

theguardian

**OBSERVER
ORGANIC ALLOTMENT
BLOG**

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

Exotic plants to spice up your garden for the months ahead



Indian onions grown for seed. All images Allan Jenkins

When, in 2010, [Garden Organic](#) began their [Sowing New Seeds](#) project to research and promote exotic vegetables, their wise first port of call was to the [allotments](#). From allotment growers in Birmingham, Coventry, Leicester and Nottingham, they were able to glean first-hand knowledge about growing these plants in the UK climate and to collect over 250 different types of seeds and cuttings.

The names of the plants read like a trans global itinerary – callaloo from Jamaica, chomolia from Zimbabwe, kang kong from Southeast Asia, methi and halloon and the snake gourd, duhdi from India.



Since then, all the seeds have been identified, catalogued and a few have grown so well that should be enough seed (given some decent weather) for some to be given out to members of the [Heritage Seed Library](#) later this year and stored for future generations. [Seed stewards](#) are spreading the word in schools, allotments and other community projects. A new exotic border is flourishing at [Ryton](#) and an Exotic Crop Fair is scheduled for this autumn.



It is such a pleasure to see this project coming to fruition so speedily and well. The time for it is ripe, coinciding as it does with a growing appetite for world food and all the ecological considerations about [food miles](#) and growing your own.



[Dr. Anton Rosenfeld and Sally Cunningham](#), who are heading the research at Garden Organic, have together written *The Exotic Crop Guide* which will come out later this year. It will throw welcome light on a mystifying and complicated subject. Sally, who previously worked in Leicester for Kew [Gardens](#) for the [Plant Cultures project](#) describes the problems of unraveling the many different Hindi or Gujarati names for the same plants when researching for her previous book [Asian Vegetables: a guide to Growing Fruit, Vegetables and Spices from the Indian Subcontinent](#).



Her message is to give it a try – her approach entirely. She bought every unusual vegetable she spotted that she didn't recognize from Asian markets to see if she could propagate it one way or another – from pips, seeds or by vegetative methods. Key research now is being done on exotic varieties that will be 'day length neutral' and so will flower and set seed in the UK regardless of how many hours of light there are in the day. Then we will all be able to grow them without too much difficulty.

Meanwhile, there are plenty of exotic vegetables, herbs and spices we can start this month and which are easy to grow and delicious. One such is fenugreek (the aforementioned methi), an excellent multi-purpose plant. It is widely used as a vegetable in Middle Eastern, East Indian and African cuisine for lentil and spinach based dishes, sambars.



It can also be usefully sprouted for micro greens in the space of a week or grown as a sweet nutty salad leaf in six. Half dried they can be thrown into sauces for flavouring and I am told that fenugreek makes mean spiced herby Gujerati paratha and out of this world bhajis. The fresh seeds can be simply fried for immediate use or roasted as a coffee substitute. However, as seeds are cheap when sold as a spice, most don't bother much with this. Fenugreek just needs a sunny spot and is so easy to grow that you can buy it for a fast summer green manure.

Another vegetable, seen on allotments is haloon (*Lepidium sativum*). Related to both cress and mustard, it's another racing green that will be ready to eat about ten days after sowing. It has a hot and spicy kick, hence its other name, 'pepper grass'. It is popular for Indian and Bangladeshi dishes and can be used like watercress without the need of special conditions.



More familiar is lemongrass (*Cymbopogon citratus*), essential flavouring for Thai and South East Asian cookery, used in delicious green curries and fragrant lemony tea. It is known to be an erratic germinator so the best way to propagate is by division or by growing a rooty piece from the market in a warm and sheltered spot. Don't forget to dig it up before winter.

Callaloo (*Amaranthus gangeticus*) is the colourful spinach-like leaf used in Asian, Indian, Indo-Chinese and Vietnamese cookery and much enjoyed in the famous salt fish dish in Jamaica. July is a good month for a final crop because it is warm enough, at over 18C, to sow directly outside. Sow thinly in rows about 30cm apart. Use the thinnings for stir fries and eat the leaves as soon as there are big enough as callaloo has a tendency to bolt.



Getting hold of seed for exotic vegetables is still not easy. It would seem that some of the best seed is stashed up in the sheds of allotment holders, many of whom were farmers in their home countries. Some strains will have been grown on over years until they have started to acclimatize. If there is no chance of begging a few, it is worth having a shot with seed sold as spice from Asian grocers. Do a germination test before you sow. There are also specialist nurseries realseeds; seedsofchange.com; nickys-nursery. tropicalfruitandveg.com; jungleseeds.co.uk that are worth a try.

I suspect it won't be long before supply begins to meet a growing demand and we will begin to see named varieties appearing more widely in the catalogues. This will be deservedly gratifying to Sally Cunningham, whose confessed ambition would be to see the lablab bean, (*Dolichos lablab*) become as popular as the runner bean within her lifetime. Even if this might be the slightest bit optimistic, clearly there soon will be the opportunity for us all to experiment with a whole new range of fascinating vegetables, fruits and spices and expand our culinary repertoire to new and greater heights. It's a really exciting prospect for those of us who love to grow and cook.

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<div></div> <div>StripSideMaddie 5 July 2012 3:48PM</div>	<div>Recommend (0)</div> <div>Responses (1)</div> <div>Report</div> <div>Share</div>
<p>Well I'm going to need to grow something to replace the Toms I'm about to lose to blight. In July for pete's sake!</p> <p>There's always something about losing two key crops to this bloody disease - saps the will. Even though I have far more coming on by way of beans, squash, courgette, peppers, salad,etc. it always seems such a loss.</p>	
<div></div> <div>kaychrds 5 July 2012 4:05PM</div>	<div>Recommend (3)</div> <div>Responses (0)</div> <div>Report</div> <div>Share</div>
<p>I thought this blog was supposed to be about what we should be doing in our allotments this month. I appreciate that the weather has been rubbish and therefore we hark for warmer climes. I also appreciate that this is a respectable project. But 'Caroline Foley's expert guide to a few things to do in July' it's not.</p> <p>I think we need some advice for what can be grown in this weather, some tips for keeping our produce alive, and why for example after a whole packet of carrot seeds have been sown only 1 has managed to germinate. I would like some helpful and relevant tips please rather than looking at more exotic produce when I can't even grow a courgette this year!</p>	
<div></div> <div>allanjenkins 5 July 2012 6:15PM</div>	<div>Recommend (2)</div> <div>Responses (0)</div> <div>Report</div> <div>Share</div>
<p>Ouch! @kaychrds, will ask but worth occasionally looking at other less mainstream crops you can grow this month, we for instance have had scary success with callaloo (that is ours in the photo). we also grow central american maize. the answer to the</p>	

germination is of course it was too wet then too dry, too cold, too hot. Would resow



StripSideMaddie

6 July 2012 9:35AM

Re. the poor germination of carrots - bear in mind that the seed may be old or duff, and being part of the umbellifer family it can occasionally be troublesome with germination. More so with parsnips admittedly. Always invest in new seed from this family of plants.

It's also worth bearing in mind that just because a seed company is well known doesn't mean it's seed is the best quality - I bought golden and boltardy beetroot from a well known firm this year (and they're generally better than the competition) and have had appalling germination. Often the smaller companies and independent growers offer a superior selection of seed.

I think there could have been some standard advice for gardeners included in the piece but I'm all for trying alternatives - be it different techniques or crops. I've often found that by eschewing received wisdom on what to grow/how to grow you have unexpected and pleasing results.

Ultimately, as Allan says - the weather this year has been awful for growers on many fronts. Not a lot a blog can do about that.....

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allanjenkins

6 July 2012 9:50AM



@kaychrds, this from caroline, hope it helps lift the gloom

"Continuous rain combined with humidity is really bad news for growers.

Too much water causes fungal diseases – e.g. blight and powdery mildew. It can cause fusarium wilt in tomatoes, and blossom end rot in tomatoes, and potatoes. No plant (other than an aquatic) can survive if it is sitting in water. Keep a sharp eye out for the first signs of trouble and take action.

Driving rain can wash away seeds and seedlings and reduce pollination. It puts off the bees and encourages slugs. The ideal is to avoid a seesaw effect of wet and dry and provide a stable amount of water, so that the soil has the consistency of a wet wrung out sponge all the time. Improve drainage by making raised beds. Start seed off at home or grow on mounds so the water will run off, add grit to the soil for fast drainage, make moats and drainage channels. You can also make plastic umbrellas so the downpour will run off. Collect water in water butts and use this. Avoid watering from above as the rain will spread any fungus spores.

The long range weather forecast into August still appears to be mixed, alas, so making provision for wet weather would be a wise precaution."

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**nahema**

6 July 2012 12:34PM

Response to [StripSideMaddie](#). 5 July 2012 3:48PM

SSM, we have had the edge of the weather here so much cooler, more rain but some sunshine. I took your advice from last year about parsnips. I bought fresh seed from Real Seed catalogue and germination was wonderful!

I sympathise about tomatoes! The thought of winter without a store of Tomato purree in the freezer is terrible. The taste of summer each time I use the purree does alot to dispel winter blues. The tomatoes are so sturdy this year with stems like tree trunks that it is difficult to imagine them swiped by blight. I have removed lower leaves so contact with the ground is minimal. Have you tried that? (sorry, probably a grandma and eggs thing!)

The potatoes very nearly suffered a colarado beetle infestation ! I think they are safe now ,I squashed beetles and larvae every day ,sometimes twice a day. Yuck! Good Luck.

[Recommend \(2\)](#)[Responses \(0\)](#)[Report](#)[Share](#)**sparclear**

6 July 2012 1:53PM

Enjoyed reading about the colourful veg & looking at the sunny pics was welcome, but would have loved a little video to go with this topic. Feel ignorant about how to grow/choose when ripe/clean and cook each thingsort of knowledge conveyed well by film, need demonstration like a child in the kitchen...

Also I have noticed when international veg shops sell me things like sweet potatoes the best ones **are** organic so I feel it's a very valid topic to belong right here. And as we're contending with different weather it is splendid to publicise experimental growers out there on their allotments. Blessings and respect to all of them.

[Recommend \(1\)](#)[Responses \(0\)](#)[Report](#)[Share](#)**StripSideMaddie**

6 July 2012 2:09PM

@**nahema** - good to hear you've had success with parsnips, unfortunately I never got round to sowing mine this year. I'll be out of favour with the mother-in-law come Christmas (it'll either be the parsnips or daring to turn up in my frock and heels!).

Have removed some of the lower leaves on Toms to avoid water splash. Always find the removal of leaves to be a fine tuning thing. Probably nearing the point when I stop using water from the butts too, just to be safe with this crop at least. Potatoes have been pretty awful without the early threat of blight.

Potatoes - I'm growing Maris Bard and Red Duke Of York.

Tomatoes - Shirley F1, Tigerella, Maskotka, and American heirloom Sheboygan for bottling - if I get that far. Otherwise I'll be making an early start on the chutney.

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@sparclear - spot on as usual!



allanjenkins

6 July 2012 2:17PM



@sparclear There is a video link embedded for the callaloo and salt fish (always just click on blue text for any link)

There is a recipe for methi sambar [here](#), though not a video

Here is [sambar recipe video](#) (almost comic) and another [here](#).

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sparclear

6 July 2012 4:02PM

Response to [allanjenkins, 6 July 2012 2:17PM](#)

somehow feeling the Graun can commission a new series of its own, now, Allan

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allanjenkins

6 July 2012 4:43PM



Dear @sparclear Guardian losses this year (for the umpteenth in a row)? £45m! figure we can maybe pick sambar recipes from youtube for time being

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sparclear

6 July 2012 6:20PM

sorry to read that Allan..

was already dreaming up G in-house version

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000a000

7 July 2012 8:02PM

The long range weather forecast into August still appears to be mixed, alas, so making provision for wet weather would be a wise precaution."

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Will my tomatoes ever ripen or will I be limited to a record crop of bushy tomato leaf? :(



StripSideMaddie

7 July 2012 8:24PM

Response to [000a000, 7 July 2012 8:02PM](#)

It's only July! Surely too early to be expecting ripe Tomatoes.....

I wouldn't expect ripe Toms until August unless we'd had wall to wall sunshine, rather than the deluge we have endured.

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000a000

7 July 2012 9:51PM

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Response to [StripSideMaddie, 7 July 2012 8:24PM](#)

Yes, an excellent point - I am rather impatient!

I already have green tomatoes on some of my plants - I'm concerned that we'll never see sun and I will be making vast quantities of green tomato chutney in a month's time.

It's been a while since I grew tomatoes so I'm keen for them to be a success.

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[allanjenkins](#)

10 July 2012 9:31AM



apologies if an earlier comment may have appeared slightly wasp-ish, will try harder for honey bee from now.

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