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OBSERVER ORGANIC ALLOTMENT BLOG



Things to do in March

Allotment expert Caroline Foley's guide to gardening tasks for the month ahead

It is very nearly spring and one of the busiest months for sowing, so here is our allotment expert [Caroline Foley's](#) guide to what to do when this month



In March you can start to sow your seed and plan a sowing programme for the weeks ahead. Set yourself up with a few plastic water bottles, a cold frame or a little polytunnel and you are ready to go. Summer cabbage for June crops can be sown outside in March under fleece. Even earlier crops can be started off in a propagator set at 16C/61F. Cabbages like fertile well-drained soil and an open situation. They need continuous water through summer. They are easy to grow. Usually the only problem with them is that they are a sitting target for slugs and snails.

I must tell you about an exciting discovery. It is the first method that I've come across to deal with slugs and snails that is not utterly repulsive. A friend found a length of copper piping in a skip. He bent it to enclose the cabbage patch and not a single slug and snail crossed the boundary throughout the entire growing season. It hardly needs saying that you need to check that there are none inside the enclosure before you start, also that there are no overhanging leaves that make a handy bridge as slugs and snails are surprisingly athletic. Unlike the expensive copper tape sold in garden centres to keep them off your hostas, I gather that you can buy copper piping quite cheaply from plumbers' merchants with the added advantage that it will last for years.

Recommended varieties of summer cabbage are the crisp pointed types with a solid heart - 'Hispi' F1, 'Greyhound' F1. 'First of June' F1 an early round mid-green cabbage is another good bet. All three have the RHS Award of Garden Merit (AGM).

http://www.buckingham-nurseries.co.uk/acatalog/pics_900006.html

Early carrots can be sown outside under cloches when the soil temperature has reached 7C/46F. A soil thermometer is a useful buy if you want to get early and late crops. Take

a tip from the show bench to get straight roots. Make funnel shaped holes with an iron bar. Fill the holes economically with the perfect compost for the crop - a fertile, sandy mix for carrots - before sowing the seed.



Carrots are still the UK's most popular vegetable. They have a fascinating history. The wild carrot, the bitter white rooted Queen's Lace of our hedgerows, was cultivated by the ancient Egyptians and depicted in purple, white, yellow, red and green. Yellow and purple carrots were to become widely cultivated in Europe. The familiar orange carrot was a brilliant piece of breeding by 16th century Dutch horticulturists to celebrate the House of Orange. After years of orange only, rainbow coloured carrots are back.

<http://www.carrotmuseum.co.uk/today.html>

Spinach beet, or Swiss chard, is not grown commercially as it has a short shelf life. Whereas true spinach has a delicate constitution, is inclined to suffer from mildew and be generally temperamental, spinach beet is reliable and easy to grow. It is ideal for the organic gardener. It makes good winter greens and is excellent for cut-and-come-again salad crops when young and tender.

An extra bonus is its sheer good looks. It comes from the glamorous side of the beet family. Red stemmed types are practically florescent when backlit.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/gardening/basics/techniques/growfruitandveg_growingspinachchardandbeet2.shtml

Though there is the choice of smooth or crinkly, white, crimson, yellow or purple stems and green red or rainbow coloured leaves, the white stemmed ones with crumpled leaves are thought to be the tastiest. Seeds come in clusters. Soak them overnight and sow thinly in March or April 20cm/8 inches apart outside for summer and autumn croppings. A second sowing in mid summer will give you crops through winter.

<http://www.gardenguides.com/how-to/tipstechniques/vegetables/swiss.asp>

Colourful varieties: 'Bright lights'(a complete rainbow) 'Rhubarb Chard' (scarlet ribs and puckered purple leaves), 'Fordhook Chard' (white ribs, green leaves and very tasty).

Peas are believed to be the oldest cultivated vegetables in the world. They were found in the ruins of Troy. To get decent sized servings however, be prepared to grow quite a few plants. There are peas for drying, petits pois, garden peas, mangetout and sugarsnap types. The leafless peas offer no advantage for us as home gardeners as they were developed for mechanical harvesting.

The round seeded varieties are the best sort for March sowing and will be ready for harvesting in May or June. They like fertile, light, moisture retentive soil, a good root run and plenty of moisture throughout their growing season. Make a little gully between rows to collect water. When sowing watch out for mice as they will remove the seeds without trace almost before you've turned your back . I like to sow peas in

pieces of plastic guttering so they can be slid out into a prepared trench with minimum disturbance. Putting them out as little plants rather than seed seems to make them less attractive to mice and birds.

Varieties: 'Kelvenden Wonder' an old English favourite, 'Early Onward' sweet tasting, prolific pea. <http://www.unwins.co.uk/pea-seeds-cid38.html>

Do try the Asparagus pea. It doesn't do much but is so pretty in flower and no trouble to grow.

Broad beans are another ancient vegetable. They were known to Neolithic man and were mentioned in the Bible. They were a staple food for rich and poor before the arrival of the potato. The broad bean's near cousin, the field bean, was grown as horse food hence the expression 'full of beans'. The succulent 'Windsors', so known as they were first grown at Windsor Castle by Dutch gardeners, can be sown this month. Soak the seeds overnight and sow 5cm/2inches deep and 20 cm/8 inches apart. Traditionally they are grown in a staggered double row. If you need to support them, run stakes along the row and tie them at the tops. Remove any suckers as they appear so you are left with a single stem. When there are four clusters of flowers at the top, cut them off. This will encourage the pods to form and discourage the black bean aphids. <http://www.garden-centre.org/Bean%20broad.htm>

Early yielding varieties are 'Witkiem Manita' and 'Witkiem Major'. [http://www.suttons.co.uk/pd_194902_Bean_\(Broad\)_Witkiem_Manita_Seeds.htm](http://www.suttons.co.uk/pd_194902_Bean_(Broad)_Witkiem_Manita_Seeds.htm)

'Red Epicure' has red flowers and interesting reddish beans <http://www.unwins.co.uk/broad-bean-red-epicure-seeds-pid1128.html>.

Salsify is a pretty plant, worthy of the ornamental garden. The white roots grow to 23cm/9ins and have a whiff of the sea about them, tasting faintly of oysters hence its common name 'the oyster plant'. Like scorzonera, http://blogs.mtengine.com/cally/2006/10/vegetable_of_the_week_scorzone.html

which is known as the 'black serpent' due to its skin colour and shape - these are gourmet roots that you cannot buy - always a good reason to grow them in my view. <http://www.rhs.org.uk/WhatsOn/Gardens/harlowcarr/harlowcarrkitchenote14.htm>

<http://www.allotment.org.uk/greenhouse/seeds/salsify.php>

Good varieties:

Salsify - 'Mammouth Sandwich Island' (GW). Scorzonera : 'Russian Giant'.



Globe onions can be started off now. For speed and efficiency, buy sets. They will be guaranteed disease free and the heat treated ones will be bolt resistant. Space 15cm/6ins apart for average onions . Onions are adaptable and you can control their size by the spacing. If you want big onions space them further apart. If you want to grow from seed, which gives you more choice, sow them indoors at 10 - 16C/50 - 61F.

The first signs of life you will see is a crook shaped shoot that will form a loop. Don't try to free it. Its purpose is to draw nourishment up from the seed and it will release itself when it is ready.

'Centurion' F1 (AGM) is a straw coloured, globe shaped onion. It's early maturing, a heavy cropper and stores well. 'Turbo' has the same attributes and is also slow to bolt.

<http://www.bakker.co.uk/Catalog/Productdetail.aspx?N=904997&productid=15224&R=15224-011>

Get going on saladini and cut-and-come-again oriental vegetables. There are so many interesting assortments that it's a shame not to try out lots of different sorts. Sow a few seeds every two to three weeks. I grow these in a container of proprietary compost so that I can be certain that amongst the many unfamiliar leaves no weeds will go unnoticed into the salad bowl.

http://www.organiccatalog.com/catalog/index.php?cPath=21_225

The leek is a five star allotment plant. It is particularly appreciated in the old mining towns of the north west of England where traditionally no self-respecting pub or working men's club would be without a pot leek competition. Leeks are easy to grow just so long as you get the soil right. It needs to be fertile, well drained, light, manured the autumn before, and on the alkaline side. Put on some lime if your soil less than neutral pH7.

March is the time to sow the maincrop varieties. They need a minimum temperature of 7C/46F.

I like to sow leeks in root trainers - loo rolls serve well. When you transplant them you can plant slightly deeper than before thereby blanching them without further effort. Make a big hole for them with a dibber, or try the carrot trick by making an upside down cornet shape with an iron bar. Drop them in still in their biodegradable cardboard tubes. The old idea of trimming the roots is no longer recommended.

<http://www.realseeds.co.uk/leeks.html>

Gardeners have to think ahead. Brussels sprouts for Christmas are sown now under cloches mounted on tiles to let in air. Keep them in the dark until they germinate. Then take the cloche off in the day and put it on again at night. When big enough to handle, thin out to 15cm/6ins apart. Late sprouts for the New Year can be sown in April without the weather worries. 'Peter Gynt' dwarf, and 'Diablo' (AGM) are clean round sprouts and came out top in trials.

It is a good idea to have a nursery bed for slow growing vegetables like sprouts that don't mind being moved. It saves them taking up space when they are still tiny. You can move them over when it suits you to their permanent positions.

Get beds ready for sowing and planting. Warm the soil and make stale seed beds by covering them with clear plastic. The warmth and light will encourage any lurking weed seed to germinate. Before you are ready to sow in a couple of weeks you can hook them out and give your plants a head start.

Don't forget your potatoes. Dig in well rotted manure or compost. Don't rush and plant them in cold soil. If you are in a warm microclimate they can go in mid-March. Otherwise it is safer to wait until April. Easter is the traditional time. Plant in trenches or individual holes or grow them in a barrel. Ist earlies about 30cm/1ft apart, 45 cm/18 inches between rows. Give second earlies about 50% more space.

At last spring is around the corner.

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Wadders

4 March 2008 8:15PM

Wonderful inspiration. What a great time of year - active on the plot again. We are still reaping the rewards of some winter forward planning, with leeks, kale and purple sprouting, and spring greens just around the corner.

A question - how does Swiss Chard taste compared to spinach? We grew spinach beet last year, but found the taste rather strong.

I would love to see an expert blog entry on how to fill the "hungry gap". My personal goal is to have something to eat from the plot every week of the year, and I fear a "pause" coming on. What is the advice of other contributors?

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soundsofOregon

4 March 2008 9:56PM

A very significant question, Wadders, and one which is emerging as a foundational concern of the locavore movement in maritime temperate climates such as ours - those of us who are exploring what is to feed ourselves fresh food, locally, year-round. Inexperienced hands tend to assume that mid-winter is the hungriest time of the year when, in fact, that is when food is at its most abundant - what with a great cornucopia of over-wintering, freshly-harvested crops that actually taste better in the harsh winter weather, readily harvestable from the garden, and then, in cold storage or our pantry, all the food we have put up in the summer and autumn - potatoes, garlic, onions, shallots, winter squash and the fresh storage fruit and preserved fruit and veggies, dried or canned, and more. The nuts, the cheese...Winter is for putting on a pelt.

In late spring things look very different. Our stored garlic has turned, our potatoes and onions are sprouting and, in the garden, the mainstay winter food crops, the Brassicas (cabbage, cauliflower, B. sprouts, kale, collards) and, where we kept them in the ground, beets and carrots, have turned and run to flower. The cows are calving and milk supply is down. Everywhere we turn, the availability of fresh food is falling off, sometimes precipitously it feels, while we are some way from the spring replacements being mature enough to fill our bellies.

I've just stepped in from the garden on a beautiful sunsplashed spring day for luncheon and I must return now to make hay while the sun shines, but let me give your question some thought as I prune the fruit trees about me and prepare ground for new and fruity friends who will be arriving in the

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next few days.

The late-spring, early-summer story is rich and represents one of the more exciting horticultural frontiers available to us. Such potential for adventurous exploration there. We are learning how to fill that hunger gap. Such fun to be had.

Right ho, back the sunshine.



Wadders

5 March 2008 8:28PM

Thanks for that soundsofOregon ... a reminder not to eat everything we grow in the summer and autumn. But a cow to milk ... I think you must have a bigger plot than my four rods in SW London.

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soundsofOregon

7 March 2008 4:39PM

You might be right on the space front, Wadders. I'm not so much an allotment gardener as an encroachment gardener - constantly squatting new territory not part of the original contract. Indeed, it is precisely this activity which explains my delay in getting back to you these past few days. Sorry about that.

I don't know if you have ever caught any of those boorish American 'frat-house' movies which generally involve much fist-pumping in the air, whoopin' n' hollerin' and jumping-around-all-silly n' the like, but that was me this earlier this week when I stumbled, for the very first time, into the sudden, gobsmacking realization that it is possible to eat fresh, local fruit year round. I've been spending the past few weeks getting to grips with the fruit scene hereabouts - hanging with ol' timers in the woods, asking many questions, and ploughing through web-based catalogs and databases - the national pear germplasm repository is just down the road from me. Note the late-ripening pear section:

<http://www.ars.usda.gov/Main/docs.htm?docid=11372>

The key to year-round fruit eating? Innanutshell, the right storage apple and pear varieties. This realization has me all aflutter, to put it mildly. (If I'm committed to a political platform it will involve feeding kids fresh local veggies and fresh local fruit, year round.) And so I have been digging holes as though there is no tomorrow. To stick trees into. This is involving encroachment because trees are big and I am interested in lots of them. As it now stands, I have more trees than holes and the trend only deepens. Co-opting the gardens of others may be the only way to go.

Tomorrow I am off to the major fruit geek event in our bioregion. The Home Orchard Society's annual scion wood swap. Hundreds of varieties available to propagate, for free. These people are complete eccentrics when it comes to tree fruit. I have my wish list in hand, and an old timer will be bringing me special material. (Also picking up seed for a storage tomato. One that was grown last summer but which is being

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eaten, fresh, tasty, right now. Interesting.)

http://www.homeorchardsociety.org/scion_exchange/

This does, of course, play directly into the late spring diet thang, so I do feel that I have not been ignoring you but, rather, doing essential, tangential R&D. Simply put, what holds for us here in Oregon holds for you in the UK, too. Though there is a fascinating UK varietal story beyond our ken. Right, rains are due back tomorrow, and I have more digging encroachment to do. Pip, pip, as they say.

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