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Things to do in March

Caroline Foley's foolproof guide to gardening this month

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Planting peas in biodegradable pots. Photograph: Howard Sooley

March is typically bracing and bright – a good month to wake up and get the plot lined up for plenty of action in April.



Last of the winter crops. Photograph: Howard Sooley

Clear away any remaining winter brassicas, leeks or Jerusalem artichokes. Sharpen tools, prepare the beds, clear weeds and cover the soil with polythene to warm it ready for sowing in a few weeks. If you plan to grow Brussels sprouts, cabbage, kale and broccoli for next winter make a seed bed for them. They are slow growers and won't need to be moved until summer when gaps appear in the brassica bed. Get in plenty of mulch but don't spread yet as it will only serve to trap in the cold.



Choosing seeds.

Photograph: Howard Sooley

Buy your seeds, compost and everything you will need for the forthcoming propagation bonanza. If you've got old seed or saved seed from last year give it the germination test to check whether it is still viable. Sprinkle some seed onto damp kitchen towel, fold it over, enclose it in a plastic bag and put it in the airing cupboard or on a warm shelf in the kitchen. Most seeds will show signs of life within the week, unless they are slow germinators like parsnips. The usual yardstick for going ahead is a success rate of 85% or more.

If your plot is in a warm and sheltered micro-climate, you could start to sow outside with cloche cover. On the whole though, it is better to wait until it's a bit warmer when plants will grow faster and catch up. Hardy vegetables start to grow when the temperature is over 5°C/41°F but will pause when it drops below. Research shows that carrots grown at 5°C/41°F take 35 days to germinate but at 10°C/50°F they only take ten days. If the grass is growing well, the hardy vegetables will grow too.



Early peas.

Photograph: Howard Sooley

To take the pressure off next month, start growing at home. Hardy peas - Feltham First or Early Onward - can be sown in biodegradable pots as they don't like being disturbed. If you can lay your hands on a piece of guttering, sow the peas in that. Later, the young plants can be slid off into a trench without them noticing the move. Sow broad bean in root trainers. Express, which has the Award of Garden Merit, is reckoned to be the fastest growing bean for early spring sowing and is a prolific cropper with claims of producing 34 pods per plant.

Sow leeks for next winter. The exceptionally hardy 'Musselburgh Improved' is probably the greatest winter leek. It shares common ancestry with own my personal favourite, the old French variety 'Bleu de Solaise' – a magnificent leek with blue-grey leaves and a terrific constitution. A yellow leek, also from France, which would make a handsome colour contrast next to it, is Jaune de Poitou. It is less hardy, but sown now, would make short chubby leeks for autumn. Sow leek seeds three per module and thin to the strongest.

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