’t get included – and indeed created – just for the joy of it. One for the future is the chocolate-flowered broad bean. A customer discovered

“CUSTOMERS CAN SAVE FAVOURITE VARIETIES FOR THEMSELVES, SO THE WHOLE ENTERPRISE BECOMES COLLABORATIVE”

a plant with dark brown flowers in his crop of ‘Crimson Flowered’ and handed it over to Real Seeds to develop. It will be available in a few years’ time, once they’ve stabilised it and bulked up the seed. And there’s the potential for other flower colours. “There were some amazing violet flowers, and all sorts, so at some point we might go back and see what else we can do with it,” says Kate.

Real Seeds is a seed company – no potatoes, no garlic, no plants, because those all involve different production processes and they’d rather do one thing really well. However, they make an exception for oca and yacon, both tuber crops, which they were growing long before the big seed companies caught on. “2012 was definitely the year of the yacon. We’d been growing it since the late 1990s, and selling it in a small way, and then last year James Wong got very excited by it, and everybody wanted it,” says Kate. Happily, Kate had planted a long row of it down the side of a field as a windbreak – it’s a relative of the similarly useful Jerusalem artichoke. “And then James Wong was everywhere, talking about yacon, and you would not believe how much we sold.

“Oca is a good one. It tastes a bit like a potato with a kind of lemon flavour. They’re pretty productive – our best varieties now yield as well as something like potato >

TOP LEFT: The first step in producing tomato seed is to ferment the seeds and juice; after three days, the good seed will have sunk to the bottom of the jar.

TOP RIGHT: One for the future: look out for chocolate-flowered broad beans in a few years’ time.

ABOVE: ‘Poona Kheera’, new this year, is an exceptionally crisp Indian cucumber which ripens from lime green to orange.

Picture: Real Seeds



ABOVE: Real Seeds offers around 20 varieties of oca, in an amazing array of colours.



LEFT: Fleece isolation cages allow several different peppers – which would otherwise cross-pollinate – to be grown in the polytunnel.

BELOW: 'Reisetomate', which produces curiously 'clustered' fruit, is another one they are trialling just for the fun of it, says Kate.

RIGHT: 'Giant Bolivian Achocha' produces big spiny fruit up to 15cm (6in) long.



'Pink Fir Apple'. They're very tasty. And they don't get blight," says Kate. They have around 20 different varieties, which they list for sale online, selling out within a fortnight. The only catch, from Kate's point of view, is that they tuberise late, only coming ready after the first frosts, so the amount they sell is limited by the amount of time she's prepared to spend digging up oca in the cold.

NEW FOR 2014

The gestation period on a new variety varies, but they generally trial things for two or three years. Then, if a variety makes the grade, they need to bulk up the seed, which takes another two to five years, depending on how 'seedy' the vegetable is. Cross-pollination is another factor; having decided to list a variety, they need to make space for it in the production cycle. Brassicas, for instance, can take years to reach the catalogue, because all varieties of *Brassica oleracea* – cabbages and their many kin – cross readily. "We tried making a little isolation garden up on our mountain field," says Kate, "but unfortunately everything got eaten by slugs. We'll try that again, to give us two brassica spots. It's a real juggling act."

They tend to offer new varieties on their website first, so that small batches of seed can be delisted once they sell out. Only once they've bulked up the seed sufficiently does a variety graduate to the paper catalogue. One that will be web-only this year is tomato 'Feo di Rio Gordo', which means 'the ugly one from the wide river'. "It's a bit harsh, because I don't think it's a particularly ugly tomato at all. Despite being Spanish it seems to be really early, and it's a really big beefsteak one. The trouble with all these sorts of



tomatoes is that they're not very seedy, which is obviously not a problem for a tomato but is a problem if you're a seed company," adds Kate.

The blue tomato, which is called 'Fahrenheit', will also be available online this year. 'Blue', it must be admitted, is a relative term, and the fruit ripen to a reddish-purple. "When they're ripe they're not as blue as all that, sadly," says Kate. "But when they're growing they're ridiculously blue."

One of Ben's recent projects has been to track down a large variety of achocha, a South American cucurbit which grows prolific crops on a scrambling vine. For many years they have grown a small-fruited variety called 'Fat Baby'. A packet of seed from a Bolivian collector came good, and they're now also offering 'Giant Bolivian Achocha', which produces big spiny fruit which you can eat fried or stuffed.

Huauzontle is another recent success. "It grows like a weed," says Kate. "We'd been growing it for years for the leaves. But then we discovered that what you're actually meant to eat is the immature flower heads. They are really good, and really tasty. So you come up with things like that, which is very exciting.

"And then you have the really disappointing... 2013 was my year of the chenopods. I thought, you've got quinoa, which is very successful in the UK, and huauzontle. What other interesting chenopods are there out there?" She came up with two promising candidates: one, a leaf green from Taiwan, grew verdantly but refused to flower, and the other, a quinoa relative, topped out at three inches. Kate added: "So this year's novel crops are a little less successful. But there we are. Probably out of every 30 things we try, one is fabulous. That should be our strapline. 'We try 30 things, so you don't have to.'" ■

RIGHT: Huauzontle grows large bushes with edible leaves – but the best bit is the immature flower shoots.

BELOW: 'Red Basque Chilli', new this year, is a prolific, well-flavoured heirloom variety which does particularly well in the UK.



Picture: Real Seeds



Picture: Real Seeds

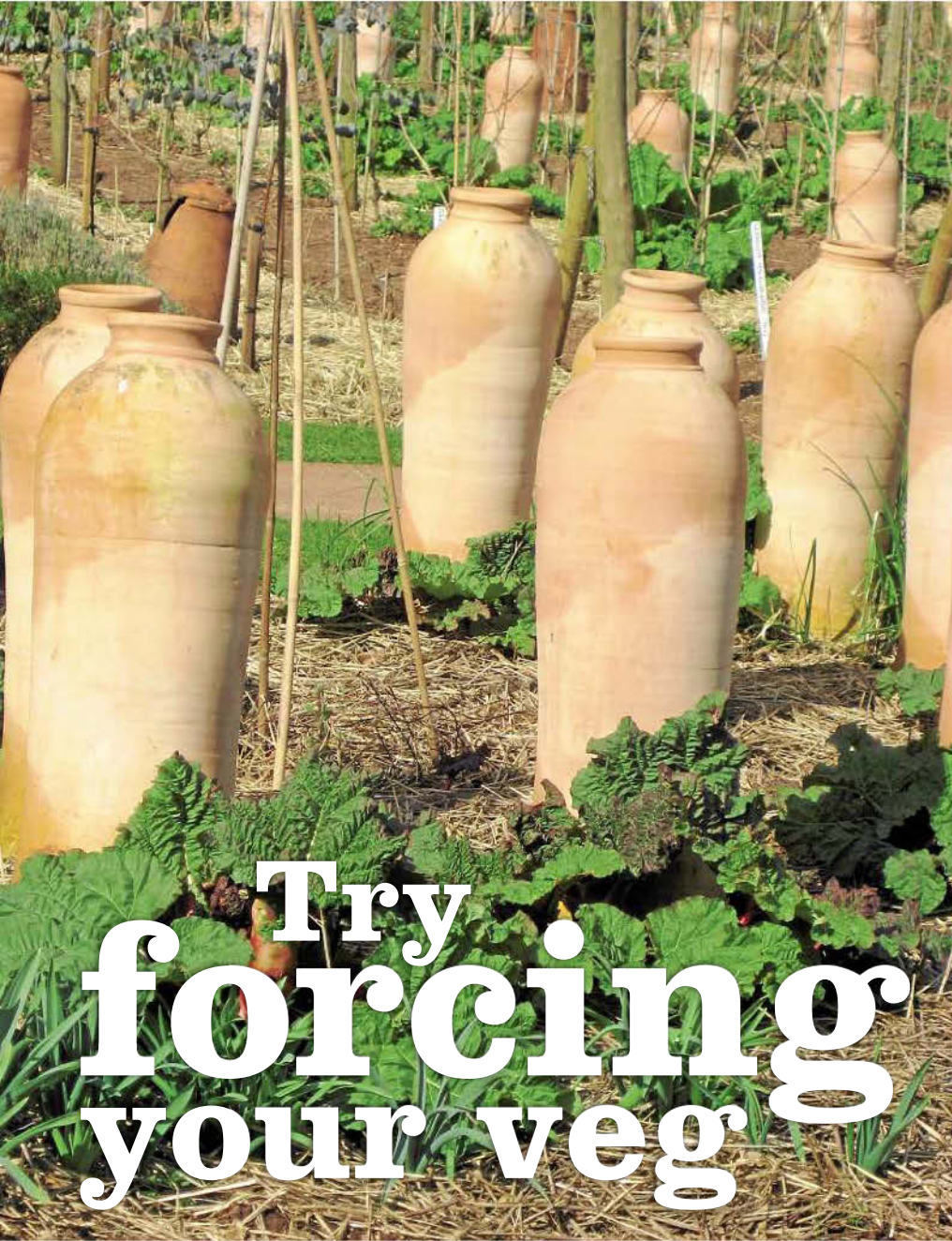
Kate at work with the outdoor seed crops.

Picture: Real Seeds



CONTACT THE COMPANY:

■ Real Seeds, PO Box 18, Newport near Fishguard, Pembrokeshire SA65 0AA
■ Tel: 01239 821107
■ www.realseeds.co.uk



Try forcing your veg

Picture: National Trust

Gardening expert Lucy Halliday looks at encouraging crops into early growth so you can harvest some even tastier young shoots



How does forcing improve flavour?

Excluding light prevents photosynthesis, which prevents chlorophyll production and also production of a number of other plant metabolites which are produced to protect leaves from UV radiation in sunlight. The lack of these compounds reduces natural bitterness plus in the cloistered forcing environment there is little need to make the fibres which give the plant resistance to wind, leaving the crop paler, sweeter tasting and with a more delicate texture.

Working in the restored Victorian kitchen garden at Knightshayes, there is a horticultural practice that always excites intrigue -forcing. We are currently working on a project with a group of dedicated volunteers to get our Victorian mushroom house producing crops and it is throwing up all sorts of exciting ideas about forcing. First on the agenda are sea kale and chicory; it would be thrilling to taste these forgotten flavours. We already regularly force small quantities of rhubarb for our on-site cafes in beautiful terracotta jars, but there are many different ways to force and blanch crops.

AN OLD TECHNIQUE

In the Victorian era forcing for winter crops expanded wildly to include everything from raising potted peas in the peach house to French beans in the pineapple pits over the winter at a toasty 27°C (80°F). Cooks in the grand houses began to demand cucumbers at Christmas and

potatoes in May and through sheer hard work and ingenuity the gardeners kept up! There are slightly blurred boundaries between forcing and blanching – technically forcing should refer to bringing crops on earlier in the season or even out of it through providing protection and possibly additional heat. However, many forcing processes cross over in to simply blanching crops depending on the time of year or the method used. Sea kale is perhaps the champion of forced crops, only edible in its early blanched form and in fact described in the 18th century by Finnish Botanist Per Kalm as ‘one of the best flavoured green vegetables which anyone can wish for’. The benefits of forcing rhubarb were apparently discovered by accident in 1815 when it was blanched like sea kale. Forced chicory was allegedly

discovered growing in the warm, dark centre of a heap of harvested chicory roots destined for animal feed.

THE BOTANY BIT

How well a plant can be forced usually depends on how much of an energy store it has. Rhubarb for instance has a huge underground energy store in the form of extensive chunky roots. These give it the food it needs to produce leaves and stems even in the absence of the light that it would normally use to make its own sugars.

Dandelions, chicory, sea kale, asparagus and cardoons all have these proportionally large underground stores as a feature. This also explains however why forcing tires the plant so much and why many plants must be either discarded or given a period of rest between forcing.



Forced chicory.



Picture: Lucy Halliday

VARIETIES TO TRY

■ **ASPARAGUS 'WHITE VENETIAN'**, a speciality in the North West of Italy.

'Connovers Colossal' a garden favourite.

■ **SEA KALE 'LILYWHITE'**, delicious shoots when forced.

■ **RHUBARB 'TIMPERLEY EARLY'**, probably the earliest variety with pink and green stems. 'Victoria' also a traditional variety for forcing.

■ **CHICORY 'BRUSSELS WITLOOF'**, possibly the best for forcing.

■ **CARDOON 'BIANCO AVORIO'**, gorgeous large purple thistle flowers.

■ **CELERY 'MAMMOTH PINK' OR 'MAMMOTH WHITE'**, RHS Award of Garden Merit.

■ **LEEK 'MAMMOTH BLANCH'**, a favourite among show growers and an RHS AGM to its name.

■ **DANDELION 'TARRASSACO'**, a highly prized alpine form, the flowers of which are famed for the honey they produce.

Suppliers

FOR SEEDS AND PLANTS:

■ **Robinson's Mammoth Vegetable Seeds:**
www.mammothonion.co.uk, 01524 791210,
(leeks, celery, rhubarb, asparagus)

■ **Franchi Seeds of Italy:**
www.seedsofitaly.com, 0208 427 5020,
(dandelion, chicory, white asparagus seed)

■ **Victoriana Nursery:**
www.victoriananursery.co.uk, 01233 740529,
(chicory, sea kale, cardoon, asparagus)

FOR TRADITIONAL FORCING JARS:

■ **Little Thorpe Potteries:**
www.littlethorpepotteries.co.uk, 01765 607221.

HOW TO FORCE VEGETABLES

Methods are many and include earthing up, growing under covers, in dung heated beds or indoors in darkened rooms. Crop covers can have fresh dung or straw heaped around them to increase the warmth. Here are some traditional forced or blanched crops for you to try.

■ **ASPARAGUS:** Earth up the emerging shoots in early May to exclude light; the pale tender shoots can then be unearthed and harvested when large enough. For a more in-depth early forcing method 4-year-old crowns are lifted and planted in boxes or pots and taken indoors to be raised in the dark at 15-20°C (60-68°F) for early blanched spears.

■ **SEA KALE:** Forced sea kale can crop from December to May. From an established plant take root cuttings or 'thongs' in mid March and grow on for a year to produce young plants for forcing. In December cover with pots or forcing jars and harvest from early spring.

■ **RHUBARB:** Placing any large cover over the whole or part of a crown in early spring just as the leaves begin to emerge. The cover could be anything from a dustbin, to a terracotta forcing jar, or a large pile of straw held down with netting.



Pipe insulation material has been used here to blanch leek stems.



Asparagus that has been grown in the dark.

■ **CHICORY/ENDIVE:** Frilly leaved endive is simply covered with a cardboard/wooden disc weighted down to blanch. Gourmet forced chicory is grown out, lifted in autumn, cut down and the roots forced indoors to give tender white chicons. Alternatively it is cut down but left in the ground, covered with a heap of dung and a terracotta pot.

■ **CARDOON:** Cardoons were another forced staple of the Victorian kitchen, the young leaf stems were bound in brown paper to blanch or forced under jars and used like rhubarb.

■ **CELERY:** Victorian gardeners grew celery in trenches between which on the resulting mounds were grown lettuces. These further shaded the celery and kept the environment moist, resulting in tall, pale, tender celery and a bonus crop of lettuce. Can also be earthed up although it's a nightmare to clean, or wrapped in cardboard collars or covered with straw.

■ **LEEK:** Leeks are often buried deeply on transplanting and can also be earthed up as they grow or like some dedicated show growers you can wrap the stems or cover using drain pipe as they grow bigger.

■ **DANDELION:** Tender blanched dandelion leaves are a prized European salad ingredient. Cover with any suitable light excluding container. You can grow a cultivated variety or just try this on the weeds in your garden which are perfectly edible. ■



Even in deep midwinter, hardy greens such as mizuna, mibuna, mustards and pak choi will soak up the sunshine 'harvested' by your greenhouse or polytunnel.



Bring me sunshine

Sunshine brings us joy and makes our plants grow, but have you ever stopped to ponder what sort of sunlight you're tapping into?

John Walker has switched to the renewable kind...



I'm fussy about the sort of sunshine I run my garden and greenhouse on. You could be forgiven for thinking that sunshine only comes in the one, bright and daily overhead variety, but you'd be wrong: there are actually two kinds we put to use on our plots.

The first is ancient sunshine, which is solar energy that landed on earth around 400 million years ago and was absorbed by plant life, including forests which grew hundreds of feet tall. Egged on by an atmosphere super-rich in carbon dioxide, plants, powered by the sun, converted this carbon into roots, stems, leaves, shoots and flowers. When they died, this carbon and captured energy became trapped in layers of rotting plant material often thousands of feet deep. Marine algae also absorbed the sunlight of the day, binding it with carbon before sinking to the ocean depths. Geological upheavals over hundreds of millions of years sank these vast quantities of plant remains, under pressure, deeper into the earth. Today, this ancient sunshine is what largely powers our modern way of life when we burn the fossil fuels coal, oil and natural gas - our 'sunlight savings' - to provide energy.

MODERN SUNSHINE

One of my guiding ambitions is that I want my garden to be as earth-friendly as possible. I want it to have a wholly positive impact on the wider natural world; my simple mantra when using energy and materials is that my garden should give more than it takes. I don't see my approach so much as austerity, more upping my planet-friendly ante. And this is where the other stuff really starts to shine.

To avoid the twin problems that besiege fossil fuels - gradually depleting reserves and a chaotic global climate stoked by the release of carbon when we burn them - I'm building my garden around a different energy source, one that's clean, pollution-free and infinitely renewable. It's the stuff that's probably allowing you to read this page (unless its night-time), that's lifting the temperature in my greenhouse a few degrees right now and keeping my mizunas and mustards ticking over. It's the same stuff that'll ensure (fingers crossed) a prolific harvest from your plot this coming growing season, and it'll coax seeds and sets into life outdoors a few months on. It's also the stuff that can help us



ABOVE: My strawberries are coaxed into flowering/fruiting earlier by the modern sunshine collected by my very own low-tech solar harvester – my greenhouse. They’re 100% fossil fuel-free fruits.

RIGHT: Leaf mould is the best soil improver nature ever devised, and it’s the easiest way of gathering up solar energy to feed your soil.

build a healthy soil. Perhaps most importantly of all, modern sunshine - which is shining now - is the stuff that brings us endless cheer.

SOLAR FOOD

We ourselves get a direct hit from tapping into modern sunshine: it’s what powers the vegetables and fruits we grow, which in turn fuels us when we eat them. I don’t use fossil fuels to heat my large lean-to greenhouse, preferring to work with energy that’s here and now, to grow food with the scantiest carbon footprint. This is very liberating; moving at the gentle pace of the seasons rather than trying to beat them with bubble plastic and the like (and with nervous glances at the electricity meter) is immensely comforting. It also means I’m not using ancient, stored sunshine to prop up my growing activities, and it gets me experimenting with all sorts of different crops that rub along happily in a greenhouse in winter powered solely by a low, lean sun. It might be chilly right now, but my greenhouse – a



multipurpose yet low-tech solar collector in its own right - still allows me to push the limits of spring and autumn, to bring cropping to a summer peak and to keep hardy greens going when all outdoors slumbers under snow.

SUN-POWERED SOIL

But it’s not just the warming sunshine, which my greenhouse’s glazing harvests, that I’m keen to cash in on. I make as much compost as I can,

using what’s closest to hand - usually a mix of bracken, scythed grass, old straw or silage plus anything from the garden. Some of these ingredients might have been busily capturing modern sunshine only hours before I cut and gather them. Once they’ve been cooked and turned in a ‘hot’ compost heap and are eventually transformed into rich, dark compost, this renewable source of sun-powered organic matter is worked into my garden soil ►



Green manures such as buckwheat turn free and abundant sunshine into leaves, stems and roots which eventually rot down into the soil, adding organic matter.

(stamina permitting), enhancing its dynamic ecosystem and so its ability to grow healthy, nutritious crops. You reap similar benefits from modern sunshine when you add the compost from a slow, cool compost heap or bin to your soil, but without the sweat.

Trees provide us with perhaps the most prolific and easy way of getting the sun's ready-tapped energy into our soil. All summer they perform the alchemy of soaking up the sun's rays and locking carbon into their tissues, then come autumn they drop it all to the ground. Rotted down over two or three years, a whole growing season's harvest of solar energy becomes super-concentrated as dark, crumbling leaf mould - perhaps the finest soil improver nature ever devised. The best bit is that trees do this each year, without fail, making leaf mould a truly renewable soil food.

Another important and simple way to harness the power of sunshine directly to build soil

“EVERY GREEN MANURE LEAF IS A MINI SOLAR PANEL, COLLECTING MODERN SUNSHINE”

(especially if manure and compost are scarce) is to grow living green manures. Every green manure leaf is a mini solar panel, collecting modern sunshine to turn carbon into leaves, roots and stems, which can be worked into the soil where they boost organic matter. Some, like clover and tares, fix nitrogen in their root nodules, releasing it for leafy vegetables to use. Others, such as buckwheat, root deep into the soil, pumping nutrients up within reach of our crops. All green manures help to improve the structure and workability of soil, and all you need do to employ their sun-catching qualities is sow some seeds.

Our ancient sunlight savings won't ever run out, but they'll get ever harder to draw on. With energy bills indoors rocketing, it's reassuring to know that we can switch to a reliable, earth-friendly way of powering our plots that won't cost us a penny. Not ever. ■



Even my unheated north east facing lean-to greenhouse grows bumper crops using just the non-polluting energy provided by today's modern sunshine.



My 'hot' summer compost heaps are a way of turning sunshine captured by plants into soil-building compost.

LIQUID SUNSHINE

In spring, rather than use an energy-intensive chemical plant feed, I steep nettles, comfrey and seaweed in a bucket of water. A few weeks later I've converted free and abundant spring sunshine into a pungent but nutrient-rich liquid (and packaging-free) plant tonic. You can always bypass the pong and buy ready-made feeds made from seaweed (it runs on today's sunlight too).



Young, sappy stinging nettles, cut before flower, can be turned into a free, sun-powered tonic for your crops.

WIN TICKETS TO THE UK'S ULTIMATE 'GROW YOUR OWN' SHOW

It's the UK's hottest hobby and the nation's fastest growing gardening event! The Edible Garden Show is putting down new roots in London in March, bringing the popular show to a bumper new crop of visitors.

Bigger and better than ever before, the three day event is a fertile mix of celebrity speakers, interactive advice sessions, cookery demonstrations, innovative products and a fabulous range of exhibitors selling everything you need for a slice of the 'good life'. Perfectly timed for the beginning of the growing season, the show is buzzing with tips on keeping bees, raising chickens, brewing

beer, saving energy, mouth-watering baking and dishing up delicious meals using home-grown ingredients.

TV presenter James Wong continues his campaign to persuade the nation to plant exotic edibles that can survive the British climate and other celebrities giving daily talks include Christine Walkden, gardening guru on BBC 1's The One Show, TV and radio presenter and 'grow your own' writer Pippa Greenwood, forager and wild food expert Mark Lloyd and author Naomi



Schillinger who has written a best-selling book with tips for growing your own in small spaces. Popular TV chef Phil Vickery will be cooking up at storm at the show on Saturday March 29.

The Edible Garden Show will be staged at Alexandra Palace, London, from 28-30 March, 2014. Tickets cost £12 in advance (£16 on the door) with concessions for children and seniors. For more information or to buy tickets visit: www.theediblegardenshow.co.uk or ring the ticket hotline on 0844 338 8001.



You can win one of 15 pairs of show tickets by correctly answering:

Which BBC One Show expert has joined the line-up for The Edible Garden Show's panel of experts for 2014?

- A. Alan Titchmarsh
- B. Joe Swift
- C. Christine Walkden

Kitchen Garden

HOW TO ENTER: If you'd like to win, here's how you can enter. Simply tick the correct answer and fill in the form below and send it to: Kitchen Garden February 2014, EGS Ticket Show competition, Mortons Media Group Ltd, PO Box 99, Horncastle, Lincs LN9 6LZ by February 15, 2014. **You can also enter for free online at www.kitchengarden.co.uk**

- A. Alan Titchmarsh B. Joe Swift C. Christine Walkden

Name:

Address:

Postcode:

Telephone:

Email:

Terms and Conditions apply. Please see www.kitchengarden.co.uk for full terms and conditions. There are no cash alternatives available. The winners will be the first 15 names drawn at random.

Closing date: February 15, 2014

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Grafting made simple

Have you ever thought how our apple trees are propagated and why they are so expensive? Maybe you'd like to propagate your own trees? Fruit expert and chairman of the Northern Fruit Group, Hilary Dodson shows you how



Grafting – the joining of two separate plants is the most reliable way to propagate a fruiting variety.



Apples have pips that can be germinated quite easily and, given 10 years or so, will eventually grow into fruiting trees. You may be lucky and pick a nice apple from your seed-grown tree, but it is unlikely to be as tasty as the one you ate. Frequently fruit produced from seed-raised trees are rather bitter, the apple pip having been the product of pollination from a crab apple and not a sweet dessert variety. However, deliberate crosses between two desirable varieties is the way new ones are created.

Another common method of propagation is cuttings. Once again this is not usually available for apple trees, but there are a few that produce burrs (clusters of lumps that will form roots). If a branch with burrs is cut off and planted it will eventually grow. 'Burr Knot' and 'Fillingham Pippin' are two varieties that can be propagated in this way.

Most apple trees, however, are propagated by a range of grafting methods, joining the desired variety on to known rootstocks. Different apple rootstocks have been developed which control the eventual size of the tree and the age at which it first fruits. In the north of England we prefer to use the rootstock MM 106 (the prefix MM denotes that the rootstock was jointly identified at East Malling and the John Innes Institute - at Merton - research stations). This rootstock survives in our wet northern soils and can be used to produce many tree forms. The dwarfing M27 is also useful because it will fruit early in its life.

Grafting joins the growing part, the cambium layer, of the variety we wish to propagate to that of the rootstock. The cambium can be seen as the thin green line just under the bark and it is important that the cambium layers of both scion and rootstock are in close contact for the graft to work.



Apple pips are unlikely to produce reliable trees.

1. CLEFT GRAFTING

Wood to be used for the scion in cleft grafting is collected in December or January, when there are no leaves on the tree. A branch that grew last summer is collected. The soft top part and the lower part with closely spaced buds are discarded. A four-bud section with well-

developed buds is used. The grafting is usually done in February or March so the scion is stored until then in a bucket of sand by a north wall or, as I do, in a plastic bag in the salad drawer of the refrigerator. Anyone looking in my fridge in springtime will have a surprise. ►



The finished cleft or wedge graft.



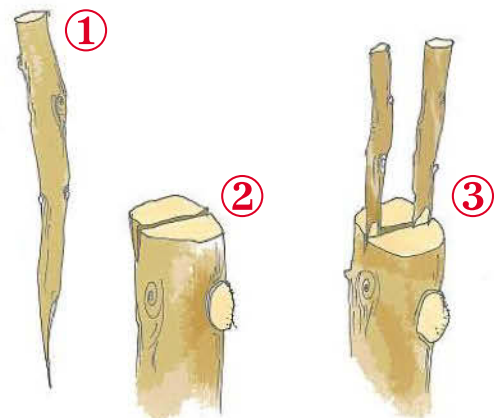
The cleft graft by the following autumn.

MAKING A CLEFT (OR WEDGE) GRAFT

STEP 1. The scion (fruiting wood) is trimmed at the base to form a wedge.

STEP 2. The rootstock into which the scion(s) are to be inserted is prepared.

STEP 3. The scions are inserted ensuring that the cambium layers of scion and rootstock are in close proximity. Wax is used to seal the wounded surfaces.



Illustrations: Rosie Ward

2. KERF GRAFTING

Kerf grafting is similar to cleft grafting in some ways and is used where the rootstock is much larger than the scion. In this case the rootstock is often in the ground and quite large. The scion is prepared in the same way as with cleft grafting (above). Two long sloping cuts are made which meet at a narrow angle. The exposed inner part of the wood is removed to make a wedge shape. A hatchet or saw is then used to slice into the rootstock to produce a cut or clean slit in the side of the rootstock. Several slits may be made at intervals around the rootstock, one for each scion. The scion is carefully positioned in this slit so the cambial layers match. Not such an easy job to do outdoors in March. The scion is tapped home with a mallet to make a tight junction and the surfaces sealed with wax.

These grafts made in spring should show buds at about the same time as the trees are coming in to leaf. When the new growth is about 30cm (12in) long it should be tied to a cane and the tape released.

4. T BUDDING

The main form of rind grafting is T budding, which relies on being able to separate the rind, or bark, from the wood. This can only be done when the trees are in active growth and there is good sap flow. The ideal time for this is on a hot day with a heavy thunderstorm the night before. A bud stick (a length of new growth complete with healthy buds) is cut from the current season's growth, and the leaves, but not the leaf stems, removed.

A well-formed bud is cut from the stick as an arched shape and the wood from the inside removed. A T-shaped cut is made in the bark of the rootstock and a budding knife used to loosen the bark so that the bud can be slipped in behind the bark using the leaf stem as a handle. The bark is then bound back in place with tape, leaving the leaf stem exposed. In a few weeks the leaf stem will wither and drop off. After about six weeks the tape is removed and in spring the bud is checked, and the rootstock cut off above the live bud. The bud will grow out to form the new tree.



Grafting tape is used to prevent any movement between the two sections.

3. WHIP AND TONGUE GRAFTING

Whip and tongue grafting seems to have the highest success rate and is done when both the scion and rootstock are dormant. This can be done indoors using bare-root rootstock (hence it is sometimes called a bench graft), and this level of comfort makes it easier to match the scion and rootstock.

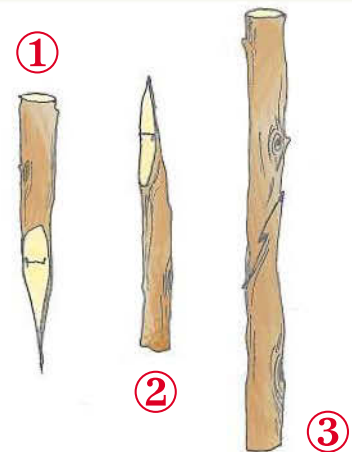
The bottom of the scion is prepared by making a slanting cut, about 2cm (approx. ¾in) long, with a bud at the back. The tongue is then made, starting about one third of the way down the cut. Equivalent cuts are made on the rootstock, and the two slotted together, bound with tape and waxed.

MAKING A WHIP AND TONGUE GRAFT

STEP 1. The scion (fruiting wood) is prepared by making a slanting cut. A shallow tongue is then cut a third of the way down on the exposed wood.

STEP 2. A similar slanting cut and tongue is cut in the top of the rootstock.

STEP 3. The two are pushed together ensuring good contact between cambium layers. They are then bound with tape and waxed.

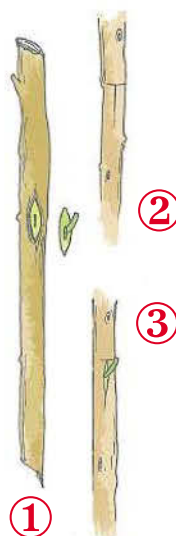


T BUDDING – STEP-BY-STEP

STEP 1. A bud is taken from the bud stick. The leaf is removed but leaf stem left attached.

STEP 2. A T-shaped cut is made in the bark of the rootstock and a thin blade used to ease the bark away from the wood underneath.

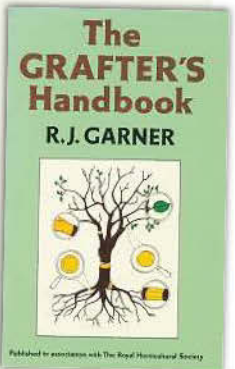
STEP 3. The bud is slipped behind the bark using the leaf stem as a handle before binding with grafting tape.



The T bud below has taken well and has started to grow out. Note the bud above which did not take and has died.

More information

An excellent reference that may be of use is, *The Grafter's Handbook*, by R. J. Garner, published originally in 1947 by Faber. Various editions of this book can be found for sale on sites such as eBay. The book was also recently updated by gardening expert Steven Bradley. This version can be purchased from all good bookstores or from Amazon.



If you fancy trying to produce your own trees, find out which of the very many apple varieties are to your taste at a local apple day. Next, find a grafting course where rootstocks will be available and there may also be a supply of scions of good local varieties. Grafting is one of those skills that are most successfully learned by a practical session with someone who really knows what they are doing. Turn to pages 100-101 for details of a grafting course in your area this month. ■



A chip bud in the autumn after grafting.

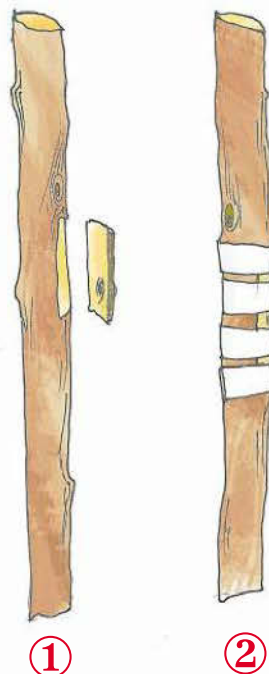
5. CHIP BUDDING

The other form of budding is chip budding and this can be done at any time of year providing dormant buds are available. In spring they will be from the previous year's growth, but in summer they will be from the current season's growth. An arched shape is cut from the bud stick with the bud in the centre and a ledge at the bottom. An equivalent shape is cut from the bark of the rootstock and the bud shield put in place, held by the ledge. Again, the all-important task is to match the cambial layers or the bud will not take. The bud is then taped in place. After about six weeks the tape is removed and the top of the rootstock cut off. The bud will grow out in spring so it can be a long wait if the budding was done in early summer.

CHIP BUDDING – STEP-BY-STEP

STEP 1. Remove a healthy bud and 'shield' of bark from the bud stick as shown. The bud should have a little 'ledge' or slice cut from the bottom of the bud.

STEP 2. Remove a similar-sized piece of bark from the rootstock and lift or nick the bark at the base of the cut to form a ledge in which the bottom of the bud can sit. Place them together and hold tightly in place with grafting tape.



Grafting is great fun and reasonably easy with a little practice and care.



The union of rootstock and fruiting wood (scion) is usually easy to see on a newly purchased tree. This should be above ground after planting to prevent the scion from rooting.



Photo: Laura Whitehead.

New kid on the plot

Laura's plot at a glance

SIZE: half a plot, but hoping to expand

SOIL TYPE: clay loam – very fertile

LOCATION: Newton Abbot, Devon

KEY FEATURES: New allotment plot on a very weedy site

This month gardening writer and keen allotmenteer Lynne McDonagh travels to Newton Abbot in Devon to meet a new plotter who is already producing trugfuls of veg from her tiny allotment



TOP: Laura's plot in August 2013. **ABOVE:** The plot when Laura first started preparing the ground the previous spring.

Laura Whitehead is a naturally modest person, but I can safely say that there is nothing humble about the veg she's grown on her plot this year. I must say that I'm more than a bit in awe of Laura's boundless energy, and of course I was also green with envy when I saw the size of her cabbages.

Laura is one of those women who manages to juggle motherhood – she's a mum to two strapping lads – alongside a busy career as a web designer and graphic artist. And recently Laura has also managed to fit in a demanding course of study in sustainable horticulture. For most people that would be quite enough to be getting on with, but somehow Laura has also made time for moving house, redesigning her courtyard garden and taking on a new allotment. Oh, and let's not forget her passion for wildlife photography.

PLOT OUT OF THE BLUE

Though Laura certainly has a busy schedule, she didn't hesitate for one minute when she was offered a plot by her local allotment association. "I couldn't believe my luck," she told me as we climbed the hill to reach her plot. "I put my name down after we moved to Newton Abbot, thinking if I was lucky I might get an allotment in a couple of years. Then just a few months later, in February 2013, I got a call one Saturday morning while I was busy working on our garden. And to my surprise the allotment secretary offered me a choice of plots. I was over the moon!" Laura added that although she realised she would be taking on a lot, at a less than ideal time, she just couldn't give up on her dream of growing her own fruit and veg.

Rather than jumping blindly into it all, though, Laura very sensibly phoned a friend who was able to advise on the pros and cons of the plots on offer. As Laura was studying horticulture at the time, she was able to put some of the theory she had learnt into practice when she visited the plot for the first time. "What struck me immediately was that the plot was south-facing and at the top of a gentle slope. That's an ideal growing space, and I knew the plot would warm up and drain easily. We get a lot of rainfall here in Devon, so good drainage is very



RIGHT: New allotment holder Laura Whitehead.



LEFT: The tomatoes benefited from the south-facing slope.



ABOVE LEFT: Little sign of the weeds that only in February had covered the plot.

ABOVE: Having cleared her weedy soil, Laura opted for the no-dig approach.

important. When I studied horticulture at college, we learnt the importance of good soil management, so I did a quick inspection of the state of the ground and I was pleased to find it teeming with life. The site itself was pretty much a blank canvas, so it meant I could shape it how I wanted to.”

It wasn't all good news, though, because the plot Laura decided to take on was very overgrown and weedy. She soon realised it was going to take many months of hard work to bring it back into cultivation. Undeterred, Laura set to work drawing up a plan of action.

GETTING CLOSER TO NATURE

Laura's vision was very clear: she wanted to create an edible wildlife garden, where she could relax and recharge her batteries as well as grow good-quality fruit and veg. “I like to potter about and get my hands dirty,” she told me, “and being close to nature is so important, it gives me a chance to rest and slow down. I really love watching birds and hoverflies, they are so completely fascinating. And if I can have a bit of fun and get fit at the same time, that's pretty cool too!”

As sustainability and biodiversity are at the top of Laura's agenda, there was no question of using chemicals to clear

the weedy ground. Laura is a firm believer in organic growing methods, but she is also a practical person; so, for instance, when she was unable to locate any organic manure to fertilise her plot, she turned instead to a local non-organic source of well-rotted manure, which was antibiotic-free.

TOP TIP

Don't try to dig everything at once - planning and patience are important too.

TACKLING THE WEEDS

Laura spent a lot of time considering the best way to tackle her weedy plot. “At first I thought it would be easier to rotovate the whole area to get a growing space sorted out quickly. But I soon realised I would be storing up trouble for the future. There was a lot of bindweed and dock, so chopping it up was going to multiply the weeds rather than keeping them under control.” Laura opted for the no-dig technique pioneered by Charles Dowding, which helps to build soil fertility while also controlling weeds (see page 20) but opted first to dig out the perennial weeds. Laura de-turfed the areas she had earmarked for her veg beds, then double-dug them, clearing the perennial weeds such as dock, nettles and creeping buttercup as she went along. The soil underneath the turf was pretty rocky and so Laura also had to remove what felt like a small mountain of stones to get an even tilth. ➤



Photo: Laura Whitehead.

ABOVE: Not bad for a first season's harvest.

BELOW RIGHT: Laura is very proud of her cabbages. Lynne was impressed too.

As Laura had started her allotmenting with just a half plot, she planned for four veg beds, a long strip for fruit and another for comfrey. By the end of April 2013 she had managed to create just two beds and was wondering if she would ever finish in time to plant out all the veg she had planned. As the weather picked up though, and the family became more enthusiastic about venturing on to the plot to help, Laura soon made up for lost time. By June the veg beds had been completed and mulched with well-rotted cow manure. And Laura was finally ready to plant out.

MINI GREENHOUSE TO THE RESCUE

With no greenhouse and only a small area around her kitchen windowsill, Laura had very little space to raise her first crop of seedlings. The 'youngsters', as Laura calls them, were soon taking over the kitchen and in danger of getting leggy. So she treated herself to a mini grow-house which she placed just outside her back door. In this way she could easily move young plants around to catch whatever sunshine and warmth was available in the early spring. Laura's system worked well and she soon had plenty of plants ready to go into her lovely new beds. With only a small growing space it was easy to plan a simple crop rotation: bed one was planted up with legumes and sweetcorn, bed two with brassicas, bed three with roots and onions and bed four with potatoes. "I was so excited about growing, I sowed far too many seeds and soon ran out space on my tiny plot. I planted some of the tomatoes out on the allotment but the beds just weren't big enough so they ended up in raised beds in our courtyard garden; but it's quite nice to stick your hand out of the back door and fill it up with lovely salad crops. You can't really get much fresher than that, can you?"

SUMMER BOUNTY

By the time I visited Laura's allotment in August there was little sign that it was a first-year plot. With plenty of rainfall early in the year, followed by a glorious summer, Laura really had picked the ideal year to start her growing. The months of hard work with heavy weeding, stone removal and de-turfing had also paid off. And of course that well-rotted cow manure had really boosted the soil's fertility.

Laura's plot was lush and tranquil, and what's more it was really buzzing with all sorts of wildlife. As we sat and rested for a while, taking in the view and watching the bees happily going about their business, Laura told me how she loved her little plot. "I just can't wait to get out on the plot and potter about. It's such a total contrast from having my head stuck in a computer screen like I do most days. At first it was just the growing and the wildlife that drew me here, but now I feel part of the allotment community. I



TOP TIPS

- Get plenty of manure on the soil and mulch well.
- Grow what you want to eat and don't be frightened of trying new things.
- Share your plot with wildlife. The bugs will help to keep the pests under control.
- Oh, and get yourself a good strong pair of boots.



come up here and chat to people. I've made new friends and it's great to wander about and see how different people have done their plots. And what surprised me was the variety of people and wide range of age groups – it's not just older people growing spuds and cabbages these days."

NOT ALL PLAIN SAILING

But Laura also told me that it hadn't always been easy and there were plenty of times when the challenges felt a bit overwhelming. One of the most difficult issues for Laura has been her health. With a long term injury to her left shoulder, digging was a real challenge, and her plot on the top of that gentle slope felt more like the summit of Mount Everest when it came to hauling bags of compost to the top. Then there was the weather. "As soon as I got hold of the plot it started to rain almost non stop and it was so frustrating to have to bottle up all my enthusiasm when I was desperate to get out there and get on with it."

Then there were the financial frustrations. Laura had been told that the allotment was home to an awful lot of rabbits, which would no doubt enjoy munching on her veg. So Laura considered fencing the plot to protect her crops. But after looking into the cost of rabbit-proof fencing her heart just sank. "There was no way I could afford that kind of money. I just had to be realistic and have faith that it would be okay." And Laura was lucky: there has been no rabbit damage this season. Perhaps they have all gone on holiday this year, I suggested. So then we had a little laugh thinking about where the rabbits might have gone. We settled on Australia suspecting they would naturally head down under!

As I headed for home I reflected on my lazy afternoon on Laura's allotment. I was full of admiration for the way Laura had risen to the many challenges facing her. She had given careful thought to what she could realistically achieve

in one season, and planned for further developments in subsequent years.

And she had set up a growing system that while creating a lot of work in the first year, was going to pay dividends in the future.

Laura's fruit and veg were healthy and thriving and the allotment was a home for many beneficial insects and other critters. So Laura had achieved many of the things she had set out to do, and while she has precious little spare time, she hadn't hesitated to throw herself into the life of the allotment community.

Before I left that day, Laura told me a little secret. She had discovered that a close family member – sadly someone she had never known – had once had an allotment nearby. She was thrilled by this coincidence and sense of connectedness it forged with her past. So Laura's allotment had brought her closer to nature, her local community and her own family history. What an achievement in just one year. ■

"I WAS FULL OF ADMIRATION FOR THE WAY LAURA HAD RISEN TO THE MANY CHALLENGES FACING HER."

Veg grown last season

- **LEEEKS:**
'Bleu de Solaise'
- **ONIONS:**
'Kyoto Market', 'Ishkura' and 'Red Brunswick'
- **BEETROOT:**
'Sanguina'
- **POTATOES:**
'Pink Fir Apple' and 'Anya'
- Oca
- Mixed cabbages
- **RUNNER BEAN:**
'Polestar'
- **TOMATO:**
'Rosa de Berne'

GET GROWING





Make a pallet potting bench



With spring around the corner, gardening writer and keen recycler Julie Moore creates a rustic style potting bench made from salvaged wooden pallets

A potting bench – it's the desire of any gardener. It's a place where you work with your hands and your mind runs free.

Upcycling projects using old and ugly salvaged wooden pallets are most definitely in vogue. The good news is that no special DIY skills or tools are needed to build your own potting bench out of these industrial cast-offs. The design can be adapted to your needs and the salvaged or recycled materials that you have available. Your only limit is your own imagination!

Organisation is the key to the perfect work station, ensuring that commonly used items are close at hand. Old wooden door knobs or wooden pegs are perfect for hanging small tools and accessories. Recycle drawers from old furniture and use wire trays to provide extra storage space to keep the work top clutter free. Fixing aluminium or zinc sheeting to the work surface will help protect and extend its life.

Following the introduction of a number of EU Directives over the past 15 years, it is now less and less likely that timber used to make wood pallets will be treated with any chemical or preservative, but when it is, manufacturers use

environmentally friendly treatments.

As the pallet wood is unlikely to have been treated, it's a good idea to treat the potting bench with a wood preservative or weatherproof paint to extend the life of your furniture. Be aware that every piece of pallet wood is different: some woods are more absorbent than others and therefore take the paint or preservative differently, so it may take a little trial and error to achieve the right rustic look.

Lightly sanding the surface to be painted first to leave some roughness will help to add character.

This potting bench project costs next to nothing to make and can be completed in a few hours. Not only does it provide a function, it's a colourful decorative piece of furniture too. ►



KNOW YOUR PALLETS

The UK makes and uses more pallet designs than most other European countries. But despite the huge array of styles and sizes, all pallets fall into two broad categories: stringer pallets and block pallets. Block pallets (left) are more common, using typically nine

blocks of solid wood to support the unit load. Stringer pallets use a frame of three or more long parallel pieces of wood, called stringers, which are sandwiched between the top and bottom deck boards to support the unit load. A stringer pallet is the one that you will want for this project, preferably one constructed with four stringers so you'll have three bays for storage.

Step by step MAKING THE BENCH

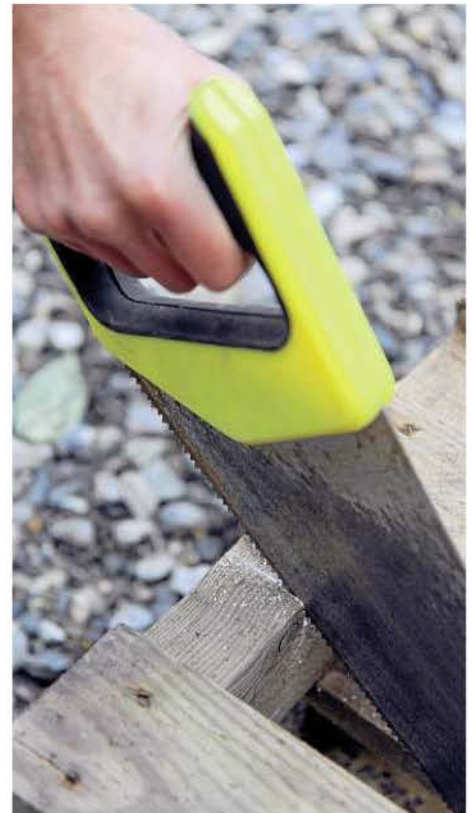


What you will need:

- 4 standard stringer pallets - 1200mmx1000mm (47.25x39.375in)
- 50mm (2in) flat head nails
- 1 tin can, rinsed
- Saw
- Claw hammer
- Tape measure
- Pencil
- Sandpaper or an electric sander



STEP 1. Measure each of the four pallets along the stringer edge and mark the midway point with a soft pencil and straight edge.



STEP 2. After marking all of the pallets, cut each one in two with a saw. Keep the cut as straight as possible to give a neat appearance.

TOP TIP

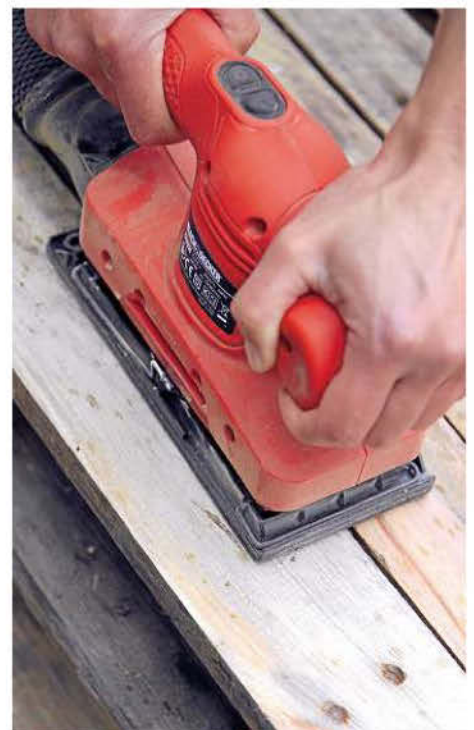
Cut each marked plank but leave the last plank towards the rear of the potting bench intact to maintain strength and stability



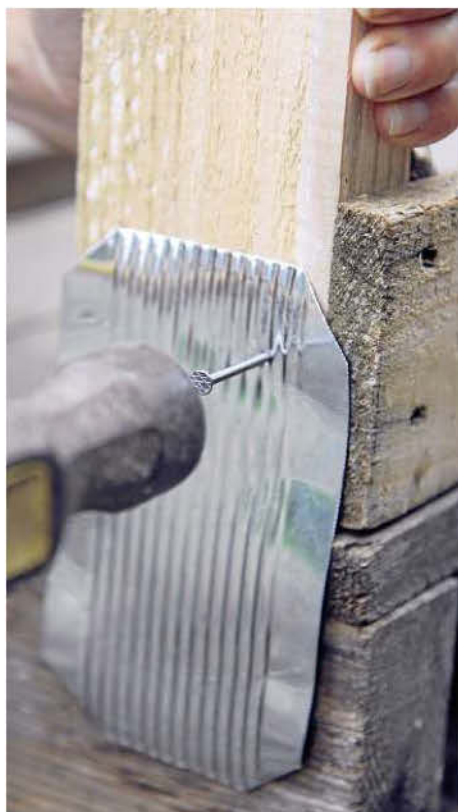
STEP 3. Stack seven of the pallets on top of each other and decide where you would like to have larger openings for storage or to insert drawers – mark where you want to cut them and remove excess wood with the saw.



STEP 4. Use a claw hammer to remove the planks from the half-pallet destined to become the work surface. Position the removed planks close together and re nail them. Reuse spare planks to complete the work surface.



STEP 5. Repeat the process for the last half-pallet that will form the back headboard to the furniture. Then sand the work surface to make it smooth to work on and easy to clean and to remove any sharp splinters.



STEP 6. Fix the headboard to the back of the work surface. Using a metal plate cut from a tin can, nail across the join between the main body and headboard to secure it in place. Repeat on the other side.



STEP 7. Sand the timbers to be painted i.e. the external facing timbers with the exception of the work surface and planks forming the back headboard. Apply a small amount of paint working on small areas at a time.



STEP 8. Quickly rub the paint along the grain with an old rag until you achieve the desired effect. If there is too much paint, keep rubbing with a clean section of rag to lift off more paint.



STEP 9. Recycle old drawers, coat hooks, handles or door knobs to decorate the potting bench and provide useful storage options. If you wish these can be painted with non-toxic water-based wood preservative. ■



WINTER WASH FOR FRUIT

Winter Tree Wash from Vitax is a completely organic product that controls aphids and other insects. Developed with a natural blend of plant and fish oils, it controls over-wintering insects during the dormant season to prevent hatching and damage to trees in the spring. It can be easily applied to dormant trees or shrubs with a brush. This is an effective way to reduce insect pests the following year especially if combined with Vitax Winter Tree Bands. These bands are simply wrapped around the trunk. The surface is treated with a non-drying adhesive that traps pests.

Price: Winter Wash approximately £9.99 for 500ml; Winter Tree Bands about £8.99. For more information about Vitax and its products, visit: www.gardenworld.co.uk.



GARDEN STORE

OUR ROUNDUP OF THE LATEST PRODUCTS AND SERVICES FOR KITCHEN GARDENERS

PLANT FOOD FOR VEG

Vitax has launched a Premium Q4 liquid fertiliser range to add to its existing Q4 products. The range includes Q4 Premium Vegetable Feed which has been designed to nurture the growth of vegetables and herbs. Also in the range is Q4 Premium Flower and Fruit Feed which will support plants to produce bigger blooms and brighter colours. Another is Q4 Premium Tomato Feed which encourages bumper crops of tastier tomatoes.

Price: £7.99 (1 litre). Tel: 01530 510060 www.vitax.co.uk



ORGANIC WEEDKILLER

Neudorff Organic Fast Acting Weedkiller is a ready to use spray to control weeds and grasses and also effective against moss and algae. It contains pelargonic acid which is naturally found in pelargoniums (geraniums) and is a highly effective fatty acid that destroys the cell walls of the leaves of the weed. Only the green parts are affected, not the woody parts of a plant, so it could be used safely beneath fruit bushes and trees or with care on hard surfaces such as patios, paths and drives.

Price: £4.99 (750ml) www.neudorff.co.uk



PROTECT THOSE PLANTS

Elite make top quality greenhouses and have now added the iGrow Cold Frame to its range. At this time of year a cold frame really comes into its own for protecting young broad bean plants, sweet peas and pea plants and also as the weather improves slightly early salad crops can be grown undercover. Tender vegetables such as squashes can also be hardened off in a cold frame.

The iGrow Cold Frame comes in two sizes (4ft 5in/1.3m and 6ft 7in/2m) and can be powder coated (green) or unpainted. The glazing is polycarbonate which makes it safer and is double skinned to provide really good insulation properties. The back is 1ft 8½in high (52cm) and slopes to 1ft 6in (46cm) at the front. The forward sloping 'tilt' and slide' top panels give good access to every corner of the cold frame.

Prices vary according to size and if powder coated. The smallest 4ft 5in model that is unpainted costs £136. Available from Two Wests and Elliott tel 01246 451077. www.twowests.co.uk

HANDY TOOL

The Hard Wall Takker is an ingenious hand-powered device that enables you to hang pictures, mirrors, bathroom hooks and much more on to any surface in seconds, including brick, concrete, mortar, plasterboard and even ceramic tiles. Dispense with the need for electric drills, wall plugs, screws, hammers, nails and stress. Use indoors or outside to hang everything from picture frames and mirrors to plant pots, kitchen equipment, bathroom accessories. Simple to use, the new Hard Wall Takker is operated by turning a handle to drill a 3mm diameter hole into any surface. The whole process takes just 30 seconds.

The kit comes with special hanging Hard Wall Takks, picture hooks, canvas hangers and two medium multipurpose hooks. These and spare drill bits can be stored in



the handle. A Takk can support anything up to 12kg in weight when used with the multipurpose hook.

Price: £24.99 including p&p within the UK/Ireland. www.takker.com

VERTICAL GROWING

VegTrug has launched its own take on the latest 'vertical farming' growing trend that is sweeping both East Asian and Scandinavian countries. The VegTrug Living Wall is a vertical growing area which can be attached to walls, fences or any similar surface and is designed to make the most of small gardening spaces especially in urban areas. It takes 'growing your own' to a whole new level with the cultivation of strawberries, salads, herbs, peppers and tomatoes possible even on balconies or from window boxes.

The VegTrug Living Wall is made from durable felt and comes in eye-catching colours ranging from red, pale blue, lime green and purple as well as grey and black for the individual planters and black and lime green for the six planter wall.

Price: The three piece Living Wall retails at £12.99 and £14.99 for the six pocket planter. A list of stockists can be found on the VegTrug website www.VegTrug.com.

MINI GREENHOUSE

The CultiCave is a small plastic tent that is easily erected to house your tender vegetables. It is made from a high grade UV stabilised clear plastic material and measures approximately 200cm x 167cm x 80cm (WxHxD). The CultiCave can be used like a cold frame to protect young vegetables in early spring or used to grow tomatoes, cucumbers, melons, strawberries and salads under cover. When a greenhouse is too expensive or impractical for your garden, the CultiCave is a great alternative and can be erected in minutes. There are zipped doorways on both sides so you can attach further CultiCaves to create a bigger growing space.

**Price: About £40. www.caveinnovations.com
Tel 01525 382938**



ABOVE: Two CultiCave tents joined together creating a larger growing area.



LET'S TALK VEG

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

Kitchen Garden Reader Poll

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

WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE WINTER CROP?

- ★ Onions: 20% (91 votes)
- ★ Leeks: 35% (159 votes)
- ★ Cabbage: 13% (61 votes)
- ★ Kale: 12% (58 votes)
- ★ Broccoli: 20% (90 votes)



 Find us on Facebook



My kohlrabi is out of control.
Deborah Hawkes, Facebook

KG WEBSITE FORUM

Join our friendly forum and find lots of growing tips.
Go to www.kitchengarden.co.uk



WHAT VARIETIES IMPRESSED YOU IN 2013?

■ Courgette 'Romanesco Latino' from Marshalls. This had an excellent flavour and has ridges down it so when you cut it across the slices look like little cogs.

This year the 'Toscana' deep pink flowered strawberry had a much sweeter flavour and is still producing fruits. I was disappointed with it last year flavour wise, and it just shows what a bit of sunshine can do. So I have changed my mind and recommend it as being both ornamental and well flavoured.

Also strawberries 'Marshmello', 'Mara des Bois', and 'Frau Mieser Schindler'. All excellent flavour and very productive. I'm still picking the 'Mara des Bois' from a tub in the greenhouse.

Heritage climbing French bean 'Major Cook's' bean from the heritage seed library. This is very productive, completely stringless even when large and the beans have quite fleshy, substantial pods with a good flavour. I'm also going to save some for the seeds for stews and to sow again next year.

Plumpudding, Stocksbridge, S Yorks

■ Tumbling yellow tomato called 'Tumbling Junior' which I planted outdoors in a border. It cropped very early; I picked my first ripe tomato at the end of the first week of July. The ripe tomatoes (which are marginally smaller than the size of 'Gardener's Delight') store well as they don't soften too quickly, and I've stored lots of them whole in bags in the freezer for use in sauces and casseroles during winter.

Primrose, Bucks

■ Tomato 'Fandango': Big, juicy and cooks down well. Also 'Slenderette' dwarf French bean just keeps on cropping. 'Enorma Elite' runner bean has been a great cropper this year. Italian 'Giant Plum' tomato from the Heritage Seed Library could be a favourite in the making too. Courgette 'Best of British' has been an embarrassment of riches.

Motherwoman, Isle of Wight

STAKING BRUSSELS

■ I am growing sprouts but the plants seemed to be leaning over. Is it okay to stake them so they are upright?

Diggers 11

■ I have staked my sprouts for the past couple of years, together with other taller growing brassicas such as broccoli. Not only does it hold them upright, but also helps to keep them that way during windy weather. Another benefit is that being upright, rather than laying over at all angles, it is easier to hoe around them. Check the ties and replace if necessary during the season, as the stems can grow very thick.

FredFromOssett, W Yorks



RECIPE

Roast beetroot in olive oil with thyme or boil and serve with cheese sauce – both yummy!
Tigger, Shropshire



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GROWING GUIDES

WEBSITES AND BLOGS FOR ALLOTMENT GARDENERS BY HELEN GAZELEY

Ivy Dene Gardens www.ivydenegardens.co.uk

This extraordinary website created by Chris Garnons-Williams isn't the easiest to navigate but repays perseverance. The vegetable section includes a variety of planting plans and explanations and examples of companion planting, biodynamic remedies, organic fertilisers and potting mixes. An ongoing labour of love, the website's packed with information on how to design, construct and maintain your garden using organic methods. Chris is in the process of adding indices on bee-pollinated plants and various ornamentals to the numerous plant galleries, with useful comparative photos of plants and borders in various stages of development.



Mock and Sons Ltd www.mockonline.co.uk

Gardening shoes and boots are often old pairs that we don't want to wear in public any more. However, these have their drawbacks as leather is hard to keep in good condition when it regularly gets muddy, and old shoes tend to leak. Mocks come as boots or shoes and are made of Mocklite (a type of rubber), which means they're waterproof with a grippy sole and can be cleaned in the washing machine or even the dishwasher. The slip-ons come in a variety of cheerful colours and are designed for robust outdoor use, though they'd be just as good for a quick foray into a muddy garden.



Plant Theatre www.plant-theatre.com

Plant Theatre was born after friends gave a thumbs-up to tiered shelves that Peter Magee put up to decorate a dull corner of his garden. Now he sells not only attractive metal plant theatres and large and small freestanding and hanging wooden versions, but also zinc pots to complement them and a range of unusual gardening equipment and kits such as a Funky Veg Kit that includes colourful sprouts, tomatoes and carrots. Items have a strong emphasis on practicality and, being dreamt up by Peter and family, have an individuality often lacking in items available elsewhere.



Allequal.com www.allequal.com

Tom Merchant is aiming to reduce all input to his garden from the outside world, especially in the way of fertiliser. To this end he makes comfrey and nettle teas, makes his own compost and grows green manures. He's also working at reducing his reliance on bought seeds and makes best use of his small space by training squashes vertically and planting shade-tolerant greens under fruit bushes. Follow his blog to keep up with interesting experiments such as propagating cabbages by cuttings and increasing scorzonora by root division.



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





Product review

Making the cut

This month smallholder Joyce Russell tries a range of garden knives to see if they are up to the job they are designed for

Pictures: Ben Russell

There are small knives and large knives; ones that fold and fit in your pocket and ones that look as if they are designed to hack their way through the wilder parts of the garden. You can get knives for pruning, harvesting, cutting through string, for digging up weeds or for chopping through the toughest of cabbage stems. The knives in this test were selected to

give an idea of some of the excellent garden knives that are available. Most gardeners will only own one knife, and, for many, that one will be rusted, blunt or temporarily misplaced (I know I put it somewhere!) You might wonder why anyone would need more, but there's nothing like having the right tool in the best condition for the job and these knives are cheap enough to make a new purchase a simple pleasure.

Features: WHAT TO LOOK FOR WHEN PURCHASING

BLADE LENGTH

Small blades will usually fold back into the handle so the knife can fit in a pocket. These are suited to cutting light stems, buds, sideshoots, string etc. Large blades will cut thicker stems and they may have a serrated edge to enhance this ability.

HANDLE

The handle should be comfortable to grip and should suit your hand size.

Colourful handles are easy to spot if the knife is left lying outside. Wooden handles have a more traditional look.

FOLDING AND LOCK

Some folding knives have a locking system when the blade is open; some also lock when closed.

PRUNING KNIVES

Many knives are sold under this name. They often have a curved blade, which means you can use a rocking action to cut through small twigs and stems. It should be noted that few people would use a knife for pruning a fruit tree these days and it would take a particular skill to do so. These knives are good for pruning green stems, cutting back small shrubs, gathering cut flowers, deadheading or removing small twigs. They are also useful for a host of non-pruning garden tasks.

BLADES

Stainless steel won't rust, so it is ideal for knives that may be left in a damp environment. Large blades cut thicker stems; small blades are best for fiddly jobs such as removing side-shoots on tomatoes.

All knives should be sharp enough for their intended use. Take care if testing for sharpness: some are extremely sharp, but if not, blades can be sharpened.

See Kitchen Garden, December 2013, for tools to sharpen knives.

SUPPLIERS' NAMES AND WEBSITES

We are grateful to the following suppliers for providing test samples:

- **DARLAC:** www.darlac.com
- **WILKINSON SWORD:** www.wilkinsonsword-tools.co.uk
- **DRAPER:** www.draper.co.uk
- **BURGDON & BALL:** www.burgdonandball.com
- **HARROD HORTICULTURAL:** www.harrodhorticultural.com
- **WHITBY & CO:** www.whitbyandco.co.uk



**PRUNING KNIFE
(WILKINSON SWORD)**

PRODUCT CODE: 1111167W
FEATURES: STAINLESS STEEL FOLDING BLADE. CURVED, BLACK HANDLE. LENGTH CLOSED 100MM. LENGTH OPEN 172MM.
PRICE: £9.99

This is a neat knife that is easy to open and close and it is small enough to fit in a pocket. The handle is comfortable to hold and the slight curve on the blade makes it suitable for cutting light stems. It worked well on green stems of ferns, fuchsia, deadheading etc. and it coped with removing small twiggy sideshoots on shrubs, but it struggled with currant stems. A rub through a sharpener improved performance. Pointed end is useful for opening bags.

KG Verdict

Comfortable to use for a range of garden tasks

PERFORMANCE

★★★★★

EASE OF USE

★★★★★

VALUE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

KG Verdict

A light, slim and tough pocket knife

PERFORMANCE

★★★★★

EASE OF USE

★★★★★

VALUE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

**SLIMLINE PRUNING KNIFE
(DRAPER)**

PRODUCT CODE: 67068
FEATURES: STAINLESS STEEL BLADE AND HANDLE. BLADE LOCK WHEN OPEN. CLIP AND CARRY STRAP. LENGTH CLOSED 100MM. LENGTH OPEN 168MM.
PRICE: £9.92

Light and very slim for a reasonably tough knife. The blade locks when open and the release catch is easy to operate. Not the most comfortable grip if using it for long periods, but as a light knife with a big blade it works very well for cutting small stems, deadheading, trimming light shrubs etc. It cut through sweet potato stems with ease. The pointed end is useful and the strap means it shouldn't get lost.



**PRUNING KNIFE
(DARLAC)**

PRODUCT CODE: DP400
FEATURES: STAINLESS STEEL FOLDING BLADE. LIGHTWEIGHT, RED PLASTIC HANDLE. LENGTH CLOSED 100MM. LENGTH OPEN 172MM.
PRICE: £6.99

A sharp blade that slices through small stems with relative ease. It struggled with a 7mm woody shoot, but was perfect for small tidying jobs such as deadheading or thinning small stems and it cut straggly twigs from a bay tree better than most. It is also ideal for general purposes around the garden such as cutting string. The rounded bright handle makes it easy to spot if you put it down and was reasonably comfortable in the hand. >

KG Verdict

A useful knife to carry in your pocket

PERFORMANCE

★★★★★

EASE OF USE

★★★★★

VALUE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

Be safe & legal

All of these knives are suitable for use in the garden or on the allotment, but all knives should be kept out of the reach of children. It is illegal to carry a knife in public without good reason – unless it's a knife with a folding blade three inches long (7.62cm) or less.





**No 10 PRUNING KNIFE
(OPINEL FROM WHITBY & CO)**

PRODUCT CODE: 10SF/SP
FEATURES: CURVED STAINLESS STEEL BLADE. BEECH WOOD HANDLE. SAFETY RING. LENGTH OPEN, 205MM. LENGTH CLOSED, 122MM.
PRICE: £19.95

This seriously chunky knife has a hooked blade that slips around stems before slicing through them. It cuts light stems well and will cut through thicker, woody stems by rocking across the curve, but you do have to apply some pressure. Perfect for cutting green stems, brambles or ferns, and it helped me cut through the stems of some hefty beefsteak tomatoes. The safety ring locks when the blade is open.

KG Verdict

Lovely chunky knife with a classic design

PERFORMANCE

★★★★★

EASE OF USE

★★★★★

VALUE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

KG Verdict

A serious knife for those tough harvesting jobs

PERFORMANCE

★★★★★

EASE OF USE

★★★★★

VALUE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

**HARVEST & ASPARAGUS KNIFE
(DARLAC)**

PRODUCT CODE: DP951
FEATURES: SCALLOPED AND SERRATED, POINTED STAINLESS STEEL BLADE. SOFT GRIP HANDLE. HANDLE LENGTH 120MM. OVERALL LENGTH 265MM. **PRICE:** £5.95

A long, sharp knife that is lovely to use. It goes through tough stems (think swede, cabbage or cauliflower) like butter and it is strong enough to push into the ground when harvesting asparagus or to cut off soil-covered roots without dulling the cutting edge. A light plastic cover is the only safety guard, but I'd be happy to store this knife out of harm's way, just for the pleasure of having the right knife for the job when it is needed.



**LAWN WEEDING KNIFE
(GROUND KNIFE)
(BURGON & BALL)**

PRODUCT CODE: GTHWTLKN
FEATURES: FSC HARDWOOD HANDLE. SERRATED CARBON STEEL BLADE. HANDLE LENGTH 130MM. OVERALL LENGTH 195MM. **PRICE:** £6.95

Any knife that can be pushed into the ground and doesn't lose its cutting edge is pretty good in my book. This knife won't take out deep roots, like docks, but it is a great aid to clearing less pernicious weeds from lawns and beds. You can cut close enough to the roots that they slide free without lifting the sod or a clod of soil. It also worked well for cutting tree roots that were encroaching on cultivated beds.

KG Verdict

A good knife to use at ground level

PERFORMANCE

★★★★★

EASE OF USE

★★★★★

VALUE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



KG Verdict

A knife that could live permanently in a gardener's pocket

PERFORMANCE

★★★★★

EASE OF USE

★★★★★

VALUE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

GENERAL PURPOSE KNIFE (FELCO FROM HARROD HORTICULTURAL)**PRODUCT CODE:** GGT-303**FEATURES:** NYLON HANDLE WITH ALLOY LINING. LENGTH CLOSED 100MM. LENGTH OPEN 160MM.**PRICE:** £12.45

This is a classic, folding pocket knife with a decent enough blade to use for garden tasks. It is made with all the precision one would expect from Felco and is at a good price. The blade is sharp and it copes with small cutting tasks, including fiddly ones like taking sideshoots from tomatoes. Not really a pruning blade but it will slice through green stems without a problem. A useful tool to have to hand on forays around the plot.

**Joyce's
choice**
for general
use

**BUDDING KNIFE (DARLAC)****PRODUCT CODE:** GHV/ASPKNIFE**FEATURES:** STAINLESS STEEL BLADE. LIGHTWEIGHT HANDLE. BARK LIFTER. LENGTH CLOSED 95MM. LENGTH OPEN 155MM. **PRICE:** £6.91

This knife is designed for budding and grafting, which are tasks that many gardeners will never attempt. Nonetheless this is a great knife to include because it is so small and dainty it can make a cut where larger knives would fail. Removing sideshoots or unwanted leaves and cutting small stems are a doddle with this tool. It is tiny, tidy, good for preparing cuttings and if you do want to get into budding and grafting it will do that too.

KG Verdict

A dainty knife for fine and precise work

PERFORMANCE

★★★★★

EASE OF USE

★★★★★

VALUE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

KG Verdict

A serious knife for those tough harvesting jobs

PERFORMANCE

★★★★★

EASE OF USE

★★★★★

VALUE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

No 8 GARDENING KNIFE (OPINEL FROM WHITBY & CO)**PRODUCT CODE:** 8/GAR**FEATURES:** STAINLESS STEEL BLADE. VARNISHED ASH HANDLE. SAFETY RING. LENGTH OPEN, 188MM. LENGTH CLOSED, 105MM.**PRICE:** £9.95

A well-designed knife that's comfortable to use and small enough to carry in a pocket. The flat blade and point are sharp enough to cut small stems, string etc. and there is something really satisfying about picking and slicing an apple with this knife while wandering around the garden. The safety ring twists to lock the blade in position when opened or closed: a double safety feature unique among the tested knives.

**Joyce's
choice**
for safety



GIVEAWAYS

WORTH
OVER
£1820

TO ENTER OUR GIVEAWAYS SEE PAGE 101 OR VISIT THE KG WEBSITE

HOLIDAY-PROOF HARVESTS

The new Duogrow veg planter from Greenhouse Sensation promises bigger harvests than growbags and pots by keeping plants perfectly fed and watered for up to 14 days. It's ideal for tomatoes, beans, aubergines, peppers and other tall-growing crops.

A compact version of the company's best-selling Quadgrow, the Duogrow (£32) has two 12-litre pots and a 25-litre SmartReservoir. When the soil starts to dry out its FeederMats pull water up from the SmartReservoir, maintaining perfect moisture levels around the roots. Holidays are taken care of because it will keep even the thirstiest plants watered for two weeks.

We have five prize packages of a Duogrow, a GardenPop Tomato Growing Kit and a pack of Nutrigrow nutrients. The Tomato Growing Kit (£19.50) includes three bright red pots, seeds selected for their reliability, compost discs, seedling pots, plant labels and a step by step guide. Nutrigrow is a super-concentrated feed which improves plant health, growth rate and flower or fruit production.

Greenhouse Sensation products are available from www.greenhousesensation.co.uk For more information visit the website or call 0845 602 3774.



5
PRIZES
TO GIVE
AWAY

We have five prizes of a Duogrow, a GardenPop Tomato Growing Kit and a pack of Nutrigrow, each worth a total of £62.49, to give away.

STEP INTO COMFORT

The SHUV, new from FitFlop, is an all-year-round shoe which is perfect for the garden. It's in the style of a clog, so you can keep your SHUVs by the back door and slip them on in a second when you need to nip outside. They're also ideal for use as house slippers. Their design is seamless for complete comfort, and feature FitFlop's trademark Microwobbleboard midsole, designed for a generous fit.

Ladies' SHUVs come in felt (£55) for that warm fuzzy feeling, patent (£65) to wipe clean and leather (£120) if you like a little more luxury in your life. Men's come in felt (£65), Nubeck (£65) or leather (£120). This month, four lucky readers can win a pair of patent SHUVs, which are available in sizes 3 to 8 and in red, blue, green and black.

For more information, call 0845 359 9884 or visit www.fitflop.co.uk where you can buy online or find a list of local stockists.

We have four pairs of patent SHUVs worth £65 to give away. Please indicate your choice of sizes 3 to 8 on the entry form.

4
PAIRS
TO GIVE
AWAY



SECURE STORAGE SOLUTION

Asgard has been the UK's leading supplier of secure, high-quality metal sheds for over 30 years. Made from thick, weatherproof steel, with a built-in metal floor for superior strength and security, they come recommended by the UK Locksmiths' Association.

The Asgard Secure Store is a great value, compact all-metal garden shed. Built from galvanised steel panels with an integral metal floor, it's an ideal secure home for your garden tools and equipment. To protect your stored items from theft the Secure Store is fitted with a tough three-point locking system featuring a pick-resistant euro cylinder lock. The full metal floor can be bolted to the ground as an additional security measure. It also includes extra-wide double doors, ideal for loading in large items. The Secure Store requires very little maintenance and comes with a 10-year warranty. It measures 1m 55cm by 94cm (5ft 1in by 3ft 1in), and has an RRP of £349.

Available from www.asgardsss.co.uk or phone 08456 580730. For more information, visit the website or www.facebook.com/asgardsss

We have one Secure Store worth £349 to give away.

1
TO GIVE
AWAY



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

LONG-RUNNING CEREAL

Mornflake has been milling oats in the South Cheshire countryside since 1675, making it the longest-established miller of oats and cereals in the UK. Today its product range includes oats, oatbran flakes, oatmeal products, Oats 2 Go sachets and pots and oatbran cereals, mueslis and granolas in a wide range of tempting flavours, including Nuts and Honey Oatbran Crisp, Cranberry and Nut Oatbran Muesli and Plum and Almond Oatbran Granola. Mornflake cereals are stocked by supermarkets including Tesco and Sainsbury's. you can also buy them online at www.mornflake.com

Mornflake has also launched a lovely range of homeware including a bone china breakfast set, a jumbo oats jar and feather-filled embroidered cushions in pink and blue, all available to buy direct from its online shop. This month 10 KG readers can win an embroidered Mornflake adult apron and an embroidered double oven mitt, plus a selection of Mornflake oatbran-based granolas and mueslis.

For more information visit www.mornflake.com or call 01270 213261.

We have 10 prizes of an apron and a double oven mitt plus a selection of Mornflake cereals, each worth over £30, to give away.



**10
PRIZES
TO GIVE
AWAY**

PETS WIN PRIZES

Established in 2005, Scruffs has become the fastest-growing pet bed manufacturer and distributor in the UK, offering a wide range of luxurious bedding and accessories for dogs and cats.

Its pet beds use luxurious fabrics combined with quality cushioning materials and filling techniques to provide your pet with warmth and comfort. The range includes mattresses, pillows, donuts and box-beds, and utility, oval, soft-walled, igloo and tepee designs. Scruffs orthopaedic pet beds mould to the shape of your pet to help its joints and bones.

Scruffs is giving one lucky reader the chance to win a huge Grizzly Bear Bed worth £199. This plush faux-fur dog bed has a faux-suede centre cushion and a machine-washable cover. Shaped like a bear paw, it is 130cm (51in) in diameter, making it ideal for even the biggest breeds. The winner will also get over £100-worth of Scruffs Eco pet accessories, including its Eco anti-gorge feeding bowls and Eco grooming kit.

To view the Scruffs pet range and order online visit www.petslovescruffs.com Call 0161 702 5060 for details of local stockists.

We have a Grizzly Bear Bed plus a selection of Scruffs Eco pet accessories, worth a total of over £299, to give away.



**GRIZZLY
BEAR BED +
ACCESSORIES
TO GIVE
AWAY**



GET SET TO SOW!

The spring edition of the Marshalls catalogue is now out, offering an enticing array of seeds, plants and sundries for your new season.

New for 2014, there's Brussels sprout 'Ruby Crunch', the first red F1 variety, with crunchy, bite-sized sprouts which look as good as they taste. Dwarf French bean 'Castandel' performed exceptionally well in customer trials last year, producing tender, fleshy pods which hold well on the plant. Parsnip 'Pearl' is a high-quality variety with very uniform, slender roots and smooth white skin. Broad bean 'De Monica' will produce the earliest crops from either an autumn or a spring sowing, and runner bean 'Scarlet Empire', an improved form of 'Scarlet Emperor', has been bred for improved disease-tolerance.

On the fruit front, there's the gorgeous red-fleshed apple 'Tickled Pink' and red-skinned pear 'Sensation', plus exclusive stocks of strawberry 'Vibrant' – formerly called 'Marshmarvel' – which boasts high yields of shapely, glossy berries. Marshalls also offers a wide range of vegetable plants, potatoes, onions and garlic, flower seeds and plants and gardening sundries.

Call 0844 557 6700 for your copy of the new catalogue or visit www.marshalls-seeds.co.uk to browse and buy online.

We have 30 £10 Marshalls vouchers to give away.



**30
VOUCHERS
TO GIVE
AWAY**

OR YOU CAN FILL IN YOUR DETAILS ON THE GIVEAWAYS FORM – PAGE 101

READER OFFERS



EXCLUSIVE SAVINGS TO GET YOUR SEASON OFF TO A GREAT START

SAVE
UP TO £16
THIS MONTH

FREE
FOR EVERY READER

APPLE LORD LAMBOURNE

* YOU PAY JUST £11.96 P&P

This classic English dessert variety was first introduced in 1907 and is still popular today, holding an RHS Award of Garden Merit. Very juicy with plenty of acidity, the crisp flesh has a good flavour and aroma. We'll supply you with a strong, two-year-old tree which is on an M27 dwarfing rootstock to keep your tree compact. Expect your first fruits in just one to two summers. Trees will be despatched within 28 days subject to soil conditions.

****CATALOGUE PRICE
£19.95, PLUS P&P****



SELECTION OF SOME OF OUR TOP SELLING FRUIT TREES

(all on rootstocks intended to produce compact trees):

■ **APPLE 'ESTIVALE'** (Award of Garden Merit) – One bare root tree on M9 for £19.95
A 'Golden Delicious' cross, this apple has a crisp and crunchy bite and just the right balance of sharpness and sweetness. Ready for harvest from early September.

■ **APPLE 'LAXTON'S FORTUNE'** (AGM) – One bare root tree on M26 rootstock for £18.95

More than 100 years old, this attractive green/yellow skinned apple is flushed and striped. The aromatic flesh has good acidity and sweetness. Harvest from September and will keep until February.

■ **APRICOT 'PETIT MUSCAT'** – One bare root tree on Montclair rootstock for £29.95
Producing small fruits which have a Muscat grape-like flavour and are intensely-sweet. Not available in the supermarkets, the only way to enjoy this superb apricot is by growing your own. Harvest from mid August.

■ **CHERRY 'SUMMER SUN'** (AGM) – One bare root tree on Colt rootstock for £18.95
This splendidly reliable cherry will even ripen in cold exposed gardens. The rich red cherries ripen to black and have a wonderful flavour. Harvest from mid July.

■ **PEAR 'CONFERENCE'** (AGM) – One bare root tree on Quince A rootstock for £17.95

A heavy and reliable cropper, even in less than ideal conditions. The long-necked green fruits with plenty of russetting have a super flavour. Harvest from September and keep through to November.

■ **PLUM 'VICTORIA'** (AGM) – One bare root tree on St Julien A rootstock for £18.95
One of the nation's favourite fruit trees it provides good, heavy crops of fruits which have a superb flavour. The fruits are scrumptious eaten fresh or cooked. Harvest from August.



GET THESE GREAT OFFERS AND MANY MORE ONLINE:

DIARY DATES

SHOWS, SWAPS AND COURSES: THERE IS SO MUCH TO SEE AND DO THIS MONTH



GARDEN SHOWS

THE EDIBLE GARDEN SHOW
MARCH 28-30. Alexandra Palace, North London. Celebrity speakers, expert advice, plants, seeds, products. 0844 338 8001
www.theediblegardenshow.co.uk

Cook, forager and wild food expert Mark Lloyd is joining the line-up of celebrity speakers at The Edible Garden Show and will be revealing the gourmet delights of the natural world.

POTATO DAYS

SKELMERSDALE POTATO DAY

FEBRUARY 1. Concourse Shopping Centre, Skelmersdale Town Centre. 100+ varieties seed potatoes, onions sets, veg seeds, fruit bushes and trees; 10am-3pm. West Lancashire Allotments Federation
www.wlaf.btck.co.uk

URCHFONT POTATO DAY

FEBRUARY 1. Urchfont Village Hall, nr Devizes, Wiltshire. Seed potatoes, seeds, onion sets, fruit – organised by Urchfont Garden Society. 10.30am-2.30pm. 01749 860039
www.pennardplants.com

DURHAM POTATO DAY FEBRUARY

1. Bowburn Community Centre, County Durham. Around 20 varieties seed potato, advice, refreshments; 10am-2pm. 01913 721394
www.doga.org.uk

SHROPSHIRE POTATO DAY

FEBRUARY 8. Montford Village Hall, Montford, near Shrewsbury. Large range seed potatoes, seeds, soft fruit, cafe; 9am-3pm. 01939 260935
www.shropshireorganicardeners.org.uk

DRIMPTON POTATO DAY FEBRUARY

8. Drimpton Village Hall, nr Beaminster, Dorset. Seed potatoes, seeds, fruit – from Pennard plants. From 10.30am-2.30pm.
www.cwdhortsoc.blogspot.co.uk

EAST ANGLIA POTATO DAY

FEBRUARY 8. Mid-Suffolk Showground, Stonham Barns, Stonham Aspal, Stowmarket. 100+ varieties seed potato, seed swap, books, tools, chip tasting; 9.30am-1.30pm.
www.eapd.btck.co.uk

SOMERSET POTATO DAY FEBRUARY

9. The Constitutional Club, Station Road, Castle Cary. Large range seed potatoes, heritage and heirloom seeds, onion sets, fruit and other edible plants, 10.30am-2.30pm. 01749 860039
www.pennardplants.com

MARPLE POTATO DAY FEBRUARY 9.

Senior Citizens Hall, Memorial Park, Marple, near Manchester. 80 plus varieties of potato in 1kg nets, onion sets, veg seeds, soft fruit; 10am-3pm.
www.marple-uk.co.uk/allotments

FROME POTATO DAY & SEED SWAP

FEBRUARY 9. Cheese & Grain, Market Yard, Justice Lane, Frome, Somerset. Community seed swap, seed potatoes, plants, talks, gardening supplies. 10am-2pm.
www.fromepotatoday.org.uk

POP-UP ALLOTMENT SHOP &

POTATO DAY FEBRUARY 13. St Paul's Church Hall, Malmesbury Road, Chippenham, Wiltshire. 4-8pm.
www.chippenhamallotments.org.uk

CODFORD POTATO DAY FEBRUARY

15. Codford Village Hall, nr Warminster, Wiltshire. Seed potatoes, seeds, onion sets, fruit – organised by Codford Horticultural Society; 10am-2.30pm. 01749 860039
www.pennardplants.com

MERE POTATO DAY & SEED SWAP

FEBRUARY 16. The Grove Buildings, Church Street, Mere, Wiltshire. Seed potatoes, onion sets, fruit, seed swap – organised by Mere Gardening Club; 10.30am-2.30pm. 01749 860039
www.pennardplants.com



Seedy Sunday Brighton – the UK's largest and oldest community seed swap – takes place for the 13th time this year on February 2.

NOTE

That the Potato Days in East Anglia, Frome and Mere also include Seed Swaps

SEED SWAPS & FAIRS

SEEDY SATURDAY FEBRUARY 1.

Corn Exchange, Church Street, Brighton. Community seed swap, stalls, talks, cafe. 10am-3.30pm.
seedysaturdaylewes@gmail.com

SEEDY SUNDAY FEBRUARY 2.

Corn Exchange, Church Street, Brighton. Community seed swap, stalls, talks, advice, cafe. 10am-4pm.
www.seedysunday.org

SEEDY SUNDAY WELLINGTON

FEBRUARY 9. The Dolphin, Waterloo Road, Wellington, Somerset. Community seed swap, advice on seed saving and growing; 2-4pm.
seedsundaywellington@gmail.com

SOUTHAMPTON SEED SWAP

FEBRUARY 9. Sir James Mathews Building, 157-187 Above Bar Street, Southampton, Hampshire. Community event with seed swap and stalls, 11am-3.30pm.
www.facebook.com/southamptonseedswap

ARUNDEL A21 SEED SWAP

FEBRUARY 23. Norfolk Hall, Mill Road, Arundel, West Sussex. Swap seeds, plants, gardening books; expert advice and refreshments; 1-3.30pm. 01903 883464

SEEDY SATURDAY MARCH 8.

Memorial Hall, Farmborough, Bath. Seed swap, seed potatoes and organic seeds, green fayre, expert talks; 10am-2pm. 07849 055339
www.getseedy.co.uk

BRISTOL SEED FAIR

MARCH 16. Create Centre, Spike Island, Bristol. Talks, plant and seed stalls, advice. 10am-3pm.
www.beansandherbs.co.uk

CONWY SEED FAIR MARCH 26.

Conwy, North Wales. 700-year-old street fair with seeds, plant stalls, seed potatoes and home produce, 9am-4pm.
www.conwybeekeepers.org.uk

Picture: Gary Eastwood

VEG GROWING COURSES

GET GROWING FEBRUARY 1 OR 22.

River Cottage HQ, Park Farm, nr Axminster, Devon. Skills and techniques to get the most from your growing space, 10am-5pm. 01297 630300, www.rivercottage.net

NO-DIG GARDENING FEBRUARY 8.

West Dean College, West Dean, Chichester, West Sussex. Day course with Charles Dowding, 9am-5pm. Book on 01243 811301 www.westdean.org.uk

GROWING KEY FRUIT AND

VEGETABLES FEBRUARY 9. West Dean College, West Dean, Chichester, West Sussex. Top tips for continual production, with Charles Dowding; 9am-5pm. Book on 01243 811301 www.westdean.org.uk

YOU CAN'T BUY THESE FEBRUARY

11. RHS Centre, Pershore College, Avonbank, Pershore, Worcestershire. Talk on unusual and delicious vegetables, 2-4pm. Book on 01386 554609 rhs@warkscol.ac.uk

PLANT IT, GROW IT, EAT IT FEBRUARY

19. Trengwainton Garden, Madron, Penzance. 12pm-3pm. 01736 363148 www.nationaltrust.org.uk/trengwainton-garden

NO-DIG GARDENING FEBRUARY 26

OR MARCH 2, 12, 22 AND 30. Alhampton, Shepton Mallet, Somerset. Veg and fruit growing with Charles Dowding, 10.30am-4pm. Book on 01749 860292 www.charlesdowding.co.uk

THE VEGETABLE GARDEN IN

SPRING FEBRUARY 27 OR 28. RHS Garden Wisley, Woking, Surrey. Practical day on soil preparation, sowing and planting; 10.30am-4pm. Book on 0845 612 1253, www.rhs.co.uk /wisley

FRUIT PRUNING & GRAFTING

FRUIT TREE PRUNING

FEBRUARY 5. Crown Nursery, Ufford, Suffolk. Hands-on course, 10am-noon. Book on 01394 460755 www.crown-nursery.co.uk

FRUIT-TREE PRUNING MASTER

CLASS FEBRUARY 9. Gibside, near Rowlands, Gateshead. Tips and practicals in the walled garden; 10.30am-3pm. Book on 01207 541820 www.nationaltrust.org.uk/gibside

GRAFTING APPLES FEBRUARY 12.

RHS Garden Harlow Carr, Harrogate, Yorkshire. Graft two trees to take home; 10am-4pm. Book on 0845 6121253 www.rhs.org.uk/harlowcarr

GRAFTING MARCH 15. Hatton

Fruit Garden, Bradbourne House, East Malling, Kent. Day course run by East Malling Research. Book on 01732 523755 fran.gallwey@emr.ac.uk

FORMATIVE ORCHARD TREE

PRUNING FEBRUARY 15.

Pencarrow, South East Cornwall. 1-4pm. Book on 01726 870146 southeastcornwall@nationaltrust.org.uk

WINTER FRUIT TREE PRUNING

FEBRUARY 15 OR MARCH 1. Brogdale Farm, Faversham, Kent. Basic techniques, theory and practical; 10am-4pm. Book on 01795 536250 www.brogdalecollections.co.uk

I PLEASE NOTE I

We have made every effort to ensure these details are correct at the time of going to press, but recommend you check with organisers before travelling.



Oca tubers – one of the unusual and delicious vegetables you can't buy in the supermarket; hear about others at Pershore College, February 11

KG FEBRUARY GIVEAWAYS

Simply fill in the details below and return to us at:

Kitchen Garden February-14 Giveaways, Mortons Media Group Ltd, PO Box 99, Horncastle, Lincolnshire LN9 6BR. You can also enter online for free at: www.kitchengarden.co.uk. Closing date for entries Friday 7 February, 2014

Name

Address

Postcode

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To enter: Once you have supplied your details, cut out and send this coupon to the address above and you will automatically be entered into the following competitions:

- Holiday-proof your harvests (p96).....✓
- Pets win prizes (p97)✓
- Secure storage solution (p96)✓
- Step into comfort (p96)✓
- Long-running cereal (p97)✓
- Please state preferred foot size below
3 4 5 6 7 8
- Get set to sow! (p97).....✓

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www.chilternseeds.co.uk

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www.dtbrownseeds.co.uk

SAMUEL DOBIE AND SON
tel 0844 701 7625
www.dobies.co.uk

THOMAS ETTY
tel 01460 298249
www.thomasetty.co.uk

MR. FOTHERGILL'S SEEDS
tel 0845 371 0518
www.mr-fothergills.co.uk

THE HERBARY
tel 01985 844442
www.beansandherbs.co.uk

HERITAGE SEED LIBRARY
tel 02476 303517
www.gardenorganic.org.uk

JEKKA'S HERB FARM
tel 01454 418878
www.jekkasheerbfarm.com

EW KING & CO
tel 01376 570000
www.kingsseeds.com

SE MARSHALL & CO
tel 0844 557 6700
www.marshalls-seeds.co.uk

MEDWYN'S SEEDS
tel 01248 714851
www.medwynsofanglesey.co.uk

MOREVEG
tel 01823 681302
www.moreveg.co.uk

NICKY'S NURSERY
tel 01843 600972
www.nickys-nursery.co.uk

THE ORGANIC GARDENING CATALOGUE
tel 01932 253666,
www.organiccatalogue.com

PLANTSBYPOST.COM
tel 0115 727 0606

THE REAL SEED CATALOGUE
(Vida Verde) tel 01239 821107,
www.realseeds.co.uk

W ROBINSON & SON LTD
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www.mammothonion.co.uk

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www.thompson-morgan.com

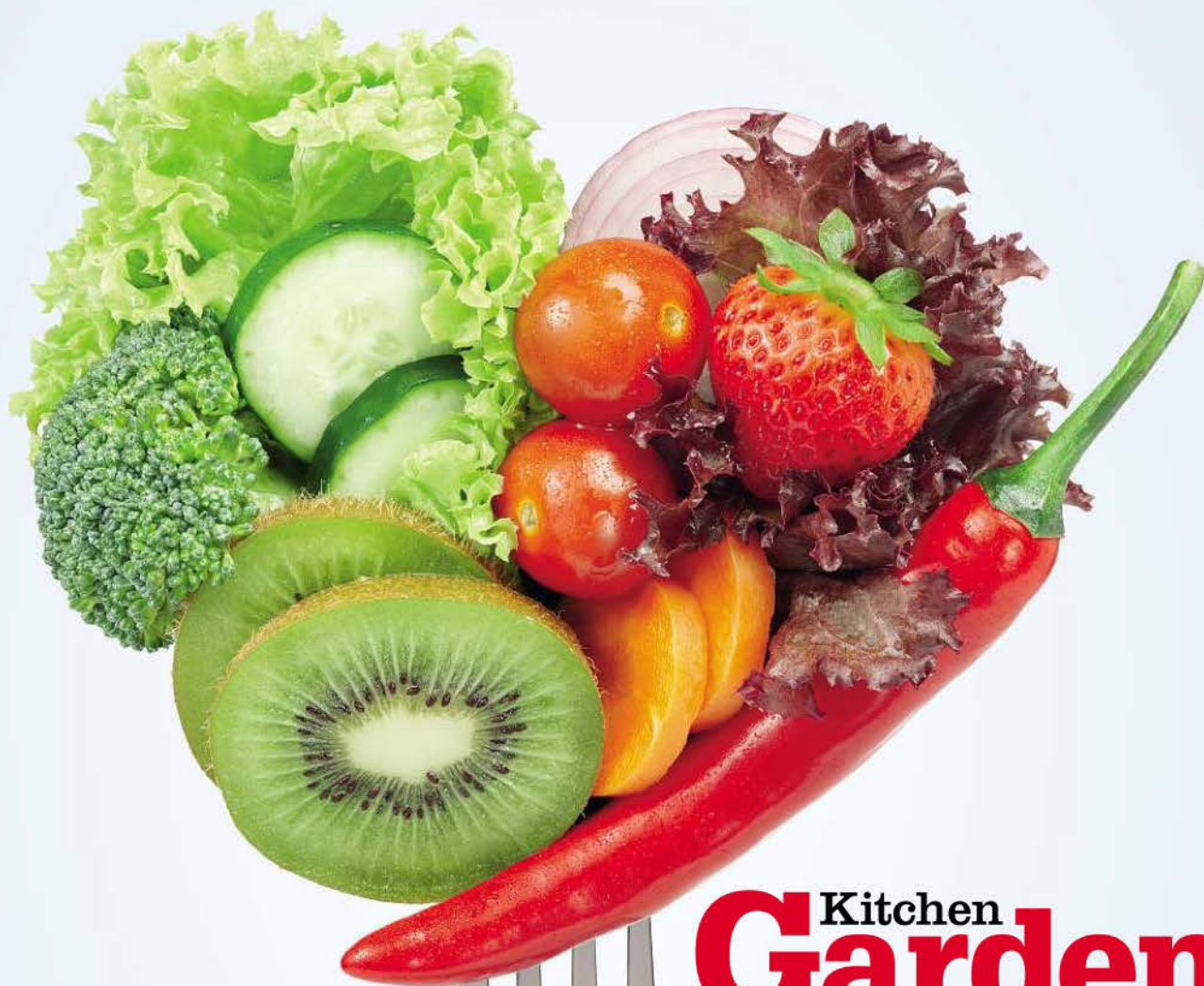
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A beginner's guide to Happy hens

Karen Pimlott has some advice for those thinking of keeping a few chickens on their plot



When you have decided to add some feathered friends to your family it's all very exciting, but there is a lot more to think about than buying a couple of hens and putting them in a coop at the bottom of your garden. However, if you follow my guidelines below you won't go far wrong.

There are lots of beautiful breeds of poultry, some as tiny as a blackbird and some so big you could put a saddle on them – not really but you know what I mean – along with the weird and wonderful.

The first thing to consider is what type of coop you are going to buy, a traditional wooden one or the more futuristic plastic style. How much room do you have? Where will you put your coop? And most importantly how many chickens are you going to put in it?

In my experience both types of coops require the same looking after; both can attract mites

(although the plastic is easier to keep clean, with a quick power wash the job's done) so it's a matter of personal preference. The plastic ones can be more expensive but do seem to hold value if you ever wanted to resell; wooden ones are less desirable second-hand.

Space is really important. The more space you can give your new chickens the better; they do get bored very easily, which can lead to problems such as feather pecking which they start simply to amuse themselves. This can be more of a problem in birds that are never allowed out of their run to free range from time to time.

INSIDE COMFORT

Indoor space is not as important as you may find that they can have all the room in the world but they will all squash in one corner or together on the roosting bars for security and warmth.

Bedding inside the coop and nest boxes – although straw looks nice, warm and comfy, dust free shavings or shredded paper is best for your birds, although paper is not as absorbent and needs changing daily. Hay is not ideal for chickens, nor is straw, both can give off spores when damp which can affect their respiratory systems and can harbour mites.

Sawdust is not good either as it is very dusty and again can affect the birds' respiratory systems and also cause irritation and infections in their eyes.

Where you site your coop is simply what works for you; in my opinion there is no right or wrong place to put your chickens as long as they are safe and secure. Just make sure coop doors are facing away from any prevailing winds.

So the coop is done, you know where it's going and what bedding you are putting in it. It's now time for the exciting part – the chickens. ►

CHOOSING YOUR CHICKENS

Although poultry magazines and the internet are full of pictures of wonderful pure breed chickens, most really are as rare as hen's teeth! You only have to look at the Rare Breed Survival Trust's watch list which is growing larger by the day.

Pure breeds come in all shapes and sizes, some are beautiful and some are quite simply freaky.

Pure breeds can be quite finicky though when it comes to laying. When they lay, most are good layers but there are many things that frequently knock them off laying... too hot, too cold, moulting and being broody to name a few!

Hybrids however are the birds that I always recommend newbies to start with. These birds are hardy, they are prolific layers, laying 300 plus eggs a year as opposed to 120-180 eggs per year from the average pure breed.

Hybrid chickens are nearly always vaccinated (check with the breeder) against many different things including the more common respiratory infections, Marek's disease and most importantly salmonella.

Pure breed breeders however do not tend to vaccinate their birds.

There are many hybrid varieties on the market at the moment, from your plain brown farmyard chicken, more commonly called a Warren, to those that look like pure breeds, such as your Sussex Star which looks like a Light Sussex and Speckledy that looks like a Maran.

Hybrid chickens are much of a muchness, all of similar size and temperament, ideal for the back garden and for children and make great pets.



Hybrid birds abound. Some look like pure breeds; the Sussex Star (right) resembles a Light Sussex.

So you have to weigh it up. Do you want hens just for pets? Then choose pure breeds and any eggs are a bonus; but do your research on your chosen breeds first and make sure it's the right breed for you.

If you want hens to be pets and lay eggs then go for the hybrids.

Whatever breeds you choose always be sure to buy your birds from reputable breeders. Avoid auctions at all cost while you are new to poultry keeping, as you will be uncertain what you're looking for and could buy old and diseased birds.

Many people still ask 'do I need a rooster for my hens to lay eggs?'

The answer is no, you only need a rooster for fertile eggs. If you are going to add a male to your girls, consider where you live and if it's really apt, as you and your neighbours

may not take kindly to being woken up by a cock-a-doodle-do at 4am!

FEEDING AND GENERAL WELLBEING

As with most pets your birds will need worming regularly. There are many over the counter wormers you can buy for your birds, some are natural products so there is no egg withdrawal period while your birds are being wormed.

Remember what goes into your birds comes out in their eggs so if you are giving anything medicinal to your birds always check the egg withdrawal time so you know when it's safe to eat your eggs again.

Most poultry keepers, myself included, worm on a six monthly basis. While I find that the natural wormers on the market are a good preventative measure to use in between times (some of these can be used every four weeks); I prefer a wormer purchased from my vet that is sure to get rid of any of the harmful worms that the birds may carry.



Worming is especially important not only for the health of your birds but also if you are eating the eggs; you don't want to be eating eggs off wormy birds!

Everything your birds need (apart from a little extra grit to aid digestion) are in the layers pellets or mash that you should be feeding your laying birds. There are many brands available, but a good quality pellet usually contains 16% protein or more. These little pellets contain all the vitamins, oils and minerals that your birds need to maintain their health and continue laying good eggs.

Treats should be kept to a minimum as this will discourage birds from eating the correct foodstuffs; treats can also lead to overweight lazy birds which will affect their health, shorten their lifespan and lead to a drop or in some cases a cease in egg production.

If you do want to treat your birds, feed them natural food stuffs such as millet, sweetcorn or meal worms. Avoid things like porridge, pasta and rice etc. Although they love it, it's quite gloopy and can cause crop problems over time, leading to a compacted or sour crop, as the birds find it hard to break it down. The crop is a storage pouch where food is stored and broken down prior to digestion.

Although layers pellets don't look too appetising, they really are best for your birds.



The Warren will lay at least 300 eggs per year.



Pure breeds include the beautiful Silkie hen.

WATCH OUT FOR MITES

Mites are one of the biggest problems when keeping chickens, both in the coop and on your birds, and prevention is better than cure.

Mites and lice that are found on your birds are usually brought in from the wild birds, because of course nobody treats them.

Birds need checking for mites on a weekly basis. Quickly part the feathers underneath the bird's vent (bottom) and if there are any lice or mites you are sure to find them there. Mites can also be found on the back of the neck if an infestation is present.

Mites can be simply treated by over the counter sprays or powders should any be seen. However, don't wait till you see them, treat your birds whatever, as a mite infestation can quickly debilitate you birds and make them quite sickly which can also leave them open to secondary infections.

Red mite is found in the coop and is the poultry keeper's worse nightmare; they live in the nooks and crannies and come out at night to feed on the blood of your birds. Bad infestations of red mite can lead to death, as the bird is rendered anaemic and cannot recover.

Again red mite can be prevented by treating regularly with a recommended treatment that can be bought over the counter.

Nothing aside from burning gets rid of these little blighters, which are no bigger than a full stop. So before you have even got your birds, it's advisable to treat their home to stop any moving in. Like I said, prevention is better than cure.

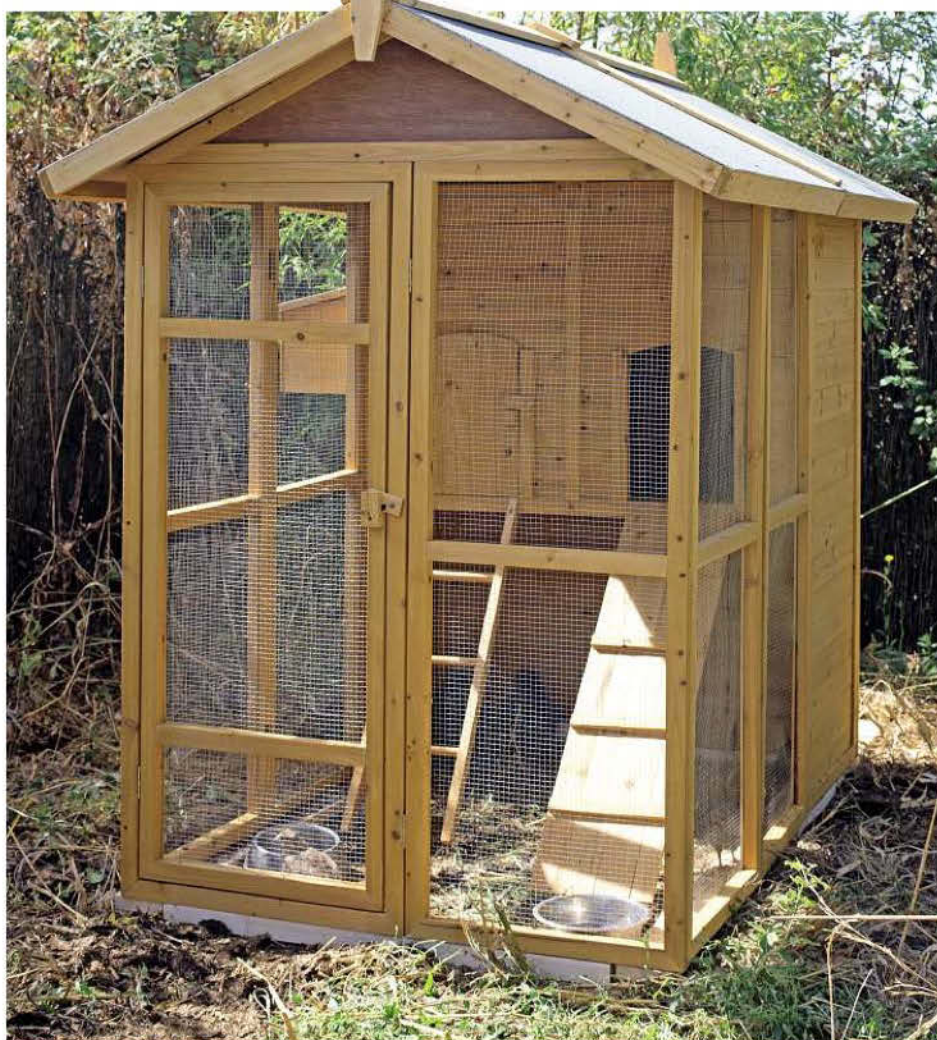
The best way to check if you have red mite is to go to your coop with a torch at night and run your fingers in corners and under perches etc. and they will pop on your fingers as they will be engorged with blood from your birds. Sounds gruesome I know but it really isn't as bad as it seems.

Second-hand coops are prime examples of red mite hoarders as old poultry/pigeon sheds can house red mite for many years. They can lay dormant and are not visible until you add new birds then they come out in force.

Although the above is a lot to take in and you may think that chicken keeping is a lot more complex than you first thought, it really isn't. That's why chicken keeping is the fastest growing hobby in the UK.

Look after your birds – keeping happy hens will give you many years of pleasure with the added bonus of lovely fresh eggs for breakfast every day.

Once you have your chickens you will wonder what you ever did without them. ■

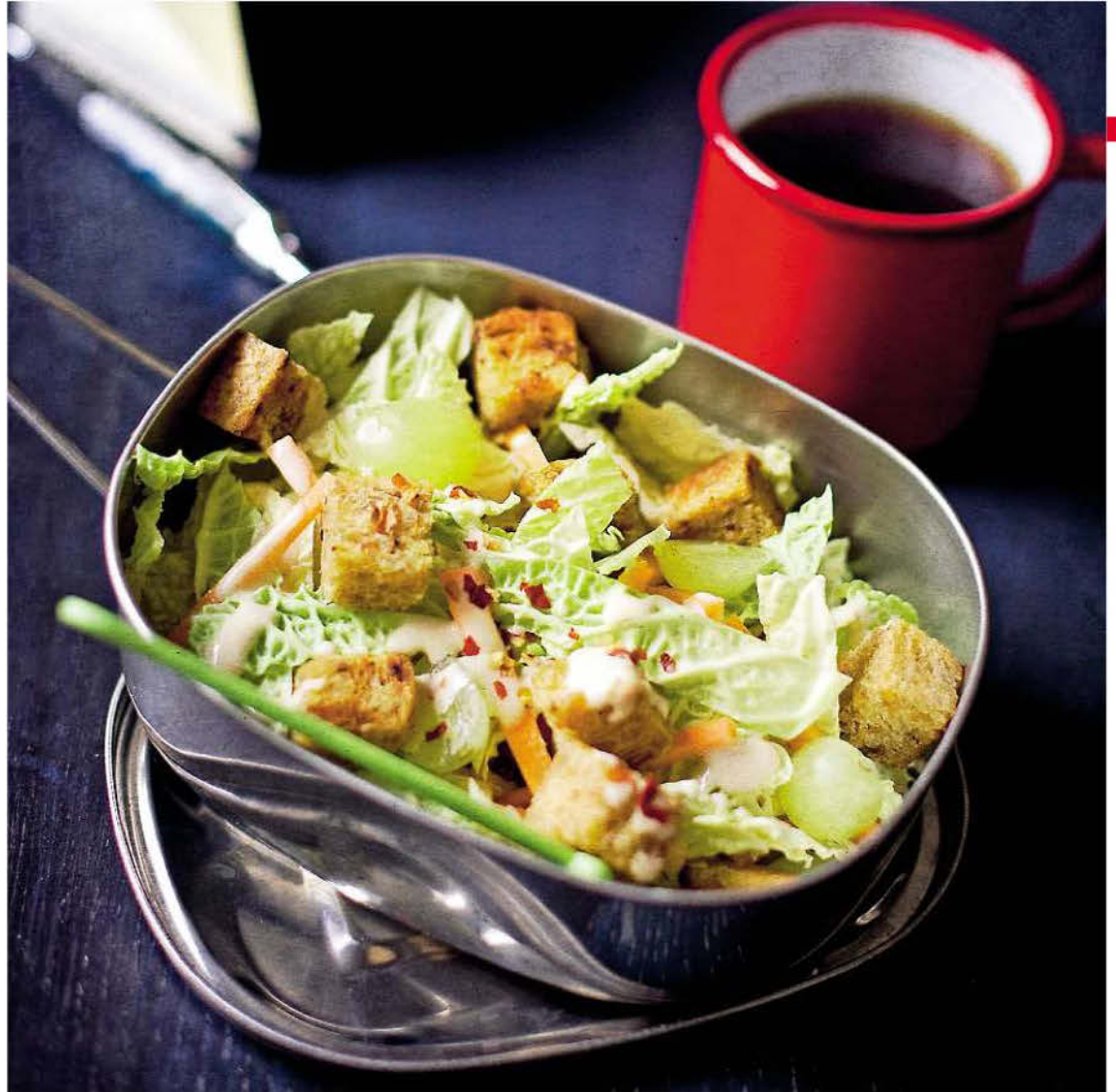


Locate your coop so that the door faces away from prevailing winds.

Savour winter pickings

Having gathered their harvest from the veg plot, KG chefs **Anna Pettigrew** and **Gaby Bartai** serve up a selection of delicious dishes using celeriac, kale and cabbage





Homemade chicken burger with Savoy cabbage, brie and cranberry

This dish takes advantage of the seasonal cabbage, replacing the traditional iceberg, that you would usually find as a burger accompaniment. Gently sauteing the cabbage brings out the sweetness of the vegetable, and gives the burger some extra bite.

Serves 4

- 4 organic chicken breasts
- ½ head of savoy cabbage, chopped
- 200g brie, sliced
- 4 tbsp cranberry sauce
- 4 burger buns
- a little olive oil to fry

FOR THE MARINADE

- 1 garlic clove
- 1 tbsp dried sage
- 1 tbsp dried oregano
- 2 tsp tabasco or other hot sauce
- salt and pepper

- 1.** Start by popping the chicken breasts into a zip-lock bag with the marinade ingredients, shake the bag about to evenly coat the fillets. Place in the fridge over night to marinate.
- 2.** Heat a pan, or griddle with a little olive oil and fry the breasts for three minutes on each side, or until cooked through.
- 3.** Half way through the cooking time, add the chopped cabbage and saute. Remove the chicken breasts and rest on a plate for a few minutes.
- 4.** Toast the buns for 30 seconds on the still hot pan. Assemble the burgers by layering the cabbage, chicken, brie and cranberry sauce between the buns.

Winter savoy cabbage salad

When the salad greens are all finished in the veg plot, simply replace them with cabbage. Green, red or savoy are all great in salads. With crunch and texture they are perfect for a more substantial dish. Try this winter take on the classic Caesar salad for your lunchbox for work.

Serves 2

- ½ head of Savoy cabbage
- 1 carrot
- ½ lime, juiced
- 1 slice crusty bread, diced
- 1 garlic clove, chopped
- ½ tsp chilli flakes
- 6-8 green grapes, halved
- 1 tbsp olive oil, for frying
- Dressing of your choice, for example a light Caesar dressing

- 1.** Start by making the croutons by dicing a thick slice of crusty bread. Heat the olive oil and pop the croutons in. Gently fry for 3-4 minutes until lightly golden.
- 2.** Now add the chopped garlic and chilli flakes. Fry for a further minute. Take off the heat and set aside.
- 3.** Wash and finely slice the cabbage and carrot and place in a bowl, add the lime juice and grapes and toss.
- 4.** Add the croutons and dressing just before serving. If taking to work, place the croutons in a separate container, to prevent them becoming soggy. ➤



Kale and cannellini soup

I'm calling it a soup, but you could equally call it a stew; either way, it's one of those wonderfully substantial meals in a bowl that goes some way towards redeeming a cold dark winter's day.

Serves 2

- 1 tbsp vegetable oil
- 1 smallish onion, peeled and finely diced
- 3 cloves garlic, peeled and crushed
- ½ stick celery, finely chopped
- 125g (4½oz) potatoes, peeled and cut into dice
- 600ml (1pt) vegetable stock
- 2 bay leaves
- 10g (⅓oz) chunk of Parmesan rind
- 115g (4oz) cooked cannellini beans
- 50g (1¾oz) kale, coarse stems and midribs removed, then finely shredded
- 2 large sprigs parsley, chopped
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

1. Heat the oil in a large pan and fry the onion and garlic gently for four minutes, then add the celery and cook for three more minutes.
2. Add the potatoes, stock, bay leaves and Parmesan rind. Bring the stock to the boil, then cover the pan, turn the heat down and let it simmer for 30 minutes.
3. Add the beans to the pan and let the soup simmer for a further 10 minutes, then add the kale and simmer for another five minutes.
4. Remove the bay leaves and the remains of the Parmesan, stir in the parsley and season to taste with salt and pepper.

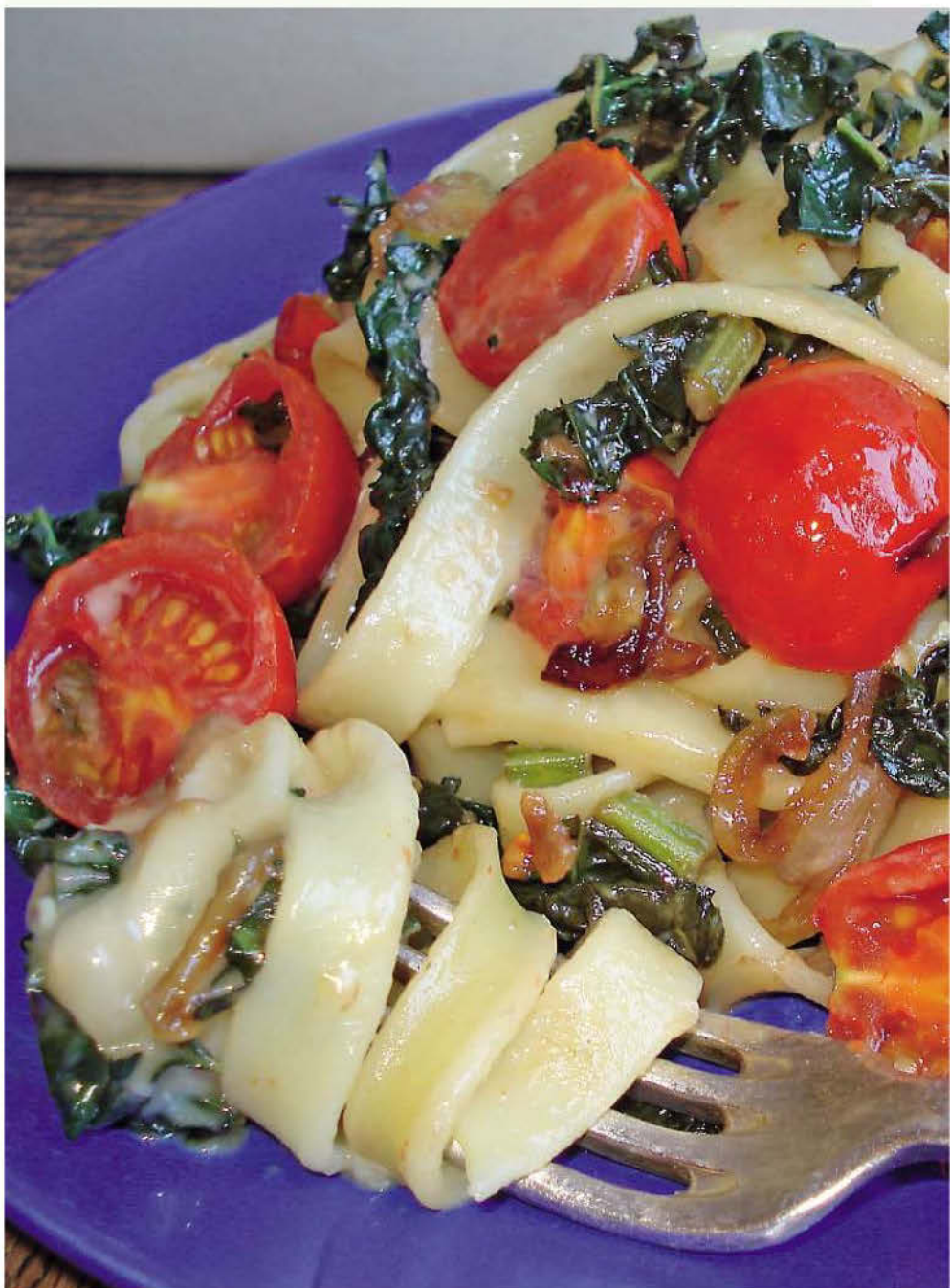
Tagliatelle with kale, gorgonzola and tomatoes

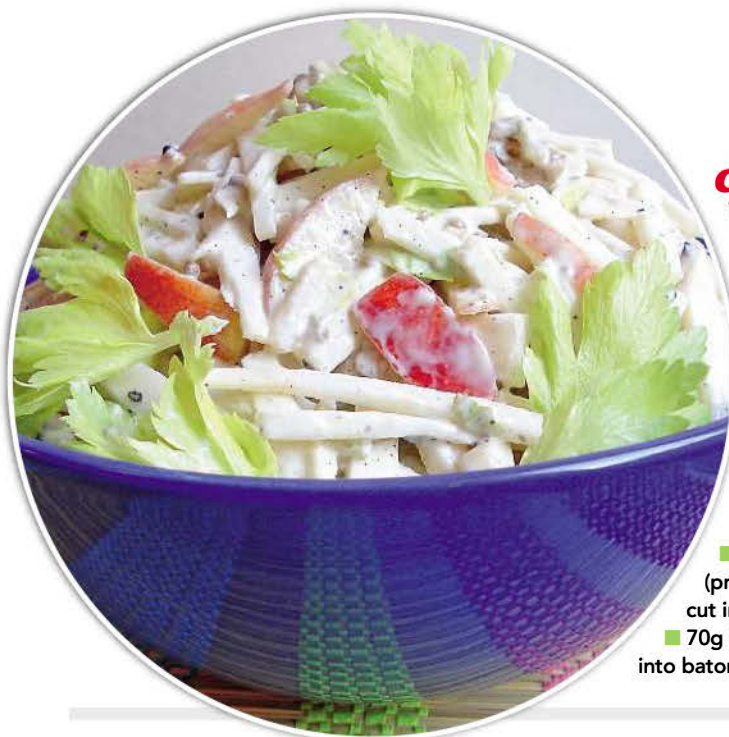
Kale and tomatoes are an unlikely but happy match, and the addition of cherry tomatoes to the classic kale-gorgonzola-pasta trinity is a good one. 'Cavolo Nero' is the kale variety of choice here, though a flat-leaved kale would also work.

Serves 2

- 175g (6oz) tagliatelle (dry weight)
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1 tbsp olive oil
- ½ medium onion, peeled and sliced
- 2 cloves garlic, peeled and crushed
- 70g (2½oz) kale, coarse stems and midribs removed, then finely shredded
- 2 tsp balsamic vinegar
- 100g (3½oz) cherry tomatoes, halved
- 85g (3oz) gorgonzola, diced

1. Cook the tagliatelle in a pan of salted water, then drain it.
2. Heat the oil in a large frying pan, add the onion and garlic and let them cook over a very gentle heat for 15 minutes.
3. Add the kale and the balsamic vinegar to the frying pan. Cover the pan and let the kale steam for five minutes, then add the tomatoes and continue cooking for five more minutes. Keep the stirring to a minimum so that the tomatoes stay intact.
4. Add the tagliatelle and the gorgonzola to the pan. Mix everything gently and continue cooking until the cheese has melted and the pasta has heated through, then season to taste with salt and pepper.





Celeriac Waldorf salad

Ring the changes on the standard winter salads with this meeting of two classics: the American Waldorf and the French céleri rémoulade, which dresses julienned celeriac in a mustardy mayonnaise.

Serves 2

- 125g (4½oz) celeriac (prepared weight), peeled and cut into fine batons
- 70g (2½oz) apple, cored and cut into batons

- 25g (1oz) walnut pieces
- 4 tbsp mayonnaise
- 2 tsp wholegrain mustard
- 2 tsp cider vinegar
- A few lovage or celery leaves, roughly chopped
- Celery salt and freshly ground black pepper

1. Put the celeriac and apple into a bowl with the walnuts, the mayonnaise, the mustard, the vinegar, and most of the lovage or celery leaves. Mix everything together gently.
2. Season to taste with celery salt and pepper, and garnish with the remaining lovage or celery leaves.



Celeriac fisherman's pie

Celeriac is an excellent partner for both fish and seafood, and a mustard and parsley flecked celeriac mash gives you the topping for a rather superior fish pie.

Serves 2

- 650g (1lb 7oz) celeriac (prepared weight), peeled and cut into chunks
- 4 tbsp crème fraîche
- 1 tbsp wholegrain mustard
- Small bunch of parsley, chopped
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 150ml (5flox) fish stock
- 150ml (5flox) milk
- 175g (6oz) white fish
- 175g (6oz) smoked white fish
- 25g (1oz) butter, plus extra for topping
- 25g (1oz) plain flour
- 100g (3½oz) peeled prawns

1. Steam the celeriac until it is tender, then drain it and let it steam dry.
2. Mash the celeriac well, then mix in the crème fraîche, the mustard and half of the parsley. Season to taste with salt and pepper.
3. Put the fish stock and the milk into a wide pan, and bring to a simmer. Add the white and the smoked fish and let them poach for five minutes, then lift out with a slotted spoon, reserving the liquid. Remove any skins from the fish, and cut it into chunks.
4. Melt the butter in a saucepan over a moderate heat, then stir in the flour and cook, still stirring, for another minute. Add the reserved stock and milk, and stir until the mixture comes to the boil.
5. Take the sauce off the heat and mix in the fish, the prawns, the rest of the parsley and a generous grinding of pepper.
6. Put the fish mixture into an ovenproof dish and spread the mashed celeriac on top. Use a fork to rough up the topping, and dot it with butter. Put it into the oven at 180°C/350°F/gas 4 for 40 minutes, or until the topping is nicely coloured.

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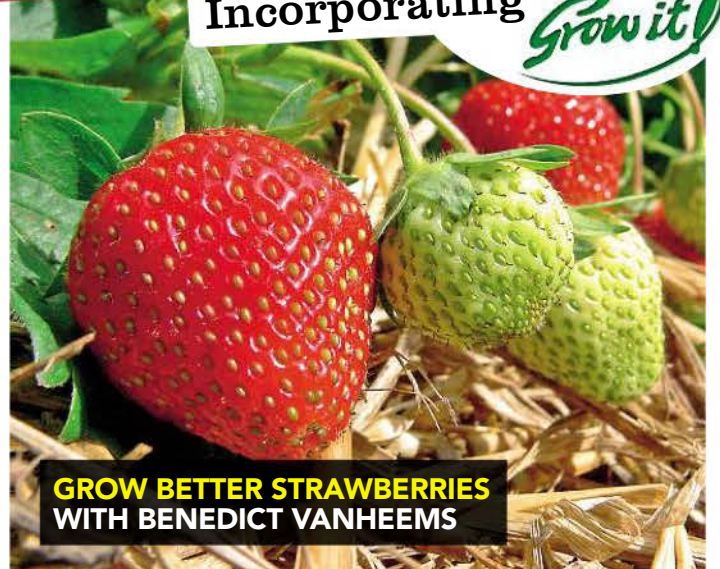
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LAST WORD

Charlie Dimmock was a familiar face on our TV screens every week from 1997-2005 as part of the Ground Force team. This month we catch up with her to talk about her many solo projects since and her latest programme which is airing now: The Great British Garden Revival

What projects have you enjoyed since leaving Ground Force?

Since leaving Ground Force I have done quite a few projects. One of the more memorable was 71 Degrees North for ITV which I wouldn't say was enjoyable but was certainly different. It was in the Arctic Circle in Norway. The landscape was amazing and we did different challenges that most people would never get to do.

How did you find the dizzy world of celebrity?

I am very down-to-earth and I have to say the whole celebrity thing was all a little silly; but I did get to meet some amazing famous people and also do some unusual projects such as having a go at dancing in the production of Chicago and flying a Hawk jet.

If you had to make the choice of being either a gardener or a celebrity which would you choose?

I would definitely go for being a gardener all the time. I love being outside with different seasons and wildlife.

What is your garden like?

My garden is very traditional with a patio, flower borders, veggie patch and yes, a pond with a waterfall. I guess the only thing that is a little different is I leave my front garden to become a meadow in the spring and summer, which my father thinks is a real mess but the wildlife love it and I think it is quite pretty.

Do you grow your own fruit and veg?

I have an apple and plum tree along with raspberries and gooseberries and I do grow quite a few vegetables. My favourites are the salads like mixed spicy salad leaves and rocket, along with tomatoes and this year many chillies. Everyone is getting a pot of chilli jam for Christmas!

What tip would you give to new gardeners?

For a new vegetable gardener I would suggest not trying to grow everything the first year or so and to go for things that you are actually going to eat; along with – and this goes for all gardening – preparation is key.



The Great British Garden Revival runs for 10 weeks from Monday, December 9, on BBC 2

We read that your horse once ran amok in your garden. Did it cause much damage?

My horse did run amok in my garden last winter – twice! The first time I managed to get her out before she did much damage. However, the second time it had been raining lots and when I shooed her out she had a bit of a hissy fit and jumped up and down leaving holes up to a foot deep in the lawn. (She is a very heavy cob). It took seven barrowloads of top soil to repair the damage, so now if a mole comes in that is really nothing in comparison.

What have you enjoyed most about being on the Great British Garden Revival?

Working on the Great British Garden Revival was rewarding inasmuch as we created a wildlife garden in an afternoon that the environmentalists said would be ideal for insects and amphibians alike, and if everyone put in a small pond like that it would make a vast difference. ■



Charlie is working with Horlicks to launch the new look pack, still with the same great taste.



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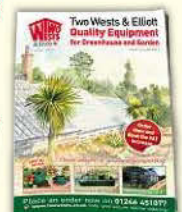
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