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OBSERVER ORGANIC ALLOTMENT BLOG



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

Spring gardening is almost here so get the garden in good order



Time to chit seed potatoes. Photograph: Steve Atkins Photography/Alamy

It seems not long ago that we were preparing for winter. Now we are on the countdown to spring. Days are longer, brighter. Walking through the park you are assailed with the ice cutting scent of mahonia, [Christmas box \(Sarcococca\)](#) and hyacinths. They are working hard to get noticed by odd pollinator that is out and about in chilly February.

If you have any fruit trees to plant, it is the last minute to get them in now while they are still dormant. Precocious trees that are producing flower buds already need to be [protected from frost](#) and birds. Later in the month you may need to [hand-pollinate them](#).

Firm soil around newly planted specimens as the effects of freezing and thawing, shrinking and expanding, can pull roots right out of the ground. Weed and mulch around basis of existing fruit trees, bushes and canes.

A spray with [seaweed extract](#) on young top fruit, grapes and berry plants will greatly improve their health, disease resistance and performance. Six sprayings, at the first signs of growth, at bud burst, when the fruit is setting and three more subsequently at periods of about three weeks should do the trick. Others recommend a fortnightly spray between March and July.

Finish winter pruning. Cut down [autumn raspberries](#). Tidy up outdoor strawberries by snipping off any tired looking leaves.

Start to dig in - or chop down and cover for light exclusion - overwintering [green manures](#), particularly grazing rye. Though it's fine to follow it straight away with transplants or potatoes, it produces toxins that can inhibit seed germination for about six weeks after it has been dug in.

While rye comes top of the league for stabilizing the soil and mopping up plant foods,

it is not the easiest to deal with as it produces a tangle of tough roots. It also has the trying habit of re-sprouting if not well buried. The best method is to chop off the tops then dig a spit deep with a sharp spade and toss the clods upside down.

Winter tares and field beans are easier and leave the soil enriched with nitrogen ideal for brassicas and other leafy crops that follow. They can be dug in any time between now and April. Allow a few weeks before sowing so that there is time for them to rot down.

If your soil is in less than good heart, put on a good thick layer of some 15 cm (6inches) of well-rotted compost or manure, particularly where you will be growing potatoes and brassicas. If you are short of supplies, chicken manure, available to buy if you don't have any, is super nutritious and should be used sparingly. Go slow where you plan to sow root vegetables or peas and beans as they produce best where the soil was manured the year before.

If you haven't already, start to chit your potatoes for planting in about six weeks.

Towards the end of the month you could plant Jerusalem artichokes, particularly good if you want a tall green screen. They will reach 1.80m quickly, providing cover for wildlife as well as for you. Towards autumn they make good artichoke soups.

A vegetable with a difference is the Chinese artichoke (Stachys affinis) which is not related to either the globe artichoke or the Jerusalem one. It belongs to the mint family and grows about 30 cm tall and wide. The roots will produce many small tubers which are variously said to resemble spiral sea shells or caterpillars and are compared to jade by the Chinese.

These are popular in France where they are known as 'Crosnes' - the name of the home town of a certain M. Pailleux, who introduced them from the East. They make a great alternative to water chestnuts eaten raw, being crisp and tasting delicately of artichoke and can be cooked too.

You can order from the seed merchants take this month for planting out in March to May or you may spot some plump tubers in an oriental grocery store. Once you have planted them, they will self perpetuate on runners- almost too much so if you don't dig them all out in autumn. Don't be put off by the fiddle of peeling them, as a scrub under a running tap is all that is needed.

Early February is the last chance to plant garlic. Towards the end of the month you could start off your shallots from sets and onions from seed.

The next batch of vegetable seed to sow would be summer cabbage, oriental greens, spinach, broad beans, radish, spring onions, baby beetroot, salad onions, kohlrabi, cabbage, turnips, cauliflower, carrots and peas. Look out for the hardest varieties, recommended for early sowing.

To make sure that you are lined up for spring, check the soil's pH and keep an eye on the soil temperature.

Warm the beds at least two weeks ahead of sowing by covering them with black polythene or with cloches. If your soil is cold clay, it might be worth making some raised beds prior to the spring rush as they will warm up quickly. The soil needs to be about 7C (46F) consistently for a week before it reaches the minimum temperature for germination.

If you have a polytunnel or cold greenhouse and are keen to get on, you could start sowing them this month. However, there is much to be said for waiting a bit. Once you have the ideal temperature rather than the minimum one, generally growth will be faster, smoother and more trouble free.

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