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OBSERVER ORGANIC ALLOTMENT BLOG



Things to do in March

Peas, cabbage and broad beans are all on our gardening expert's to-do list for March

Although the weather in March is notoriously fickle, if you take a little care not to get caught out by it, you can bound ahead.

If your rotation plots are ready, you can get going on a few types for each bed. In the [brassica](#) bed early Brussels sprouts can go in under cloches towards the middle of the month to be planted out in May for autumn eating. Reliable earliest croppers are Peer Gynt and the newer Nelson. Noisette is a good traditional nutty sprout that you can sow through summer.

The summer varieties of cabbage are the ones to sow in March ("summer" referring to the harvesting time). With the RHS Award of Garden Merit are round types evocatively named 'First of June' and 'Derby Day' along with pointed ones Hispi and Greyhound. All are crisp, mild and delicious.

For something different consider [kohl rabi](#) or the "cabbage turnip". This is a fair description as it tastes of both. It has the advantage though of being easier and quicker to grow than turnips while being less prone to disease than cabbage. It copes well with hot summers as it has a wide-reaching root system to search for moisture. Its charm lies in its cartoon-like sputnik appearance. Quickstar is a good variety for early sowing. Don't let it get bigger than a golf ball though or it will toughen up.

Texel greens, a 20th century man-made mustardy green, otherwise known as [Abyssinian cabbage](#), is worth a try especially if you want a nutritious crop.

Like most fast growers, the upside is that it is generally outstrips trouble and the downside is that it coarsens quickly. It is ideal for easy to grow cut-and-come-again fresh leaves.

For the legume patch you can get going with summer eating broad beans and first and second early peas. If you want to eat broad beans and peas all summer, sow a few at a time, once a month for beans and every two weeks for peas, from March to May. An alternative way to get a non-stop succession is to [sow peas](#) that mature at different times.

Amongst broad bean cultivars, the AGM Witkiem Manita came out as "best for spring sowing" in the Gardening Which trials and, along with its successor Witkiem Major. It is generally recommended for earliness, high yields and good flavour. Express claims to be the quickest broad bean yet and great for freezing. Sutton is ideal for windy sites being a dwarf variety. Personally, I can never resist the delicious heritage [Red Flowered](#) with its red seeds and beautiful crimson flowers, especially as it was saved from extinction by Garden Organic.

If you harvest broad beans young enough you can eat the whole bean like mangetout – a treat you cannot find in the shops. Soak the seeds overnight and sow them well dug soil so their big roots can stretch out luxuriantly.

Peas are traditionally [sown](#) on St. Patrick's Day, March 17th. They need a minimum temperature of 7C (46F) to germinate. If you don't trust the weather in your area, it is wiser to sow them in modules and harden them off before planting them out next

month. If you can get a piece of plastic guttering to start them off, then you can slide them out into a prepared trench later without them even noticing the move.

Good varieties for early sowing and for carrying on through summer is the prolific, mildew resistant AGM Kelvedon Wonder or the vintage Early Onward. For petits pois, Darfon is a good bet. A good old stager for snow peas is Oregon Sugar Pod. Sugar Snap is a dual purpose pea as it will grow on from snow pea into shelling pea.

In the roots bed, you can start off early carrots. There is a huge variety of new types. Manufacturers are aiming cleverly at the children's lunch box market with brightly coloured or pastel collections designed to be tasty when eaten raw. Adelaide, a member of the RHS Collection, is a pale sweet tasting carrot that can be sown throughout summer. Crème de Lite is a brand new smooth and elegant cream coloured number that needs no peeling.

Hamburg parsley is another dual purpose vegetable. It has roots like parsnip (with a celery taste which is a useful addition to stews) and tops that can be used like parsley. Rather like true parsnips, which can also be sown now, it should be elevated from its historic association with animal feed and War rationing. If they are eaten when still small and succulent, instead of being allowed to grow hefty and coarse, they are quite delicious. There are no cultivars of Hamburg parsley as yet to my knowledge but quite a few tasty "culinary" parsnips now like Tender and True or the impeccably elegant AGM Javelin.

When you can provide a temperature of 10 – 15C (50 – 59F), globe onions, pickling onions Japanese bunching onions can be planted out.

Potatoes can go in towards the end of the month, though April is more traditional. The standard way is to plant them a trowel deep and earth them up as they grow.

<http://www.videojug.com/film/how-to-plant-potatoes>

If you can lay your hands on some straw and grass mowings you can save your back and try the no dig system. You do this by growing them on top of the ground and covering them with a compost/manure mix followed later on with grass mowings. Some gardeners just grow them under black polythene. If you plan to follow this method wait a few weeks for the weather to warm up.

If on the other hand, you want to win the potato growing race that takes place in some allotments, there is a cunning way of getting ahead. It involves mounding soil into ridges, digging down in the troughs between to the depth of a trowel to plant the potatoes. These are covered with soil. Polythene, which will keep the temperature up, is put on top of the ridges and held in place with planks. When the potato shoots are bumping up against the polythene, slits are cut to let the shoots through. However, if the weather turns at this point, you will need to be ready to throw fleece over the potato tops.

As plots are getting smaller these days and if you don't want to turn over too much of your plot to potato growing, try growing them in a barrel or old bin. I find this particularly good for new potatoes for eating in June.

Spinach beet is in the beetroot group so it can fit in anywhere there is space. Highly decorative with near florescent leaves and stems it will certainly brighten up your plot. Though just catching on here, it is hugely popular in Provençal cookery for rice dishes, soups and tarts with made with fruits, lemon, and cheese. The midribs are cooked separately and eaten with vinaigrette. The most colourful varieties are Bright Lights and Rhubarb chard while Fordhook Giant is considered to be the tastiest.

There is still time to plant out perennials - asparagus crowns, Jerusalem artichokes, seakale offsets and garlic. Get going with cut-and-come-again salad leaves and radishes. The more you get done now, the less there will be to do in April – possibly the hard working allotmentee's busiest month all year.

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crikfan

28 February 2009 6:06AM

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