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## OBSERVER ORGANIC ALLOTMENT BLOG



# Things to do in April

Your expert guide to essential gardening tasks for April. By allotment guru Caroline Foley



Sweetcorn can be planted at the end of April. Photograph: Howard Sooley

With the vagaries of the weather lately, writes [Caroline Foley](#), I would suggest getting in some good crop protection. These are a gift for the organic gardeners as they keep out the majority of pests, allow water through, air to circulate and they keep plants warm - all this, without you having to lift a finger. Many professionals grow their crops under them from start to finish.

Good innovations this year include: double thickness fleece that shouldn't tear. Now it comes in a discreet and tasteful pea green.

<http://www.haxnicks.co.uk/direct/details.asp?ProductID=54>

Ultra fine meshes that will keep out flying pests and prevent them from laying their eggs on your crops. They will also take the edge off wind and cold. If you bury the edges, they should deter slugs and snails.

<http://www.haxnicks.co.uk/direct/details.asp?ProductID=55>.

'Aerated polythene' blankets with holes cut the right size for bees to circulate comfortably. This is ideal for an early crop of strawberries.

[http://www.harrodhorticultural.com/HarrodsSite/product/Garden%20Netting\\_Animal%20Protection%20Netting/GDN-821.htm](http://www.harrodhorticultural.com/HarrodsSite/product/Garden%20Netting_Animal%20Protection%20Netting/GDN-821.htm).

It is also excellent for your tender crops - tomatoes, peppers, chillis, sweetcorn, aubergines, marrows, pumpkins, squash and courgettes. These are plants that originated in Ecuador, Peru or Mexico, and can't take the smallest whiff of frost.

If you want to grow these from seed, you will need to get weeding this month, or next if you live in the north. Choose outdoor varieties. Start them off at home and they can go out in the garden in May or June when the weather is (fingers crossed) guaranteed to be warm. Put them in a sheltered sunny spot. For the best crops, cover them with

fleece, even in summer. Given plenty of water, food and sun, they will grow fast and be highly productive.

Sow tomato seeds about mid-April.

<http://www.rhs.org.uk/vegetables/crops/tomatoVideo.asp>. They need a bit of heat to germinate 22C/72F. The best home technique is to fill small pots with seed compost. Water well, scatter the seed and cover thinly with vermiculite. When two sets of 'true' leaves appear above the cotyledons (the primary leaves) they can be potted on. Keep some water at room temperature and water them well ahead of time. Plant them slightly deeper than before so that the cotyledons are just sitting on the surface. Keep them on a warm windowsill and turn them every day.

Sweet corn seed can go in towards the end of April. Push the two seeds into each pot of compost and thin out the weaker. Start them off 16C/61F.

<http://www.sweetcornrowingtips.com/>. Plan to plant them in a block later. This is the best arrangement for them as they are wind pollinated.



Thinning seedlings. Photograph: Howard Sooley

The cucurbits - marrows, pumpkins, courgettes, cucumbers and summer and winter squash - can be sown indoors in this month. Check the packets for the precise temperatures. Sow them in pots, on edge rather than upright, two at a time and thin to the strongest. <http://www.kew.org/plants/cucurbits/cultivation.html>.

Winter squashes are fun to grow and they have a poetic ugliness which is very endearing. My favourite is the Turk's Turban. For summer the buttercup coloured Patty Pan <http://www.twenga.co.uk/dir-Garden-DIY,Seeds-and-bulbs,Pattypan-squash-seeds>

is delicious and looks like a little flying saucer with a scalloped edge.

[http://www.organiccatalog.com/catalog/product\\_info.php?products\\_id=295](http://www.organiccatalog.com/catalog/product_info.php?products_id=295)

If you are aiming for the pumpkin prize

<http://www.backyardgardener.com/pumpkin.html> try 'Atlantic Giant' - the world's record breaking exhibition pumpkin <http://www.howarddill.com/> weighing in at 1,689lb (766 kilos).

[http://www.merebrow.com/home/mbgp/how\\_to\\_grow.html](http://www.merebrow.com/home/mbgp/how_to_grow.html)

Chillis and peppers are sown under glass at 20C/78F. They aren't the easiest as they can be slow to germinate and need to be kept constantly moist.

Runner and French beans can be sown in root trainers or, if you are not in a hurry to get the earliest crops, sow them in situ in May or early June.

Alternatively, you can save yourself a lot of bother by purchasing a ready made selection of plug plants - courgettes, peppers, chillis, tomatoes, runner and French beans ready to plant out. [http://www.kingsplants.co.uk/product\\_info.asp?prdID=7816](http://www.kingsplants.co.uk/product_info.asp?prdID=7816)



Ravishing radishes. Photograph: Howard Sooley

Outside (under that fleece) make successional sowings of beetroot, chard, radishes, New Zealand spinach, cut-and-come-again-mixes, <http://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profiles0701/salads.asp> salad onions, turnips and peas. By sowing little and often you can have a non-stop supply of fresh young delicacies. For fun, try combining two types of radish or make your own salad mixes.

The best way to support peas is to stick your shrub prunings into the ground. Hazel sticks or buddleia prunings make good pea sticks. Put in some sweet peas with them. [http://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profiles1100/sweet\\_peas.asp](http://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profiles1100/sweet_peas.asp)

Be ready to earth up your early potatoes to protect them against frost. <http://www.videojug.com/film/how-to-earth-up-potatoes>

If the ridges get too high, you can use straw to cover them. Maincrop potatoes need to be planted this month to give them time to make a really good crop in autumn.

Plant lavender and rosemary. Sow dill, fennel, hyssop, marjoram, rue and thyme and parsley.

Grow some edible flowers to draw in useful predators and lift your heart. Violets, marigolds and nasturtiums <http://herb-gardens.suite101.com/article.cfm/nasturtiums> set off vegetables nicely.

Feed any plants that look weary after winter. A spray of liquid seaweed is a great tonic.

Sunflowers are jolly and provide loads of nectar and seeds for wildlife.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/gardening/plants/plantprofile\\_sunflower.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/gardening/plants/plantprofile_sunflower.shtml)

Feed the birds, but don't give them whole peanuts in spring as the chicks can choke on them.

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/advice/helpingbirds/feeding/index.asp>

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**Vesca**

2 April 2008 4:30PM

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No, sorry, I refuse to sow anything under fleece. Or polythene for that matter. It looks awful.

[Report](#)[Share](#)**Fernverrow**

4 April 2008 7:34AM

I agree about the fleece, not pretty, but it does help to protect the crops from frosts, with this rather later start in the spring it is usefull. I never use it, not because of the unsightlyness of it, but because I would need so much on my scale, and it does tend to be rather windy here, and I am sure that it would end up in my newly laid hedge!

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