

theguardian

OBSERVER ORGANIC ALLOTMENT BLOG



Caroline Foley's expert guide to a few things to do in March

Our favourite gardening guru's thoughts and tasks for the month



Planting potatoes is the first challenge of the gardening year

When it comes to the weather, March is a month of false promises. Do not be lured by the odd bright day as, likely as not, it will be followed by treacherous winds and frosty nights.

Instead, turn your attention to the first major challenge of the allotment year – the potato. The classic time to plant is Good Friday – April 6 this year. However they can go in any time several weeks before or after. There is still plenty of time to order.

Early potatoes take about eight weeks to mature and the maincrops take around 16. Both are planted at the same time, give or take. They just have different growing speeds. For a succession through summer, stagger planting the earlies through spring. Keep in mind that potatoes are not frost hardy.



Chitting is a good idea but not essential. Commercial growers don't bother. However, getting the potatoes to sprout before planting does speed up the process. An early crop not only brings the pleasure of the first new potatoes of the year but is more likely to avoid [the diseases](#) which build up through the summer.

The peak time for potato blight (*Phytophthora infestans*) – the fungus that caused the Irish potato famine and is still going strong despite all efforts – is August and September. In [allotments](#) where potatoes have been grown for generations, potato diseases can be a real menace. This is one reason to grow earlies.

Before you invest in your seed potatoes, it is worth checking out the pros and cons of your [favourite varieties](#) on the database of the [Potato Council website](#). It will give you all the full profile including a disease resistance score of individual varieties on a 1 – 9 basis.

There are some surprises. The most famous potato of all time, the [King Edward](#) – so named to commemorate the coronation of King Edward VII in 1902 – has a score of 3 for late foliage blight and 4 for tubers. In contrast, the organic [Sarpo Mira](#) which was bred for disease resistance and was launched a century later in 2002, has a score of 7 for late foliage blight and 9 for tubers.



While your hands are tied waiting for the weather, the idea of a polytunnel or greenhouse is always particularly alluring. There is much to be said for having an undercover growing space which, along with a heated propagator, [heat pad](#) or [hot bench](#) as it will lift you into a whole new league of growing, up there with the pros.

You could, for example, have new potatoes in April, rather than May or June grown in barrels or sacks. Recommended for this is the [Scottish potato 'Swift'](#). It was bred for speed and will clip a week off the growing time and be ready in a mere seven.

I was brought up short when I came across an inspiring new book this week [Vegetables](#)

of the Polytunnel and Greenhouse by Klaus Laitenberger. Formerly the Head Gardener at the Organic Centre at Rossinver, Co. Leitrim he has been growing vegetables organically for 20 years in the UK and Ireland. He lays out a successional growing programme, month-by-month, vegetable-by-vegetable which will almost double the productivity of the plot and really keep you in vegetables all year round.

Just take the chapter on March. On the heated bench you start to raise the tender plants – tomatoes, chillies, peppers, aubergines, courgettes, cucumbers, squash, pumpkins, celery, celeriac and basil.

In the modular trays in the unheated greenhouse or polytunnel, for planting outside later, you can get going with Brussels sprouts, early cabbage, calabrese, celeriac, kohlrabi, leeks, lettuce, onions and scallions – all from seed.

There will be a whole lot of seedlings, sown in January, which will now ready to be planted into the beds. Also there is a raft of highly unusual tender vegetables that seem to thrive in a polytunnel and might be fun to grow. Amongst others there is the pepino or melon pear, from the Andes, which is a delicacy eaten raw. The yakon, or Peruvian ground apple, is an Inca plant related to the dahlia with edible tubers that can be eaten raw or cooked like a potato.

But back to the plot in chilly UK. Carry on as last month, clearing away tired Brussels sprouts and winter greens. Bury the stumps in the compost heap as they may carry disease. Dig in overwintering green manures ready for new planting. Double check last year's potato patch and clear any 'volunteers' (potatoes left from last year). Top dress beds with compost, manure or lime as necessary. Warm the soil with cloches or polythene. Sharpen tools, order seeds and wash your flower pots. Get everything ready in other words for a bonanza of sowing.

The green light comes on when the grass begins to grow.

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nahema

29 February 2012 3:25PM

Thanks ,great post. The only thing is that Sarpo Mira tastes ,well ,not horrible but not great either and King Edwards are a fantastic potato .Worth the risk I think.I understand that some of the more recent Sarpo varieties are much better tasting and

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would welcome anyone's experience of growing and flavour. I am trying Bonnenotte de Noirmoutier this year but i have room for more!



nahema

29 February 2012 3:28PM

Sorry, that should be Bonnote de Noirmoutier!

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StripSideMaddie

29 February 2012 5:01PM

After last years success with first earlies I've opted again for Red Duke Of York, and Maris Bard.

Have also taken Mr Dowdings advice and sown 4 onion seeds to a module and will grow them on almost Shallot style this year (Red Baron).

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StripSideMaddie

29 February 2012 5:05PM

Response to [nahema, 29 February 2012 3:25PM](#)

Re. potato varieties - that's the ebb and flow of growing your own. Flavour and texture vs. disease resistance. You can't seem to have both. I'd take flavour any day.

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allanjenkins

29 February 2012 6:15PM

This year for the first time we are not intending (at this stage) to grow potatoes as they sprawl so greedily over our small plot. Worried somehow that means it won't be a proper allotment?

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ams180457

29 February 2012 10:52PM

Allan, you don't have to go without potatoes to save space. For years I've grown them successfully in an old black plastic compost bin without the lid. Layer soil, spuds, manure, spuds, compost, spuds till you reach the top and you'll have a bumper crop. You can "bandicoot" if you want: lift the bin and sneak some out from the bottom. Old car tyres laid on top of one another work the same way. This year I'll have three bins and three varieties.

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allanjenkins

1 March 2012 8:49AM

wanted to share this beautiful inspirational film series, this about sharing, growing, beekeeping
http://thisismadebyhand.com/film/the_beekeeper

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**Lincsbreadmaker**

2 March 2012 9:55AM

"Bury the stumps in the compost heap as they may carry disease. "

Burn the hard stems and roots. Uncompostable within a reasonable timeframe and increases risk of clubfoot if composted. So dry them for a month or so and then on the bonfire.

King Edwards are the greatest-ever potato in my view. Full of flavour and great mashed, roasted or chipped. Not had any blight trouble (fingers crossed as ever and blight spray ready though) with Edwards.

Maris Bard for reliable earlies with some flavour. Swift are fast-growing but not much taste.

And pink fir apple as an easy to grow waxy maincrop to give you salad-style potatoes all winter. Great put in to stews as they keep their shape well. Don't chit pink firs as they come up just as fast and don't sprout in trays in my experience.

Plant main-crop tates first week April to be ready end August. Then cut the tops off and leave in the ground two weeks to fasten the skins (Edwards likewise).

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