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OBSERVER ORGANIC ALLOTMENT BLOG



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

The gardening tasks for the month ahead

Caroline Foley

guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 1 May 2012 18.03 BST



Time to think of sowing and seedlings. All images Allan Jenkins

Conscientious allotmenters set up a near assembly line this month as they sow, or prick out, or pot on, harden off and transplant the multitude of different vegetables one after the other. It is monotonous work but the rewards for being ahead of the game from the start of the year are the earliest delicacies now – home grown asparagus, young broad beans cooked in the pod, the unrepeatably first peas of spring and salads.



While May is the latest month for planting potatoes and onion sets (also sweet peas) for a summer or autumn harvest, there is still plenty of time for almost anything else

under cover. If you have no liking or time for greenhouse work, you can now buy ready-to-go plantlets by mail order or in the garden centres, or start to sow outside in situ.



To maximize your success growing seed outside, warm the soil with polythene aiming for a comfortable 15C/60F. Start with the hardier types of vegetables, the cool weather crops. These include kale, swedes, leeks, winter cabbage, perennial and sprouting broccoli, peas, broad beans, turnips and parsnips.



Statistically, there is still a small chance of frost – but only 0.5 days in Edinburgh and 0.2 in London. Towards the end of the month you can move onto sowing more tender subjects under cloches outside - French and runner beans, sweetcorn, courgettes and other squashes. By the time the seeds emerge, the last dangers of frost are long gone.



Start off a cycle of successional crops - salad leaves, oriental saladini, baby finger carrots and golf ball-sized beetroot. Sow a scattering every few weeks for a non-stop supply through the growing season.

Perennial vegetables - perpetual spinach, rhubarb, Jerusalem and globe artichokes and cardoons, are worth growing as they need little attention and certainly earn their keep. Rhubarb, with its untidy habit and big floppy leaves is the ideal plant for the allotment plot where it has room to spread. Buy a crown or two or see if a neighbour is splitting one up and can give you a piece of root.



Although the harvest is usually quite small, grow globe artichokes and particularly cardoons for their stately appearance, their height and their generous silvery leaves.

When choosing varieties I always recommend RHS Award of Garden Merit (AGM) winners as a safe bet for high performance. However, not all vegetables have been tested by the RHS (yet) and they are inclined to stay with mainstream types.



Apart from growing the basics, it is also fun to experiment and grow conversation pieces that are not generally available in the shops – e.g. white and yellow beetroot, purple carrots, yellow courgettes or blue sweetcorn.



Vegetable gardeners are becoming more adventurous and seed merchants report an increase in popularity of the more unusual vegetables like the yard long bean and vegetable spaghetti.



Another idea that is coming across in a big way is growing flowers both for eating and for pest control. Only the fiercest of allotment managers restrict the growing of flowers these days, I am pleased to say.



Ornamental flowers and vegetables are perfect partners. Dark green brassicas particularly set off flowers off to perfection, even the brightest ones. Inspired by Joy Larkcom in her book *Creative Vegetable Gardening*, I plan this year to try mixing annual flowers with carrot and parsnip seed. Annuals with fine leaves like flax, love-in-the-mist, cornflower or scabious are recommended as they won't shade the carrots too

much. Mix flower and carrot seed together at around 50:50 ratio. Through summer you will just see the flowers but the camouflaged carrots or parsnips will be growing quietly amongst them unnoticed by the carrot fly.

It's an ideal arrangement as I am sure that I will enjoy noticing the flowers and and so will the bees.

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