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ORGANIC ALLOTMENT  
BLOG

## Caroline Foley's expert guide to a few things to do in August

Everything you need to know about sowing food for winter



Classic winter greens such as kale should be ready for transplanting now

The classic winter greens – winter cabbage, broccoli, chard, cauliflower and kale – should be at the right stage now for transplanting. However, if you don't have any to hand, do not despair, there is an entire repertoire of colourful oriental brassicas that are ideal for August sowing and autumn and winter eating.

The orientals are a terrific group, being both vigorous and versatile. Typically, pak choi, can be eaten in its entirety – leaves stalks and flowering shoots and at all stages of its growth. It reaches the 'Chicken Feather' stage within three weeks when the leaves are about 7.5cm long. It progresses on to the 'Little Cabbage' stage around two weeks later when about 10cm. The mature heads, which can be up to 60cm, are arrived at a few weeks after that. Moreover, it's no misfortune if it bolts, as the flowering shoots are delicious too.

Pak choi has various names including Chinese celery cabbage, which describes its texture and taste, and, mysteriously, horse's ear. It comes in various forms including the Chinese white, the soup spoon type, the Canton type (a squat variety) and the green. The green types are said to be the most desirable as well as the hardiest. Sow between now and the end of September. Given cover, they can carry on in their various stages up until Christmas.



Baby Oriental leaves

Joy Larkcom, the pioneer who introduced oriental vegetables to the West in her famous book of that name, says that the komatsuna deserves the most underrated vegetable award. It is still not widely available but worth searching out.

It too can be eaten at any stage of its development. If you sow the seed closely, you can thin out alternate plants for baby leaf and give the others room to mature. Komatsuna is described as a leafy turnip which tastes more like a cabbage (some say spinach) when young and more like a mustard at maturity. It is a large easy going plant with leaves up to 30cm in length. It's unlikely to bolt and can take temperatures down to -12C.

All the mustards are highly nutritious and excellent for people who enjoy food with a bit of punch. As vegetables go, they make handsome plants. Rather like kales and chards they come in many shapes, sizes and textures – curly, frilled and with blistered leaves. Green-in-Snow varieties live up to their name for hardiness, though the giants are said to be the hardiest of all. Sown between now and October, they will take three or four months to mature though the young leaves can be eaten all along the way.

'Red Giant' is the undoubted star of the mustard family. It is slow to bolt, tastes of horseradish (some say mustard) and is good eaten young in salads. It has terrific presence with leaves the colour of old claret interlaced with jade green veins.



Chicories can survive

a mild frost

The oriental radishes fall into the category of vegetables that are easy to grow but not easy to find in the shops outside Chinatown. The mooli or daikon (literally 'large root') is usually white and carrot shaped. It can grow to huge proportions but is generally harvested when the size of a small cucumber.

This takes ten to twelve weeks, so, if sown now, they will be ready in early autumn. It

doesn't matter if you overrun slightly as they can take a little frost. Less pungent when peeled, they are excellent in salads and the delight is that they lend themselves to being carved into fancy shapes, slivers or matchsticks or, alternatively, can be cooked in casseroles in the same way as swedes and turnips. The 'Beauty Heart' varieties with their summery rose and lime green centres need extra warmth but could be grown now if sown in early this month in a polytunnel.

Something you don't often see are the aerial radishes. The 'Rats Tail' radish has little root but is grown commercially purely for the seed pods – a delicious and unusual salad garnish. The plants can grow up to 120cm tall and will mature within three months.

Japanese bunching onions, also known as scallions and Welsh onions (a misnomer as they come from Siberia) can be eaten like spring onions, or left to grow into leek-sized proportions.



Red chicories add

colour to autumn sowing

Every year, I forget to sow the winter salad leaves in August, but this year I have made a note in my diary. These are the wild and hardy salads that need no attention other than a cloche to keep them tender. Winter purslane, lamb's lettuce and American land cress fall into this group.

Chicory and endive can survive a mild frost but are best grown in greenhouse, polytunnel or just under fleece in mild areas. Add to these some of the hardier lettuce varieties, 'Valdor', 'Winter Density' or 'Arctic King'. For the finishing touch put in a few young leaves of the fancy kales and mustardy greens and you will have salads fit for a king right through winter.

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**stripsidebob**

29 July 2011 6:12PM

Charles Dowding's new book Growing Winter Vegetables is a must read, as are all his books. Actually makes organic gardening sound simple.

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**allanjenkins**

29 July 2011 6:54PM



@stripsidebob howard bought one for us after your last recommendation, hope all well with you, mrs stripside and baby

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**stripsidebob**

29 July 2011 8:04PM

@allanjenkins - hi allan. All's good, although not getting much time for allotment (or sleep!) I'm finding the small patch I've developed at home is performing much better than the plot - everything seems healthier.

Don't know if this is because I'm able to keep an eye on things more readily at home or because the very nature of an allotment means pests and disease build up in quantity.

Warm regards to yourself and Howard.

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**englishhermit**

29 July 2011 9:48PM



I have a copy of 'Salad Leaves For All Seasons' by Charles Dowding. I have to admit that it has remained on the shelf for a while. Time to read again, methinks.

I'm not that keen on chicory. I tried some other oriental leaves like pak choi but I'm not that keen on them either. I'll keep lettuce growing in the cold frame as long as possible instead. On the other hand my kale and sprouts are planted out and the cabbages ready to move on as well. I have a final sowing of kale to do so that I have some for next spring.

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**Lazza65**

1 August 2011 12:04AM

Thank you Caroline,  
 I now have half a clue what to do for my allotment ( New ) over the next few months!  
 Have put in lots of hardy herbs, marigolds and fennel.  
 I happen to love pak choi, chicory, kale and will now set forth with a plan of action.

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Shall I get so one to water while away for 2 weeks or will the seeds be better off if I plant out when back from holiday at end of August?



**soundsofOregon**

2 August 2011 5:05AM

Some very handy observations from Caroline. A few notes to add from this end. Myself and Andrew of the Seed Ambassadors Project have gone big on chicories and radicchios, and endives and escaroles in recent winters. Comparing notes, we find them among the very hardiest winter greens - they will continue to grow throughout the winter and will hold all the way through to mid-spring. Yes, hardiness differs between varieties and types but, as a general rule, even where they take a hammering from major weather events, outside, with no cover, they will recover to provide rich spring bounties. All told, we reckon them much-underrated winter crops offering astonishing diversity. They have the added, highly significant advantage of being slug-proof and extremely disease resistant.

Of chicories and endives, we find the leaves are much milder in the winter than summer: some are even sugary sweet. They are excellent cooked. Sugar Loaf/Zuckerhut and Bianca di Milano are the sweetest we've found. My favorite for adding spectacular color to a winter garden and salad is Palla Rossa Radicchio which adds a deep burgundy-red splash to a winter garden and salad. A robust presence in a winter garden, its color deepens with the passage of the season. It is a mainstay variety for me, now, well-proven, outside, through a diversity of winters. Many chicory and endive varieties will bolt if seeded on the early side but some selections will not - Early Treviso and the impressively diverse Wild Garden mix from Frank Morton among them. Castelfranco and Verona chicories are beautiful and extremely hardy. Most F1 hybrid Radicchios are not winter hardy. Italian seed catalogs are particularly strong in these crops.

For escaroles try Eros, Diva, and Great Batavian. For frilly endives try Pancalieri a Costa Bianca, Greek, and Frizee de Meaux. Adaptive Seeds and Wild Garden Seeds are good sources for proven overwintering varieties being grown, eaten and selected through challenging winter conditions where their stewards taste and live. These crop types are surprisingly slow to run to seed, bolting in late spring and therefore play an important role filling the hunger gap. Andrew has noted his crops start to get damaged if the temperature drops below 20°F but often will pull through into the spring and look wonderful. I've seen mine bounce back from much colder temperatures. Traditional varieties often show more cold tolerance than the more modern "summer bred" varieties.

These "Italians", and spinach, are the only 'salad greens' I've seen consistently survive the entire winter, outside (apart from the corn salads and miners lettuce which we tend not to focus on hereabouts). The vast majority of the mustards tend to succumb to snow - the weight of which, crushes their susceptible

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structure. I grow very little lettuce through winters. Though lettuce is, for the most part, extremely cold tolerant, readily handling extended sub-freezing temperatures, the wetness almost always does them in when they are grown outside. They succumb to rot and other diseases quickly, sometimes early if we have a particularly wet November. I have grown them under cover but they are space hogs and tend to suffer from Botrytis fungus and other diseases far more than other greens, whereas mizunas and arugulas and spinaches excel under cover and, importantly, can be planted thickly, repeatedly harvested, and are extremely disease resistant. Lettuce names can be misleading: many varieties have been bred for cold-hardiness, but not damp-hardiness - Arctic King may handle the cold well, but it succumbs quickly to disease in our bioregion. The same goes for varieties with the word 'winter' in their name. The darkest red lettuces seem to fend off the cold and disease better than other varieties (the anthocyanins covering both bases?) and I will occasionally grow a small number of a superdarkred type such as Merlot, under cover, to add color to winter salads. But even with the dryness of cover, the slugs will tend to seek them out. Winter is the season I eat a fresh salad every day, but lettuce, I find, works much better as a summer crop for me.

stripsidebob, I'm very curious about what Charles Dowding has to say about timing. By my reckoning, you need to come at your winter crops, seeding and transplanting, earlier than we do, here. What does he have to say about the major Brassicas, and the salad greens?

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