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**OBSERVER
ORGANIC ALLOTMENT
BLOG**

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

The heat is on and there is lots of fun gardening stuff to do



Native Americans introduced corn, squash and pumpkin to the pilgrims

There are no more worries about Jack Frost lurking around with his icicle fingers itching to catch us out. At last we can relax and plant out the sun-loving vegetables – cucumbers, sweet corn, tomatoes, peppers, chillies, courgettes and all the other squashes.

The Mediterranean vegetables originated in sub-tropical countries and have been developed over centuries. Tomatoes, peppers and chillies arrived from Mexico with Columbus and Cortéz. The scarlet runner bean, also from Mexico, was introduced to Europe by the Tradescants, the 16th and 17th century plant hunters and royal gardeners.



Native Americans introduced sweet corn, squash and pumpkin to the pilgrims. Aubergine and cucumbers are ancient food plants from the Indian sub-continent.

It was Livingstone who nailed down the origin of the watermelon when he noticed they were growing wild and were 'abundant' in the Kalahari desert.



The original tomatoes were small yellow fruits and were regarded with great suspicion as – like potatoes, aubergines and peppers – they belong to the deadly nightshade family. Runner beans were thought to be ornamental, pumpkins only fit for pigs.

These sub-tropical plants are fast growing, prolific and need plenty of food, water and, above all, heat. Plant breeders have developed a truly impressive range of shapes, sizes and colours. They've brought in disease resistance and, most usefully, some hardiness so that most (but not all) can now be grown with confidence outside in a reasonable English summer.



When choosing tomatoes for the allotment, first check they are outdoor varieties. Then decide whether to have 'cordon' type (indeterminate) or 'bush' (determinate). The cordons take more work as they are trained to grow on a single stem and need staking and pruning. However, this is pleasant enough work and no hardship if you are just growing a few. Amongst the cordons are some of the most popular varieties – 'Gardener's Delight' which has abundant small fruits and 'Money Maker', universally loved for its flavour and vigour.

The bush types need less attention though it's a good idea to get the plants off the ground. The cheap and effective way is to put in a few stakes and 'weave' between them with string to make a tomato 'hedge'. The smaller the tomato the quicker it will mature, a thought to keep in mind if you live in a cool part of the country.



Worth looking at are the super fast tomatoes from wintery Russia. However, the cherry tomato 'Sub Arctic Plenty' still takes the lead, maturing from seed to plate in 50 days. Heirloom 'The Amateur' and 'Red Alert' are also good varieties for both speed and taste. Another advantage of growing tomatoes quickly is that, with luck, you will be a jump ahead of blight which strikes in hot damp weather.

A new development is the runner/French bean cross. French beans don't need pollinating whereas runner beans do. As runner beans are notorious for their 'poor setting', not helped by the sad lack of bees, this seems to be a good idea. *Gardening Which* has done trials on runners including four of these crosses – 'Aintree', 'Firestorm', 'Moonlight' and Wey'.



'Wey', (named after a Surrey river) came third in the trial of 18 varieties, It proved easy to pick and produced consistently through September to early October. The crosses were deemed to be 'smoother, sweeter and less beany' than the others. The top prize winners, however, were straight runner beans, the modern 'White Lady' and 'Red Flame' both known as excellent all-rounders.

Peppers, chillies and aubergines are all grown in the same way and all are still borderline. Grow them on in pots and then you can move them around to the warmest and most sheltered places.

Peppers are the hardiest of the three and aubergines the least. If aubergines catch the slightest chill, the flowers are inclined to drop off. There has been some breakthrough with the development of grafted varieties however. They are said to be less temperamental and more disease resistant. The new grafted Aubergine 'Scorpio' was entered by Birmingham City Council for the Chelsea Flower Show Plant of the Year Award, for its vigour, disease resistance and increased yield. So it might well be worth

a try.



Summer squash and courgettes are blissfully easy to grow and highly rewarding. It is not too late to sow them early this month or buy a little plant and try growing it in the compost heap. One or two plants will keep a family going. Picked young, a single plant should produce four or dainty courgettes a day. The variety of butternut squash, specially bred for the UK and guaranteed to do well as far north as Lancashire, is the RHS award winning 'Hunter'. It matures in 105 days, four weeks earlier than average.

Along with the ratatouille-style vegetables, don't forget the Mediterranean herbs, rosemary, thyme and oregano. Hot sunshine releases the heady scent of their essential oils as you brush past. Plant them around where you sit or throw them onto the barbecue. Basil is a must for tomato salads. Nasturtiums petals and their mustardy leaves are a taste of summer. Strawberries should be out now.

Rejoice, June is a lovely month of plenty.

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The summer squash look fab. Must give those a go. Thanks Caroline.

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