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**OBSERVER  
ORGANIC ALLOTMENT  
BLOG**

## Things to do in May

What need to be done and when this month. By allotment expert  
Caroline Foley



Now is a good time to get beans in, maybe growing up corn as companion planting

In May everything is growing and breeding apace, say our gardening guru [Caroline Foley](#). Keep a hoe to hand to chase after the weeds and watch out for pests. Vigilance pays off at this time of year. By the end of the month you are getting into the second wave of planting - all those lovely tender vegetables that can only go in when the frosts are over. Now you can sow [French and runner beans](#) and [sweet corn](#) either undercover or outside.

Even though there can be frost, by the time the seeds emerge, any danger of it should be past. If you sow seed both indoors and out you will get early and later crops.

Another idea is to grow French beans up sweet corn to produce a double crop in a small space. Let the sweet corn grow to about 90cm (3ft), before planting a small bean next to it. If you then add a courgette plant at the bottom, its leaves will shade out weeds and keep the soil cool and moist in summer. The beans fix nitrogen into the soil to fertilize both sweet corn and the squash. This is a classic piece of companion planting known as the 'three sisters' - a triad of good neighbours helping each other. Sunflowers make good bean supports too



Flowers can draw in the insects that control pests

Another aspect of companion planting is about the chemistry between plants. It is a good idea to grow flowers amongst the vegetables, not only for pleasure but for practical reasons. They draw in the insects that will control the pests.



And nasturtiums add colour and bite to salads

Quite a trend, emerged from the Guerrilla Gardens of New York, is the 'edible landscape'. Why not make everything on the plot edible including the flowers? Nasturtiums, marigolds, chives, garlic, petunias, pansies, violets, stocks and lavender can all be eaten.



Quick-growing Orientals can fill space in slow-growing brassica beds

Most winter brassicas like sprouts and broccoli take months to reach their full size so you can plant between them (intercrop) with quick growers to make the most use of the space. This is particularly useful where a few beds have been brought into top production while others are still being worked on. Salad leaves, cut-and-come-again Orientals or young turnips will produce a crop from seed before the brassicas need to fill the space. Radishes are ready in four weeks, carrots can be eaten at any stage.

Birds love our greens as much as we do, and some (most notably pigeons) will pluck the young plants right out of the ground almost before you turn your back. Birds take no time to work out that bird scarers are a foolish human invention unworthy of their attention. The only way to keep birds off brassicas effectively is to net the crops. Make a little tent of mesh to protect them and secure it firmly at the bottom to ensure that the birds don't get tangled up in it.

The cabbage root fly will be out and about on the look out for fresh cabbages. They lay their eggs by the stalk so that the larvae are perfectly placed for a good feed when they hatch out. You can prevent them from doing this by putting on brassica collars, either bought or (just as good) home made out of small pieces (15cm/4ins square) of roof felt. The carrot fly larvae will be hatching out around now into destructive little maggots that burrow into carrots and parsley. Techniques to discourage them are to confuse their sense of smell (apparently they can sniff a carrot from a mile away) by planting garlic nearby, also disturbing the carrots as little as possible so as not to release the smell. Experts say that, if you sow carrots now (rather than in spring) and harvest them before late summer, you will neatly dodge both the first and second generations of carrot fly. However, without doubt, the simplest method is to erect a low barrier of fleece or clear polythene around the crop almost as soon as you have sown it. The adults travel in straight lines flying low, so this simple precaution will defeat them completely with little effort on your part.

When broad beans flower, pinch out the delectable young tips. This will discourage the blackfly. Unlike runners and French beans, broad beans don't cling well and need a little propping up when heavy with pods. Incidentally, really young broad beans are quite delicious eaten complete with shell like mangetout.

Don't despair if there are a few more creepy crawlies around than you would wish. It is all part of nature's sweet pattern. Bring in the birds with bird feeders, water and nectar plants to attract insects, and they will demolish invertebrates in truly staggering quantities. A pair of adult blue tits need 10,000 caterpillars for each brood and thrushes need a thousand snails to fledge each batch of young.



You can plant out squashes and courgettes by the end of the month in the south or early June in the north

By the end of the month, or early June in the north, you can plant out squashes,

marrows, courgettes as well as outdoor cucumbers and melons. If you don't have a lot or choose ones with large fruits, they can all be grown up supports to save space. The hefty ones can also be grown in coils. To achieve a neat coil you need to pin it down with hairpins or wire practically every day once the plant gets going. If you've got plenty of room you can let them ramble as ground cover. Marrows and squashes are good plants to grow through black polythene or hefty cardboard if you are dealing with a bad weed problem by blacking out the light. They will quickly cover the ground and their big leaves, fruits and flowers are very decorative.

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