

Spring Jobs in the Fruit & Vegetable Garden

This covers the months of March, April and May.

Clear the plot of last year's summer and autumn crops as soon as possible if you have not already done so.

Bed preparation. If you are a digger (some people manage without digging) then you should complete this job as soon as possible in the early spring. Incorporate any manure / compost at this time and level the soil in preparation for sowing / planting. Apply a balanced fertiliser such as Growmore or BFB (Blood, Fish and Bone) around sowing time or later.

Early Planting. Garlic and onion sets can be planted in February or early March (weather conditions permitting). Early potatoes can be planted from around mid-March and main crop potatoes from mid-April.

TRY NOT TO BE IN A RUSH TO SOW. This is arguably the best single piece of advice for growers. Articles in newspapers and magazines tend to be full of talk about getting started in January and February. However, unless you have the necessary heat and light indoors or the necessary temperatures outdoors then very early sowing is unlikely to be successful. Do not worry if you sow in April (say) rather than March as the later germination will be better and the plants will often catch up when the weather eventually warms up from late May onwards. Better to be driven by the weather rather than by the calendar.

Outdoor sowing in March. Includes broad beans, early peas, leeks, brassicas and salad material.

Outdoor sowing in April. All root crops – carrots, parsnips, beetroot *et cetera*, spinach, main crop peas, some herbs such as parsley, chervil and dill, plus more salads (sow salads little and often (say fortnightly) from late April until early August for a continuous supply until mid / late autumn).

Outdoor sowing in May. Runner beans, french beans and any indeed any other sort of bean. Courgettes and marrows can also be sown directly into the soil at this time.

Planting out of indoor sown / bought plants. Plants which are not susceptible to frost damage can be planted out as soon as they are large enough and have been hardened off. They include brassicas and salads. Half-hardy plants (i.e. those that are susceptible to frost damage) can be at risk from overnight frosts until the end of May. They include tomatoes, courgettes, marrows, cucumbers, squashes, peppers, aubergines, runner beans, french beans, *et cetera*. If you want to take a chance and plant earlier then some limited protection can be afforded by covering the plants with cheap horticultural fleece which will usually ward off a ground frost – but not an air frost. Better still, put them under cloches or 5 litre plastic water bottles with the bottoms cut off, supplemented with horticultural fleece on cold nights.

Weeding. Weeds really get going around early / mid-May. The precise time in any given year is a good indicator that conditions are now ideal for any outdoor sowing. Weeding is particularly important in May and June if your plants are to be given sufficient space and light to grow well.

Pests. The dangers to seedlings and young plants early in the growing season tend to come primarily from slugs and snails although earwigs, thrips and flea beetles can also be a problem.

Harvesting. Rhubarb is usually the first crop to be picked. Last year's sowings of broccoli and spring cabbage will be ready. They will be followed by salad material such as radish and lettuce from early sowings, and just possibly spinach and early carrots if the weather is kind.

For newbies - find a good book on sowing / planting or seek advice on the web. Hessayon's **Expert Guide books** are a popular and useful starter although you will probably find that after a season or two you will be looking for more detailed advice. **Growing Vegetables** by Tony Biggs (in collaboration with RHS) has been recommended by various growers. In addition, there is plenty of material to be found on the web although it tends to be of variable quality. The allotments page on the Sunningdale Parish Council website contains links to a couple of useful articles for new growers. Meanwhile, allotment forums on the web can also be a useful source of information.