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OBSERVER ORGANIC ALLOTMENT BLOG



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

Sowing corn, squash, beans and other jobs for this month



Corn such as our Painted Mountain can be sown in the south now

The arrival of [asparagus](#) in May is a highlight of the food calendar. Along with the delicious early salads and rhubarb, it's a reminder that summer is nearly here and it's time for the second wave.



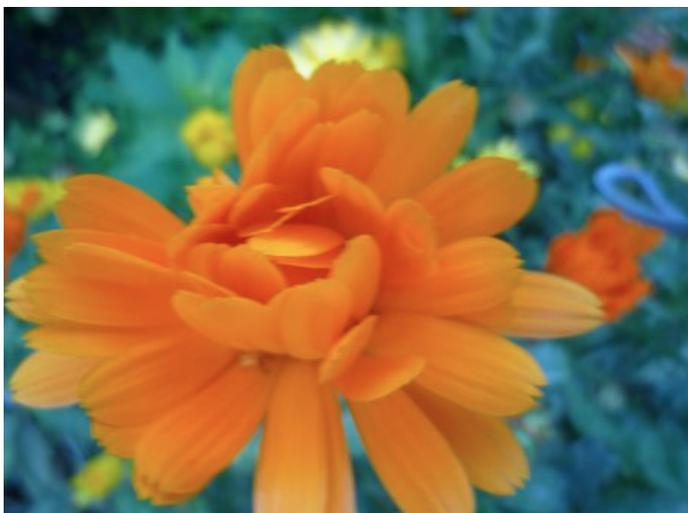
Make space in the nursery beds by [transplanting](#) early seedlings like [leeks](#) and get the winter greens, the [cabbages](#) and Brussels sprouts into their permanent positions. Remember to water everything well, both before and after, transplanting to minimize 'shock'. If you've grown them in biodegradable containers (lool rolls cores are just as good) you just plant them out complete in their containers. That way, they won't even notice the move.



Allow plenty of space when you transplant the big brassicas. Tall cultivars of Brussels sprouts, for example, need to be spaced around 60cm/2ft apart and summer cabbage a good 45cm. As they are slow growing there will be gaps between them for quite a while, making ideal slots for a quick crop of lettuces and radish.



Young, Japanese turnips – delicious grated into salads or quickly cooked – are brassicas too so they will be good bedfellows. These need to be sown early in May as they take about five weeks to grow into the ideal golf ball size and they don't care the heat of late summer. To avoid trouble cabbage troubles, it's as well to grow brassicas under fleece or enviromesh and through a membrane or protected with collars.



Beetroot, once commonly known as the 'blood turnip', is no relation to the turnip being in the family of the brightly coloured chards. Nor need it be blood red as, these

days, cultivars come in white, yellow, purple and even in candy stripes. Sow a few seeds every couple of weeks. The beetroot family is easy and fun to grow. Get the chard in now and you can pick the outside leaves all summer and eat the heart in autumn.



Sweet corn, runner beans and French beans – can be sown outside in the south (two weeks later in the north) as by the time they have germinated, all danger of frost should be over. You could sow half in and half out to stagger the harvest. The ones sown indoors will be the first to mature.



Remember to sow or plant sweetcorn in a block as, like all grasses, it is wind-pollinated. A neat square of four rows of four plants about 35cm works well from a pollination point of view. Once they are beginning to establish, you can underplant them too.

Continue to direct sow carrot, salad onions, peas and broad beans. Pinch out the tasty tops of previously sown broad beans when you have a few flower trusses to discourage blackfly.



If you're in a very warm microclimate you can sow summer squash, courgettes, marrows and pumpkins outside under cloches at the end of the month. Otherwise sow indoors now. Soak the seeds overnight and sow on their sides, two per pot. Keep at 18C, and thin to the strongest later. When you plant out, growing them under black polythene will provide extra warmth and keep the fruits clean.



May is the last chance to plant your potatoes, spinach (until late summer) and onion sets for autumn eating. If you are quick there is still time to sow sweet peas. French or English marigolds (*Calendula* and *Tagetes*) will brighten up the plot and bring in the predators. No worries about temperature. Just sow them straight out.



Incidentally, if you are harvesting your rhubarb and planting the last few potatoes at the same time, you could try a traditional deterrent for the cabbage root fly. Instead of

employing brassica collars planting the potatoes through a membrane , chop up the rhubarb leaves quite finely and layer them into the potato trench or planting holes. It's said to work a treat.

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bankalchemist

3 May 2011 2:41PM

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soundsofOregon

4 May 2011 5:11AM

I'm at a latitude with southern France, so light levels differ markedly from the UK, even as the climate here is very English-like. That said, if March 15, St. Patrick's Day, is a traditional potato planting day hereabouts, we plant for large, reliable storage potatoes for the winter in May - pulling them in September rather than August. However, adventurous souls succession sow potatoes July through the end of August. Why? Most potatoes are 55-70 day maturities, and August, September and half of October amounts to 75 days - long enough, in other words, given that we expect our first light frost sometime in October. If we have an unexpectedly early frost in mid-September from an August planting, we still have lots of baby potatoes. Potatoes harvested later seem to store longer through the winter, all things being equal.

These days I'm learning a great deal about systemic pesticides - especially a relatively recent class of insecticides, the neonicotinoids. These work like military nerve agents, indeed the cross-over between military chemical warfare and pesticide development and use is long and continuing. Zyklon B, for example, originally developed as a cyanide-based pesticide in

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the early 1920's by a group of scientists closely associated with German chemical weapons development in the First World War, was used in Auschwitz, and is still manufactured in the Czech Republic for pest control. 'Neonics', the latest and greatest evolution upon the agricultural nerve agent theme, are *extremely* effectively against insects - which is one reason they are now banned in several European countries where they are held responsible as a primary cause of Colony Collapse Disorder (though they are still legal in the US and UK, I believe.) Where they are able, industrial farmers remain very attached to neonics because their economic advantages are immense - even as the collateral damage of friendly fire is proving disastrous to 'beneficials' such as honeybees. Why are neonics so popular with farmers? Because they are so powerful. Once you douse a seed (or seed potato - most conventional potatoes are indeed treated in this way) the entire plant from root to leaf to sap to pollen to nectar to fruit becomes toxic to insects. Here's dinner and you're dead, matey. I'm now thinking that using conventional seed potatoes in an organic regimen ("taking plants organic" as I used to say) may no longer be an effective way of avoiding the nerve agent hangover for insects and our diets. This season, therefore, for the first time, I'm recommending friends make a very strong point of going with organic as distinct from conventional seed potatoes.



allanjenkins

4 May 2011 9:03AM



@soundsofOregon Warm welcome back to Nick Routledge who has been off-line and deep up country in Oregon for a while. Much of what we grow and why has been informed by you (and others of the Seed Ambassador family), feels good to be back in touch

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sparclear

4 May 2011 4:46PM

Dear **soundsofOregon**, thankyou for your informative posts, both this one and across in the other 'wood for the trees' thread, re: apples.

If what you say about seed potatoes is true (I think along the same lines as you, and probably it is) can we find some existing research, or someone to carry out new and thoroughly unassailable research about it?

This feels urgent to me. As people get old they might accumulate some of these toxins as frequent dietary pollutants? What about cumulative effect in animal feedstuffs too?

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Reluctantgardener

4 May 2011 8:20PM

Oops, have already planted out courgettes and tomato plants - too early? Sweet corn advice heeded, thanks. Also I appreciate the broad bean tip. I overwintered mine and they are looking

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very fulsome and flowery and bluey-green compared to others down at the allotment (sorry to boast but I hardly ever get anything to boast about, allotment wise!)

Have noticed, planting seedlings out this last fortnight, their leaves go from bright green to darker colours, pinky-purple even, after a few days in the sun. Normal?

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soundsofOregon

6 May 2011 5:13AM

Reluctant gardener, the purple ain't sunburn. My guess is your starts are a little stressed. I'll see the purpling tendency on Brassicas, especially broccolis, on plants held too long in cell trays before planting out, or on plants stressed by a loss of impetus occurring after I transplant into soil that lacks nutrients; or is either too wet, too dry or too compact, factors which makes nutrient uptake a challenge. If you are buying vegetable starts then, make sure they aren't root bound – a good clue that they have been held in the little plastic cell tray for too long. Another thought: were your plants 'hardened off' before you put them out? Sometimes the shock of coming out of a cosy, warm greenhouse into cold spring nights will traumatize plantlets, so we introduce them gradually to the outside world over the course of a few days by putting starts out during the day, then bringing them in at night, and so forth, for a few days, before putting them in the ground proper.

Recognizing nutrient deficiencies in plants is tough even as color change can be a good beginning clue. But I shouldn't worry too much about making precise sense of whassup, honestly. More often that not, experienced gardeners have no idea what's going on, either. And, besides, having a pro telling you it sounds as though your plants lack phosphorus is all very well, but what does that mean exactly? Not enough phosphorous in your soil, or not enough or too much of another constituent(s) compromising phosphorous uptake? And besides, what is phosphorous anyways and why would lack of it make your plant purple? Not that it isn't a very useful thing to know, but I'm in the dark, frankly. Perhaps another reader can help. My advice would be to focus on improving your soil health/tilth by adding organic matter such as good quality compost through the seasons, and doing what you can to ensure that your starts maintain impetus all the way from seedling through the transition into the garden itself. Plants thrive on 'impetus', and many will never fully recover from early slowing – heading Brassicas such as broccolis, cabbages, and cauliflowers especially, are particularly susceptible to early setbacks. It can take a while, of course, for reluctant plants to show themselves to reluctant gardeners, but all the while you will be learning.

I'm delighted your broad beans are thriving. One can't have too many morale boosters. I coo over broad beans in English gardening catalogs which have the best selections in the world,

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by far. What with the genetics you are probably playing with and the health of your quintessentially English plants, you are probably growing one of the finest examples of a vegetable crop in the world just now. Hooray for garden democracy!



soundsofOregon

6 May 2011 5:26AM

Sparclear, I shouldn't worry about picking up pesticide residues as you get old. A recent study of circa 200 students at a Spanish university (I tried digging up the reference but it escapes me just now) showed an average of, I believe, 11 pesticide residues in each student, with levels of one particular pesticide high enough to affect reproductive health. Yes, poking around the environmental consequences of pesticide use can be a profoundly sobering experience, not least because new and more powerful pesticides are being developed and introduced constantly – these days very much in conjunction with new GMO crop varieties.

As per pesticide concentrations in animal feed, I haven't looked for evidence, but here's a thought following the very simplest linear train of thought...every conventional corn kernel going into US ground this year is dosed with a whole slew of chemicals – systemic insecticides, fungicides, growth regulators, and so forth. Then, of course, there are the herbicides – typically glyphosate - for the ground the GMO, herbicide-ready corn grows in. In the US, we stuff our livestock with this corn prior to slaughter so, yes, there's a human dietary connection there. But staying away from American meat won't keep you free from American pesticide residue. If you are eating processed food in any restaurant or supermarket anywhere in the world, my bet is that you will be eating American high fructose corn syrup. Then there's soy products, of course. And sugar. The belief that borders, or washing a vegetable or piece of fruit, will protect us from pesticide contamination is, well, a quaint anachronism at best.

Hereabouts, it's not so much the pesticide residue in animal feed that has raised eyebrows as much as the endemic use of antibiotics in industrialized animal husbandry. The Union of Concerned Scientists estimates that at least 70 percent of the antibiotics used in America are fed to animals living on factory farms. (That antibiotics speed up growth as well as keeping cattle alive in close and filthy confinement lends them prime industrial appeal, of course.) There is increasing evidence to suggest that concentrated animal feeding operations, or CAFOs as they are called, are among the the primary reservoirs of novel, antibiotic-resistant bacteria affecting humans – in Europe as well as the US.

We find ourselves in something of a dead-end paradox here - the very tools we are using to stave off starvation are precisely those technes – widespread antibiotic use and vast chemical inputs – destroying the biological integrity on which our health

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depends. In case you hadn't heard, the last vestiges of antibiotic effectiveness are in freefall, which is one reason the World Health Organization devoted this past April's World Health Day to precisely this topic: "In the absence of urgent corrective and protective actions, the world is heading towards a post-antibiotic era, in which many common infections will no longer have a cure and, once again, kill unabated." In April, it was also reported that NDM-1 is now in the New Delhi water supply. Hmm.

This reckoning was always implicit in the evolutionary paradigm, of course, but the suddenness of the cascade of accumulating synergies now arriving upon us makes me extremely skeptical of plans of any type which assume technological food and medicine will continue to work as they have. Nature so clearly has other plans for us. It is as times such as this I try to remember that the foundational rationale for holism as it relates to raising food and medicine is the creation of a *sustainable* tradition of healthy living in harmony with the ecology of which it is an integral part – deep gardening as it is most fully practiced and understood. It's also why lay-herbalist gardeners such as myself are deliberately growing/stewarding and working with botanical anti-microbials and anti-virals as well as food plants; and why so many are looking to raise their own eggs, meat, dairy and honey, wherever they can.



sparclear

6 May 2011 1:33PM

thanks **sounds**, much appreciated the time you put in and effort responding to my question. I too cherish herbs and holism.

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Reluctantgardener

6 May 2011 9:47PM

Thank you, soundsofOregon! Much appreciated. What you say makes sense. It IS amidst my brassicas that I have most noticed the purpling, and yes, mostly on the broccoli. I sowed the seed indoors in Feb. They shot up and went spindly, so when I transplanted them into little pots, I buried some of the stem. They seemed to recover well and grew stronger but I was probably stressing them yet again when I planted them out without any attempt to harden them off. Poor little devils! Ah well, nothing to do now but see what happens.

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Reluctantgardener

6 May 2011 10:01PM

p.s. thanks also, soO, for the bean-related encouragement! My Dad (88 this year) and I have had our allotment for 9 months, and the only real successes so far (last autumn) were spinach and turnips. Although I was grateful to the turnips for their friendly company, they were hard to eat and harder to give away. So the thought of having a delectable veg like the broad bean on side is pretty heady.

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