theguardian

OBSERVER ORGANICALLOTMENT BLOG

Things to do in April

The expert's guide to gardening this month

Make the most of the purple sprouting season

Once the grass starts to grow, you can be pretty confident that the temperature will be around 5°C (41°F) and it will be warm enough to sow your hardy vegetables outside. These include the slow growers that potter on gently all summer but are a welcome sight when they mature in the 'Hungry Gap' of winter.

Sprouting broccoli takes the best part of a year to reach maturity while occupying space but it is great for the allotment where there is plenty of room. You don't need many plants as you can keep picking small delectable florets over many weeks in January and February. 'Claret' and 'Bordeaux' are good varieties.

April is the month to sow winter cabbage (e.g 'January King') and Brussels sprouts (e.g. 'Braveheart') for Christmas and the New Year. Tuck them away out of sight ,taking precautions against slugs and put collars round the young plants or plant them through a mulching sheet to protect them from the cabbage root fly.

For more immediate eating, get going on the cut-and-come-again salad leaves. If you sow a few seeds every two or three weeks, you can have gourmet fresh salads throughout summer. There are many mixes to try, varying from 'Baby Leaf' to 'Italian' 'Oriental' or 'French'. Otherwise you could just purchase a few packets of individual seeds of mizuna and mibuna greens, different types of lettuce, endive, rocket, radicchio, red orach, radish, mustard or Good King Henry, depending on taste, and make your own mix.

Baby kale makes a good cut-and-come-again crop

The Japanese bunching onion is a good addition to the salad bowl. It can be eaten like a spring onion and cropped for salads about six weeks after sowing. On the other hand if you leave it to grow on (taking snippings like chives meanwhile) it will grow into leek like proportions in due course.

Carrots can be eaten at any stage, so you can enjoy them as little finger carrots or let them grow on to maturity. It is worth waiting for the temperature to reach 10°C (50°F) as they will speed up then and overtake earlier sowings.

As you sow, cover with carrot fly netting or put up a screens of plastic sheeting or fleece. A 60cm barrier will thwart them as they fly low and in straight lines.

For midsummer eating get in your broad beans and peas, switching to second early or summer types. Summer peas and beans (indeed all summer vegetables) are more tender and delicious than the winter varieties. Watch for mice and birds who like nothing better than to make off with the seed before it has even germinated.

Get the supports up for the runner beans ready to plant them when the frosts are truly over.

Plant bulb onions in warmed soil. Sow maincrop leeks in a cold greenhouse or under cloche cover when there is a minimum temperature of 7C (46F). They will be ready for pulling from late summer. Sow late types (e.g. 'Toledo') at the end of the month to stand through winter.

Tender shoots of frost-free spring

Early bunching turnips sown now and picked at golf or ping pong ball size in early summer bear little resemblance to the traditional coarse old roots. They can be grated raw into salads or used in myriad other interesting ways - trendy chips for example. Turnip 'Oasis'and 'Primera'are two good bets. If you have any turnip seed left in

autumn, sow it for spring greens.

Beetroot, which is another good addition grated in salads comes in several different colours. Apart from red, there is pink and gold as well as stripy.

Time to get the potatoes in

Under gentle heat, sow celery, French and runner beans, outdoor chillis, aubergine, sweetcorn and tomatoes, so they will be ready for planting outside in June. All the cucurbits - ourgettes, marrows pumpkins and squashes can be sown under glass. Sow cucurbit seeds on edge rather than upright as this helps them to germinate. Squashes, like the golden scalloped-edged 'Patty Pans' are great fun to grow and look good on the plate. You rarely see them in supermarket.

Check the packets of these tender vegetables for the minimum temperatures as they vary considerably. For example outdoor chillis need a minimum temperature of 16°C (61°F) and sweet corn 20°C (68°F). If you have young plants in the greenhouse you will need to shade them against strong sunlight.

Plant your potatoes. The lates go in a couple of weeks after the first and second earlies.

Feed fruit trees and soft fruit with a general fertilizer. Protect fruit against the birds with netting. A gauge of 2cm is big enough for the bees to get through to pollinate. If your strawberries are in flower protect them against frost at night with fleece. If you have planted new strawberries this year you may decide to pick off the flowers - this years's sacrifice for a bumper crop next year.

If you have established clumps of mint, chives or French tarragon, dig them up and pull the roots apart and replant for some fresh growth. Mint and tarragon are best planted in containers to curb their tendency to spread.

Pests will be on the move now. Catch aphids early. Shower or squidge them off.

Sow plenty of annuals – nasturtiums, marigold or the poached egg plant - to attract aphid predators. Flea beetles come out of hibernation around this time. You will detect them by the appearance of lots of tiny 'shot' holes in brassicas and, on closer inspection, lots of minute shiny beetles. he simplest way to deal with them is to net throughout the season and have done with it.

With netting the chance of pest eggs being laid near the host plants is eliminated in a single stroke. If you already have an infestation, you can take advantage of their habit of jumping when disturbed. Hold a board covered in heavy grease or wet glue, shake the plant and they will jump up and stick. If you can lay your hands on a battery operated car vacuum cleaner, another possibility is to hoover them up.

Slugs and snails will start to lurk. Apart from the traditional beer traps etc., there is a new anti-snail copper paint, which is designed to put them off. It can be used on most surfaces – the boards around raised beds, most types of container and greenhouse staging. Apparently the paint will turn into a coppery verdigris colour which is an

interesting bonus. At the risk of being obvious, remember to inspect the beds first to make sure there are no slugs trapped inside.

Previous Blog home Next

Ads by Google

Plan a Vegetable Garden
Online garden planning tool - plan, space and rotate crops
www.GrowVeg.com
Find a Lawyer in Spain
English-Speaking Lawyers in Spain Who Guarantee Fees in Advance...
myadvocatespain.com/law-spain
Plant Manager Recruitment
Plant Manager Recruitment from €60K Connect to over 10,000 Headhunters!
Experteer.com/Plant_Manager

Comments

2 comments, displaying Oldest first

g Staff
c Contributor

Comments on this page are now closed.

engineeringlyretired
2 April 2009 8:23AM

Recommend (0)
Responses (0)
Report
Share

Wonderous, very informative, no mention however on the prevention of cabbage white butterfly attack, last season I spent hours removing their offspring by hand- make that days

Seablue
4 April 2009 9:45AM

Recommend (0)
Responses (0)
Report
Share

You are doing the right thing. Once the caterpillars are there, all you can do, without resorting to sprays, is to pick them off. You may be able to catch them at the egg stage. Check under the leaves for the clusters of the orange eggs of the large white butterfly or the single eggs of the smaller version. It is the larvae that do the damage to your crops. The only really effective way of preventing them is to put up a barrier of netting so that the female butterflies simply cannot get anywhere near the plants to lay their eggs in the first place. Wasps are helpful , but if you try to draw them in with companion plants you will also attract cabbage whites.

Comments on this page are now closed.

© 2012 Guardian News and Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.