

Summer Jobs in the Fruit & Vegetable Garden

This covers late May and the months of June, July and August.

Outdoor sowing in May. While this is traditionally the month for the direct sowing of runner and french beans, any crop can be directly sown outdoors this month, particularly tender items such as courgettes, squashes and marrows.

Outdoor sowing in June and July. Further sowings can be made of most crops in June. Even in July it is possible to continue to sow salads, peas and carrots for autumn picking. If possible, choose early varieties for July sowing as they require less time to come to fruition.

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 grow prolifically from May through to the end of September. Weeding is particularly essential during May and June when the danger is that the weeds will otherwise crowd out your young seedlings and hamper their growth, as well as providing a home for pests such as slugs, snails, flea beetles *et cetera*.

Crop protection. Beware that the local wild life may eat your plants and crops before you get a chance to sample the fruits of your labour. Birds will go for any soft fruit; pigeons will strip brassica plants and peas / mangetout; squirrels and parakeets have a taste for sweet corn; while rabbits will eat almost anything. It follows that some form of netting is usually advisable, if only during the period when crops ripen.

Pests. The possible pests that you may need to battle, mainly during May, June and July, include: slugs and snails (particularly during wet spells), black fly on beans, spinach and various other crops; and caterpillars on brassicas and gooseberries. Your approach to the eradication of pests will depend on your philosophy on the use of chemicals. However, a lot of remedial work can be achieved without recourse to chemicals by going over the plants regularly and rubbing out caterpillar eggs and aphid “eggs”, which are both usually found on the underside of leaves, before they have a chance to hatch and cause damage.

Watering. This is an inevitable activity during the summer months. If possible, try to target the water where it is required rather than just spraying it over the entire growing area. Weed suppressant material, where it is employed, can bring the added benefit of helping to preserve moisture. Also, pots sunk into the ground next to potentially thirsty plants such as courgettes, marrows and tomatoes can help to target watering by pouring it into the pots and hence directly to the roots thus avoiding any wastage.

Harvesting. The majority of soft fruit is harvested during June, the main exception being blackberries which tend to crop from late July through to early autumn. Autumn raspberries and strawberries can also extend the season. The traditional glut of vegetables typically lasts from mid-July until early September. One of the grower’s objectives should be to extend this period of harvesting as much as possible. Broad beans, spinach, salads, early carrots, early peas and mangetout can all be harvested in June from early sowings, while runner beans, french beans, peas, carrots and salads can be picked through into the middle of October from later sowings. Squashes and pumpkins need a long growing season and they are not usually picked until September and October. In addition, there are main crop and late potatoes plus main crop carrots which are usually not harvested until autumn. We are focusing on summer crops here; there are of course many winter crops such as leeks, parsnips, sprouts, winter cabbage, winter cauliflower, kale, jerusalem artichokes *et cetera* which will considerably extend the period of harvesting.

Finally, do enjoy the fruits of your labour. We all have successes and failures every year. Do not get too carried away by the former and try to learn from the latter.