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OBSERVER ORGANIC ALLOTMENT BLOG



Things to do in February

The planting and the plotting for the month ahead. By allotment expert Caroline Foley



Time to cadge some rhubarb roots from friends or neighbours

February is the calm before the storm, says our gardening guru [Caroline Foley](#). No-panic jobs include scrubbing, honing and oiling your tools, dreaming up this year's plot plan and ordering seeds and plants. If you are going to lime the soil for your root and brassica crops, this needs to be done six weeks ahead of sowing. If you plan to fertilize the soil with hoof and horn, this should be done two weeks before sowing as it works on slow-release.

Early peas ('e.g. Kelvenden Wonder' or 'Early Onward') and broad beans (eg 'Witkiem Manita' or 'Express') can be sown outside in mid-February under cloches or in the cold greenhouse. Broad beans eaten really young in the pod like mangetout are a treat for the home grower alone.

This month make plans for the perennial vegetables that can be propagated by root division. Jerusalem and Chinese artichokes are harvested in February or March and a few of the best are replanted for the next year's crop. Five year old rhubarb is dug up and the roots are divided to give the plant a new lease of life. You may be able to cadge some root divisions from friends or neighbours.

http://www.gardenaction.co.uk/fruit_veg_diary/fruit_veg_mini_project_september_1aa_rhubarb.asp. Otherwise you can order one year old crowns now from the seed merchants.

I was surprised to find that there 112 cultivars of rhubarb in the National Collection at RHS Wisley. There is the choice between between green, pink or red and in size. 'Ace of Hearts' grows to 1m/3ft whereas the old favourite 'Victoria' is a substantial 1.5m/5ft. <http://www.rhubarbinfo.com/rhubarb-varieties.html>. Otherwise the differences seem small.

Not so, when it comes to asparagus. The experts agree that the one year old F1 male hybrids give by far the best and most reliable results. The RHS has given the Award of Garden Merit to 'Backlim', 'Gijnlim,' and 'Lucullus'. Asparagus produces for more twenty years and is not known to be the 'king of vegetables' without reason. Louis XIV had green houses specially built so that he could eat it all year, while Madame de Pompadour took her share of the crops as an aphrodisiac.

Site asparagus in a sunny, sheltered spot where it has not been previously grown. Dig down one spit and meticulously remove all traces of perennial weeds to save trouble later. Asparagus will grow almost anywhere except in acid clay or sodden ground. If you need to lighten your soil up, mix in grit, leaf mould or manure, or raise the bed. Aim for a neutral pH of 7. If it is too acid add lime, if too alkaline add manure.

When the crowns arrive, make ridges in the prepared pit and straddle the roots over them. The crowns should end up about 15cm/6ins below ground. Plant them about 45cm/18ins apart in staggered rows. Don't cut them in the first season. Your patience will be rewarded from 2010 to 2030.

Jerusalem artichokes are happy in any soil, sun or shade. Make sure you have room for them because they will shoot up to a staggering 3m/10 ft in a single season.

They can be planted now 10 - 15cm, 4 - 6ins, deep and about 30cm/1ft apart. Earth up the stems when they are about 30cm/1ft tall. If you are growing them as produce, cut them down to about 1.80m/6ft in midsummer and remove the flower buds so the plants will concentrate on the tubers. For each root you plant you will get around 4lb of 'chokes'. Cut them right back to 10cm/4ins when the leaves die back in autumn. Lay the tops over the patch for winter protection. Dig up them up you want them as they don't store well. Make sure to get them all out before the following spring as they can take over if left in the soil producing smaller roots each year. Keep a few of the best ones for planting out. A recommended variety is 'Fuseau'.

Though there are striking similarities in the growing pattern and taste, the Chinese artichoke is unrelated to the Jerusalem one. Coming from the mint family (Lamiaceae), it only grows to 45cm/18ins and produces pink spiky flowers - though these are rarely seen in the U.K. It has a nutty artichoke taste and the crisp consistency of a water chestnut. The tubers are highly prized in China and Japan for their resemblance to white jade when first dug up. Dead easy to grow, they can be sprouted in trays of compost to get ahead - though this is not necessary - and planted out in March or April in well drained soil, sun or semi-shade. They will ready to harvest from October onwards.

But neither of these pseudo artichokes can compare with the real thing - the globe artichoke. This too can be grown from root divisions but not until April when the frosts are over. Contrary to popular belief, the name 'artichoke' doesn't come from it having ticklish hairs that will choke you at its 'art', but from the old Spanish name 'alcarchofa'.

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