

Vegetable Directory

Contents

Artichoke, Globe	3
Artichoke, Jerusalem.....	4
Asparagus.....	5
Aubergine.....	6
Bean, Broad.....	7
Bean, French	8
Bean, Runner.....	10
Beetroot	11
Broccoli, Calabrese.....	13
Broccoli, Sprouting.....	14
Brussels Sprouts	16
Cabbage	17
Carrots.....	19
Cauliflower	21
Celeriac.....	22
Celery	23
Chard.....	24
Chicory	25
Claytonia	27
Corn Salad	28
Courgette and Summer Squash	29
Cucumber.....	30
Florence Fennel.....	32
Garlic	33
Kale.....	34
Kohlrabi	36
Leeks	37
Lettuce	39
Mibuna	41
Mizuna	43
Oca	44
Onions	46
Oriental Mustards	48

Vegetable Directory

Parsley	50
Parsnip	51
Peas	53
Peppers (Chilli and Bell)	54
Potatoes	55
Pumpkin	57
Radish	58
Rhubarb	59
Rocket	60
Scorzonera	61
Shallots	62
Spinach, Annual	63
Spinach, Perpetual	64
Spring Onions/Scallions	65
Squash (Summer and Autumn)	66
Swede	67
Sweetcorn	68
Tomatoes	69
Turnip	71
Yacon	72

Vegetable Directory

Artichoke, Globe

Why Grow It?

Globe Artichokes are no relation to Jerusalem Artichoke – in fact, they couldn't be more different. Whereas Jerusalem artichokes will grow in any soil, and produce enormous yields of knobby tubers underground, Globe Artichokes are grown for the dense hearts that are inside flowerheads which grow on top of a massive thistle-like plant. They are low yield (a plant that takes up a meter of space produces just a dozen heads), and fiddly to cook with quite frankly, but the plants are beautiful in their own right.



Sowing

Growing from seed is possible, but many GIYers use more reliable "offsets" which are the sideshoots from an established plant. They will need a very fertile soil in a sunny, sheltered position. To grow from seed, sow seeds in module trays indoors in March – plant them on in to larger 10cm pots and plant out in June after hardening off. Space them at least 1 meter apart. Cover the plants with fleece if there is a risk of frost. Offsets are planted about 5cm deep. Trim the leaves to 13cm after planting.

Growing

Keep plants weed free and water well. In the first year remove the flowerhead as soon as it appears – this will give you a better crop the next year (sounds great in theory, but not so hot if you are an instant gratification kind of person). To prepare plants for the winter, remove any dead stems and dying foliage. Fork over the soil around the plants and then put a thick layer of well rotted manure or compost around them. Give them a high potash liquid feed in the spring.

Harvesting

Harvest the largest, top globe first when it turns fat and soft and just before the scales start to open out. Cut a short length of stalk with it. Then harvest the other heads as they mature. You will get approx a dozen of them between June and August. Globe Artichokes will produce globes every year for 3-4 years and then they start to produce progressively less. At this stage, it's worth propagating new plants by cutting offsets from old ones. So their lifespan is about 5 years in total.

Recommended Varieties

Violetto di Chioggia

Green Globe

Problems

Globe Artichokes are relatively problem free apart from the usual suspects – snails, slugs, aphids etc.

GIY Tips

1. Make sure you water the plants well in the summer, if they don't have enough H₂O you will end up with disappointingly small globes.
2. Globe Artichokes make a beautiful, edible addition to the flower border

Vegetable Directory

Artichoke, Jerusalem

Why Grow It?

These knobby roots are not to everyone's liking and they have an unfortunate association with flatulence (they are often nicknamed, rather unimaginatively, fartichokes). On the other hand they are a sinch to grow, suffer no diseases, are exceptionally prolific, will grow pretty much in any soil, and to my mind make for a great winter soup. The tall plants (up to 3m) are grown for their tubers which grow underground.



Sowing

Sow them exactly as you would spuds – get yourself some artichoke tubers (they might be trickier to come across than spuds – ask a fellow GIYer if they can give you a few tubers), make a hole about 15cm deep and drop a tuber in to it every 30cm in a row. Then backfill with soil. You will only need about 5 plants. Don't worry about including them in any rotation – they can be grown wherever you have the space, but since they grow exceptionally tall, chose your site carefully – they will cast a shadow on their neighbours in the veggie patch.

Growing

Earth up the plants several times in the season to provide some support to the plant as it grows and also to increase yield. When they are 30cm tall, earth up to 15cm. In the autumn when the leaves go yellow cut the stems right down to ground level and compost them.

Harvesting

You can start harvesting artichokes in October or November and they will stay in the ground quite happily right through the winter. You can lift them and store in a box of sand in a cold (but frost free), dark shed. They will last until April this way. Left in the ground they will eventually succumb to slugs and they will probably prevent you from preparing the bed for whatever will be grown there next year. Make sure to remove absolutely every last tuber from the soil – otherwise you will be plagued with them growing back next year.

Recommended Varieties

- Fuseau
- Gerard

Problems

Try to make sure you only use the least knobby tubers to grow from - the smoother the tubers you use to grow plants, the smoother the resulting crop will be. You will know why this is important when you go to peel them!

GIY Tips

- Divide large tubers before planting, each one should be about the size of a golf ball.
- You can cut the plants down to 1.5m in late summer which apparently focuses the plants energy on tuber production.

Vegetable Directory

Asparagus

Why Grow It?

Asparagus isn't easy to grow – it's fussy about the soil it grows in and though it only crops for a little over a month, it takes up space in your veggie patch for the whole year. It also takes three years before you get any crop worth talking about. BUT (and it's a big but), once you get it going it will produce for twenty years and it is undeniably delicious. So if you have the space, and the patience, give it a try.



Sowing

You can sow asparagus from seed but honestly – why would you bother? A plant that will crop for two decades is worth investing some money in. Buy young asparagus plants which are called “crowns”. Choose your site carefully – they will need good fertile soil in full sun with wind protection – raised beds are a good choice, particularly if your soil is heavy. Make sure the plot is free of perennial weeds before you start. Plant about ten plants in early spring – make a trench 30cm wide and 20cm deep (if you have more than one row, leave 50cm between rows) – add a thin layer of well rotted compost or manure and then add a 10 cm layer of soil in a ridge in the center of the trench. Place the crowns 30cm apart on top of the ridge with their roots splayed out. Then fill in the trench with soil, covering the crowns, and water. Spread a layer of well rotted compost or manure on top.

Growing

Keep the bed weed free. Then wait. Every year, add a mulch in the autumn. Asparagus produces a mass of fern like foliage that grows unexpectedly tall – up to 6ft. It will need supporting with canes otherwise it will fall over.

Harvesting

Don't harvest for the first two years – you are trying to build up some strength in the plants. In the third year (see what I mean about patience?) you can harvest some spears but only a few. Thereafter you can harvest for about six weeks from May. *Cut them when they are 13-15cm long and about the width of your finger.*

Recommended Varieties

- Connovers Colossal
- Jersey Knight F1

Problems

The main problem is (surprise, surprise) slugs – they will eat the shoots before you can if you let them. Solution? Show them no mercy. In damp conditions foot and root rot can be an issue – if it strikes, remove the plants and destroy. Do not grow asparagus again in that spot.

GIY Tips

1. Asparagus needs to be grown in soil that has a pH of 6.3 to 7.5, buy yourself a testing kit and measure your soil pH before planting.

Vegetable Directory

Aubergine

Why Grow It?

They are a problematic veg to grow, tending towards being unreliable. Some years even a healthy looking plant won't provide much food. But nevertheless they are a compact and bushy plant, so you can always pop one or two in to a pot or in the soil in your greenhouse or polytunnel. If it works, they are a delicious treat. Most of us are familiar with the beautiful, glossy black aubergine but you can also try growing pink, white and even orange fruits.



Sowing

They require a reasonably fertile soil, good ventilation and a long growing season. You need to sow them as early as possible, certainly by mid March. Sow five seeds in a 9cm pot and place it on a warm sunny windowsill or on a heated propagator. They will need temperatures of about 18-20 degrees Celsius to germinate. About a week after the seedlings have appeared, prick them out and put each seedling in a 7cm pot. About a month later (when 5cm high) pot them on again in to 10cm pots.

Growing

Aubergines are a tropical plant, so they won't do well outside in Ireland. Plant the aubergines out in to the polytunnel or greenhouse in May – only do so if the weather is mild and all risk of frost has passed. Allow 45cm between plants (though there are dwarf varieties available that can be planted 30cm apart). You could also try planting them in growbags or large pots (20cm). Water regularly – they like humidity. Don't allow the plant to get taller than about 50cm – if this happens, pinch out the growing tip which will encourage the plant to become bushy. Fruit bearing branches may require a support stick.

Harvesting

Harvest the fruits when they are a good size and shiney.

Recommended Varieties

- Black Beauty - An old heirloom variety but still very popular. Produces long, smooth purplish-black fruits with a good flavour.
- Rosa di Bianca

Problems

Unfortunately aubergine plants are prone to a range of problems including whitefly/greenfly attacks, blossom end rot and grey mould. An occasional garlic spray will help and will make the plants more vigorous. Interplanting with marigolds will deter whitefly.

GIY Tips

2. It is wise to restrict each plant to producing about 5 fruits. Remove other fruits as they develop.
3. Feed every two weeks or so with a tomato or comfrey feed when the fruit starts to set.

Vegetable Directory

Bean, Broad

Why Grow It?

Broad Beans are generally the first legume to produce a crop, making them one of the first new-season crops of the year. Arguably they are not as tasty as peas or French beans, but they are very easy to grow and prolific, and they freeze well.



Sowing

Many GIYers sow “early” broad beans in the autumn for a late spring crop, but only do so if your soil is good – they won’t fare so well in wet, heavy clay. Alternatively sow in February for early summer crop. Dig in some well rotted manure before sowing. Broad beans are hardy so you can sow direct in the soil, or you can sow in module trays for transplanting later. Either way, sow 5cm deep. Transplant to 15cm apart. Sow extra seeds to provide spares in case some get eaten or fail to germinate.

Growing

Weed and water frequently. A mulch is a good idea around the base of the plants to preserve moisture. Pinch out the top growing shoot when the plant starts to set pods. Support the plants with individual stakes or canes. Alternatively, enclose a row of broad bean plants within a ring of twine strung between canes (this will stop them from toppling over).

Harvesting

The key is to keep picking em! The more you pick the more they will produce. Start cropping from the bottom of each plant and work your way up. Marvel at the beautiful white fleece inside the pod! The beans inside are at their **best when the membrane attaching them to the pod is green or white, not brown.**

Recommended Varieties

- Aquadulce Claudia — An excellent variety for autumn sowing, very hardy. Compact plants.
- Witkeim Manita — An excellent, high yielding variety with a large number of medium sized pods. Suitable for spring sowing.

Problems

The biggest problem for broad beans are blackfly which will be clearly visible at the top of the plant and stunt its growth. Pinching out the growing tip helps to prevent them. Chocolate spot is another problem and is not as much fun as it sounds – it’s actually a fungus that causes brown spots on the leaves and pods. It is most common in damp, humid weather – leaving enough space between plants will allow air to circulate between them and may prevent this problem.

GIY Tips

1. When the plant has finished cropping, cut the plant out but leave the root in the soil. Broad beans are nitrogen fixers. They take nitrogen from the air and fix it in the soil, which will be good for crops that will be planted there next year. If you dig up the root you will see tiny little white balls among the roots - these are nodules of nitrogen.
2. Broad beans are sweeter when small and in fact, you can eat the whole pod when they are 2-3cm.

Vegetable Directory

Bean, French

Why Grow It?

French beans are a little trickier to grow than runner beans, but they are arguably more tasty. There is huge variety available – green, purple, flecked, cream – and they are quite versatile. Immature french bean pods are excellent to eat whole, while the beans inside larger pods (often called haricot beans) are also very tasty. Climbing french beans make a very attractive addition to the summer veggie patch.



Sowing

There are two types of french bean – climbing and dwarf. Dwarf beans grow just 45cm tall and are surprisingly prolific for a small plant. Climbing french beans grow up to 6-8ft tall and produce a lot more beans in the same footprint (important if you don't have much space - you get more bang for your buck). Seeds can be sown direct in the soil or in module trays ready for transplanting - we find the module tray approach better as slugs always seem to get the tiny seedlings when we sow them direct! There's no point in sowing too early as they will be ready to transplant when the weather outside is too cold for them. Sow two seeds per pot 5cm deep in late April or early May. Sow again in July for a late summer crop.

Growing

Plant out when the seedlings are 8-10cm tall following a period of hardening off. Add some well-rotted compost to the holes as you plant out. A bamboo wigwam or double row of canes is the best support structure – we sometimes put runner and french beans in to the same wigwam row. Put three or four beans at the base of each bamboo leaving 30cm between the canes. Plant dwarf varieties in blocks so that they provide each other with shelter and support – leave about 15cm between plants. Hoe around the plants regularly to suppress weeds. Water regularly in dry weather particularly when the flowers start to form. Mulch around the plants if it's very dry.

Harvesting

It takes 2-3 months for the French bean to produce its first harvest. Harvest from June to October. Start harvesting when the pods are about 10cm long. The more you pick, the more it will churn out. A plant will continue to pod for nearly two months if you keep picking – so keep doing so, even if you are fed up to the back teeth with beans (freeze them, you won't be so fed up of them in mid winter!). A neat trick is to apply a liquid feed (e.g. comfrey tea) when the plant has finished harvesting to promote a second crop.

Recommended Varieties

- Cobra (climbing) — Cobra produces a huge yield of delicious stringless beans over a long period. This variety is very hard to match. It is suitable for indoor cropping as well as outdoors in sheltered gardens.
- Purple Teepee (dwarf) — My favourite Dwarf French Bean variety. You really can't miss the beans as they are produced above the leaves and are a lovely purple colour. But don't worry – they turn green when cooked.
- Safari (dwarf)

Problems

French beans are susceptible to late frosts – cover young plants with fleece if frost is forecast. Slugs are a problem for seedlings – seems they absolutely love them. Bean seed fly can be an issue – these are soil living grubs that damage seeds and seedlings.

Vegetable Directory

GIY Tips

1. Pick a sunny and sheltered site to grow your beans in.
2. Haricot beans are obtained by leaving the pods on the plant until they turn yellow - hang the plants indoors to dry and when the pods are brittle, remove the beans and dry them on a shallow tray for several days. Store in an airtight container.

Vegetable Directory

Bean, Runner

Why Grow It?

Incredibly prolific, incredibly attractive looking, and easy to grow. Runner Beans plants will grow up to 10ft tall and a row of them growing up a cane wigwam will make a great feature in the summer vegetable patch. The beans themselves are tasty and freeze well. The only downside in fact to runner beans is that you will have to pick them every other day in the summer months – so don't be tempted to sow too many of them! A single plant will produce up to a kilo of beans.



Sowing

Seeds can be sown direct in the soil or in module trays ready for transplanting. A disadvantage of the former is that slugs can get at the seedlings before they get a chance to get established. A disadvantage of the latter is that they can quickly outgrow their module tray so when they are ready to plant out, they are REALLY ready to plant out! Sow seeds in May, in pots, 5cm deep. There's no point in sowing too early as they will be ready to transplant when the weather outside is too cold for them. You can sow an early crop in the polytunnel or greenhouse if you wish.

Growing

Plant three or four seedlings at the base of each cane - they seem to fare better when growing together like this. Tie them loosely to the support. They will very soon take hold and start to wind their way up the support at a rate of knots. Hoe around the plants regularly to suppress weeds. Water regularly in dry weather particularly when the flowers start to form. Mulch around the plants if it's very dry. Pinch out the growing tips when they reach the top of the support.

Harvesting

It takes about 3 months to get the first crop, but once it starts, you won't be able to keep up. Try to pick the beans while they are young – they get stringy as they get older. The more you pick, the more it will churn out.

Recommended Varieties

- Enorma — A fantastic runner bean – beautiful flowers, delicious beans and with 'no strings attached'. You can't go wrong.
- Scarlet Emperor

Problems

Runner beans are generally problem free. Slugs are a problem for seedlings – seems they absolutely love them.

GIY Tips

1. Older beans have strings down both sides which are unpleasant to eat, so cut them off. Slice beans and fry or boil them. They can also be blanched and frozen.
2. Bear in mind that the plants get incredibly heavy, make sure the support structure is solid.

Vegetable Directory

Beetroot

Why Grow It?

Many people have an aversion to beetroot because the only way they have ever tasted it is boiled and drowned in vinegar! If this is your experience, it deserves a second chance for it is a fine root crop, that is (a) easy to grow, (b) can be eaten all year round since it stores well, (c) is incredibly good for you and (d) has multiple uses – boil it, bake it, grate it in to salads, make chutneys, wine and even cakes (beetroot brownies, yum). Try baking young, small (golf-ball sized) beets in the oven wrapped in tinfoil – they are a revelation.



Sowing

Beetroot likes a deep, sandy soil, manured the previous winter. Apply organic fertiliser about a week before sowing. Germination is in about 10 days and you will have roots to eat in about 3 months. Sow either in module trays (for careful transplanting about a month after sowing) or in situ outside about 1 inch deep, 4 inches apart in rows about 12 inches apart. Traditionally two seeds are sown at each point and then one is taken away when the seedlings are 1 inch high. Bear in mind that a beetroot seed is actually a “cluster” of up to five seeds, so you may need to thin out if they all germinate. Sow every two weeks from April until July (for a continuous supply of young beets) although you can start even earlier (March) in a greenhouse or polytunnel. Sow another batch in July which will be ready to lift in October for winter storage.

Growing

Keep the ground weed free by hoeing carefully. Young beets are sensitive to cold spells which is why we generally wait until April to sow. Protect young seedlings with fleece if required. Overwatering encourages leaf growth at the expense of root formation.

Harvesting

Start to harvest when they are golf ball size – leaving every second one behind to fully mature. Do not let beets grow larger than a tennis ball. You can also harvest the leaves for salads but not too many as the root needs the leaves too. Lift July-sown crop in October and store in sand or peat – will keep for 3-4 months. Twist off leaves a few centimetres above root before storing. Handle carefully – they will “bleed” if damaged.

Recommended Varieties

- Pablo F1 — It’s the one to get excited about. You really can’t go wrong with Pablo. It is absolutely delicious, reliable and high yielding and you’ll never get that bitter taste that can put people off beetroot. Pablo is an all round variety suitable for early sowings as well as for storing.
- Boltardy — One of the best known and most popular varieties available, Beetroot 'Boltardy' produces good yields of deep red, globe shaped roots with a superb sweet flavour and tender, ring free flesh.
- Detroit Globe — A very old maincrop beetroot variety that still performs extremely well. It is highly recommended by Kylemore Abbey Gardens.
- Bulls Blood

Problems

Beetroot is generally trouble free but black bean aphid and mangold fly can occasionally be troublesome.

GIY Tips

Vegetable Directory

1. Soak seeds in warm water for 20 mins before sowing to aid germination.
2. Beetroot doesn't like dry soil and it causes 'woody' roots (very unpleasant). Keep soil moist in dry weather and/or mulch to conserve moisture

Vegetable Directory

Broccoli, Calabrese

Why Grow It?

Why not? It's relatively handy to grow and can be succession sown so that you can crop almost all summer and autumn long. It's important to mention that the standard "broccoli" that we buy in shops with the big green tightly-packed head is actually called calabrese. It is traditionally harvested in summer and autumn. "Sprouting broccoli" is a different vegetable – it produces small florets in purple or white varieties and is traditionally harvested in winter and spring.



Sowing

Sow three or four plants indoors in late March, the same in early May and again in early June. Sow two seeds per module in a module tray about 2cm deep. If both seeds germinate, remove the weaker one. The seedlings will be ready to transplant in a month. You can sow a couple of plants in early March indoors for an early polytunnel/greenhouse crop.

Growing

Include calabrese and sprouting broccoli in your brassica rotation – do not grow them anywhere that you have grown any member of the cabbage family the previous year. Plant them in soil that has been manured well the previous autumn. Space plants 15cm apart in rows that are 30cm apart. Water well and frequently and keep the base of the plants weed free. If the plant dries out you will get a low yield. An occasional liquid feed made from nettles will help give the plants the nitrogen they need.

Harvesting

It will be ready to harvest 3-4 months after sowing so you should get your first calabrese crop in early July. Start harvesting by cutting the central head before any of its flowers open and while it is 10cm diameter or less. Once this is removed, smaller side shoots will develop. The more you cut, the more it will produce. It should go on cropping for 4-6 weeks.

Recommended Varieties

- Marathon F1 — Calabrese is the broccoli from the shops with the dark green head. Matures in autumn and has good cold and disease resistance. Harvest when necessary as it goes into flower very quickly.
- Green Magic F1

Problems

Calabrese is susceptible to the same issues as cabbage and other brassicas.

GIY Tips

1. When the plant is coming close to harvest, check them every few days, the flower heads quickly move beyond the densely packed stage (at which they are perfect) and open up in to yellow flowers. They will look pretty then but they are useless from a GIY perspective.
2. Wider spacing (45cm) between plants will produce larger central heads but you get less plants per square meter.

Vegetable Directory

Broccoli, Sprouting

Why Grow It?

“Sprouting broccoli” is a different vegetable to the standard broccoli that we get in the shops (which is actually called calabrese). Sprouting broccoli produces small florets in purple or white varieties and is traditionally harvested in winter and spring. It is a fantastic vegetable to grow as it will provide plenty of food at a time when there’s very little else available in the veg patch (from February to April).



Sowing

Whereas calabrese is succession sown, sprouting broccoli is only sown once, in early June with the aim of getting three or four good healthy plants which will grow through the year and then produce food the following spring. Sow two seeds per module in a module tray about 2cm deep in a greenhouse or polytunnel. If both seeds germinate, remove the weaker one. The seedlings will be ready to transplant in a month. It makes sense to sow an early and late variety at the same time, so that you will get a longer harvesting season.

Growing

Unlike calabrese (where the seedlings are planted 15cm apart), sprouting broccoli needs a lot more space. Allow 75cm between the plants. Include calabrese and sprouting broccoli in your brassica rotation – do not grow them anywhere that you have grown any member of the cabbage family the previous year. Plant them in soil that has been manured well the previous autumn. Water well and frequently (in dry weather) and keep the base of the plants weed free. Sprouting broccoli plants become quite tall and heavy – they will need support to prevent them falling over in gales.

Harvesting

The plants will start producing shoots around February and will go on cropping for up to 3 months. The shoots should be cut when 15cm long. Harvest regularly and do not allow to go to flower – if this happens remove the flowers immediately to allow the plant to continue producing shoots.

Recommended Varieties

- Purple Sprouting mix — our own blend of 5 varieties – that will yield delicious and healthy spears from February until May.
- Summer Purple — has been specially bred for Summer cropping. Produces excellent yields of purple spears from July to September when sown at intervals. Pick regularly for the highest yields, these prolific plants will keep producing over a long period.
- White Sprout Early — produces white heads in early Spring from plants sown the previous year. Similar to the purple varieties but with a milder flavor. Provides a source of Spring greens when fresh vegetables are scarce. Red Arrow
- White Star

Problems

Sprouting broccoli is susceptible to the same issues as cabbage and other brassicas.

Vegetable Directory

GIY Tips

1. The more you cut, the more it will produce – so blanch and freeze if you have more than you can handle.
2. Give them a good mulch with some compost over the winter – this will feed the plant and by earthing up you are also supporting the base.

Vegetable Directory

Brussels Sprouts

Why Grow It?

File this one under the “love ‘em or loathe ‘em” category – for some people Brussels Sprouts are the devil’s spawn, reluctantly tolerated once a year on Christmas day. For many GIYers however they are a vital part of the winter veg garden, even though they are relatively difficult to grow, have a very long growing season (8 months) and take up a lot of space. The reason we persevere with them is that three or four plants will produce a mound of produce in the lean winter months – each healthy plant produces up to 2kg of sprouts.



Sowing

Best sown in module trays indoors – sow one seed per module 2cm deep. The key with sprouts is to time your sowings so that you have a long harvesting period – if you sow three times between March and May you will be eating fresh sprouts between December and March. Bear in mind that four or six plants in total is probably enough for most families. Sow your earlies in mid March, then sow again in mid April and again in mid May.

Growing

Sprouts need to be included in your brassica rotation – do not plant them where you grew any members of the cabbage family the previous year. They need a good rich soil, manured the previous winter. They like a firm soil – plants grow very tall so their roots need good soil support. Seedlings will be ready to transplant about 4-5 weeks after sowing. Space plants at least 60cm apart – it will seem counter-intuitive with such a small plant but don’t be tempted to cram them any tighter. Fit a brassica collar made from felt or carpet around the base of the plant – this will prevent cabbage root fly. A net cover will also prevent cabbage white butterfly from laying eggs – even still, you will need to check leaves regularly and remove any caterpillars. Water well to start and keep weeds down. Earth up the stems after about a month to give the plant more support. They will benefit from a liquid organic feed (nettle or comfrey) in summer. Remove yellowing/dying leaves regularly.

Harvesting

Harvest sprouts from the bottom of the plant first, as soon as they are ready to eat – snap them off by pulling downwards. The leaves at the top of the stems can be cooked like spring greens – very tasty they are too.

Recommended Varieties

- Brigitte F1 — an excellent variety with excellent disease resistance and flavour and also the buds don’t open up prematurely.

Problems

Sprouts are susceptible to the same problems as other brassicas including clubroot and cabbage root fly. As ever, prevention is better than cure. Mealy aphids are a particular issue with sprouts.

GIY Tips

1. When you remove the plant, smash the stem up with a hammer before composting, otherwise it will take forever to break down.
2. Don't boil the life out of your sprouts when cooking, cut them in half, blanch them for a few minutes in boiling water and then fry them in some butter with a little chopped garlic.

Vegetable Directory

Cabbage

Why Grow It?

Pair it with bacon or shred it for a slaw, cabbage is a supremely useful, healthy vegetable that grows well in our relatively cool climate and is easy to grow. With a little planning it's also possible to have a supply of cabbage all year round, even though the coldest of winters. The only downside tends to be the amount of space they take up.



Sowing

A foolproof way to grow healthy cabbage seedlings is to sow them in module seed trays – sow one or two seeds in each module 1.5cm deep. Thin out the weaker seedling. Cabbages will germinate in about a week and will be ready for planting about three weeks later. Make sure to harden off early sowings carefully. The key with cabbage is to plant in to firm ground – the root and stem will eventually have to support a very heavy head! Since they are a hungry crop, add plenty of compost or manure the previous autumn. Water plants well before sowing – create a hole with a dibber, pop the seedling in and then firm in very well. Spacing will determine the size of the heads - between 45-60cm is about right. Cabbages will tolerate partial shade. Include cabbages in your brassica rotation – do not plant them where there have been brassicas for at least 3-4 years previously. A suggested planting plan for a near continuous supply of cabbage (assuming you have the space):

Summer Cabbage – sow early April

Autumn Cabbage – sow early May

Winter Cabbage – sow early June

Spring Cabbage – sow early August

Growing

Hoe around young seedlings regularly to keep weeds down. Water regularly to prevent the roots from drying out. Earthing up stems will help the plant to support the head, particularly in a windy site.

Harvesting

Harvest spring and summer cabbages as soon as they have formed good compact heads. Autumn and winter cabbages will stand much longer in the ground, but you can lift them and store in a cool shed if you want to clear your beds for the winter. Harvest by cutting through the base of the stem.

Vegetable Directory

Recommended Varieties

- Vertus (Savoy) — a very frost hardy savoy cabbage with finely blistered dark green leaves for harvesting from October until February.
- Hispi F1 (Spring) — a delicious early pointed cabbage. One of the most tender cabbages especially if grown in early spring in a tunnel. Be aware though that once it is ready it will crack, so only sow a few seeds at a time.
- Stonehead F1 (Summer) — an excellent summer cabbage producing a dark green head with a solid heart with an excellent flavour.
- Red Drumhead (Red) — Solid, dark red, round heads of fine texture, excellent for pickling and for speciality cooked dishes. Summer/Autumn maturing.
- January King Late no 3 (Winter) — A very hardy, frost resistant variety with red –tinged leaves. The colder it gets the redder the leaves. Matures from November until January. Harvest as required.
- Tundra (Winter)
- Dottenfelder Dauer (White Dutch)

Problems

Cabbage Root Fly maggots eat the roots causing the plant to stop growing. Prevention is better than cure – 15cm wide “collars” made from felt or carpet placed around the stem at soil level, can prevent the adult fly from laying its eggs. The other major pests are butterfly (large and small white) and moths which lay their eggs on the underside of leaves – the resulting caterpillars will munch their way through your crop in no time. You can remove the caterpillars as they appear, but again the best option is prevention – cover your cabbage crop with appropriate netting to stop the butterfly laying its eggs on the leaves. A more serious (though less prevalent) problem is clubroot, a fungus which can stay in the soil for up to 20 years.

GIY Tips

1. You can test to see if the young seedling is planted firmly enough as follows: after planting, tug at a leaf, the leaf should pull off (as opposed to pulling the whole seedling out of the ground).
2. After harvesting a cabbage head, cut a cross in to the stem, if left in the soil, each quadrant in the stem will sprout baby cabbage leaves which effectively gives you a second crop from the one plant.

Vegetable Directory

Carrots

Why Grow It?

Perhaps not quite for the beginner, carrots are difficult enough to grow and require a deep, light, stone free, fertile soil to do well. But if you get the soil right, you will be rewarded with a crunchy, sweet and flavoursome crop which will store well. Two or three well-timed sowings of carrots should see you self-sufficient all year round in this classic stockpot vegetable (which is full of vitamin A). The GIYer can also try out lots of different varieties of carrots (generally speaking such variety is not on offer in supermarkets). We generally associate carrots with the colour orange, when in fact you can grow carrots of other colours too - before the 1700s most carrots were purple or white in colour (the orange carrot was developed relatively recently to honour the Royal House of Orange in Holland).



Sowing

Carrots are best sown direct in the soil as they do not transplant well. Choose an open, sunny space in your veggie patch. Never add fresh manure when sowing carrots as it will cause them to fork, and encourage leafy growth (rather than root growth, which is what you're really after!). You can however add well rotted manure the previous autumn to the area where you will grow carrots. Dig the bed well during the autumn to make sure there is at least a foot of good friable soil – compacted soil equals stunted carrots. Apply a general purpose organic fertiliser (such as chicken manure pellets) about two weeks before sowing.

Carrot seeds are tiny so this is one situation where you will really need to get the seed bed to a “fine tilth” - if you don't, the seeds can drop down in between the clumps of soil and they will then be too deep to germinate. From mid April (or March under a cloche), sow thinly at 1cm deep in rows 15-20cm apart. Keep the seed bed moist to encourage germination. Carrots are slow to germinate so don't be alarmed if nothing seems to be happening! It could take 2-3 weeks. Thin to about 5cm when the seedlings are large enough to handle. Remove weeds carefully. Sow maincrop for storage in June. You can also sow in August for a tender winter crop, covering them with cloches after October.

Growing

Carrots dislike competition from weeds so keep the bed weed free – use a hoe along the rows and hand-weed around the carrots. Once the plants get established the leaves provide a thick canopy which will keep weeds away. Carrots don't need a lot of watering, but in very dry weather water every two to three weeks.

Harvesting

Baby carrots will be ready about 7 weeks after sowing, and you can leave the rest behind to grow more (maincrop varieties take about 11 weeks). Lift by hand, or ease out with a fork carefully if ground is hard. Lift carrots rather than leaving them in the ground to grow too large – they are not too tasty when very big. Lift maincrop carrots in October and store in boxes of sand – they can be left in the soil if growth has stopped but they will be affected by frost. Before storing remove the foliage, leaving a 5cm stump on the carrot.

Vegetable Directory

Recommended Varieties

- Starca F1 —the first F1 hybrid carrot commercially available and still the favorite with many growers. Produces delicious long slender roots resistant to splitting.
- Early Nantes — produces long straight roots with good colour with a lovely sweet flavour. A blunt end early variety with very little core for successional sowing.
- Autumn King — one of the most reliable varieties. Well suited to heavy soils. Harvest in October for storing through the winter.
- Colour Mix — a selection of coloured carrots to add a bit of novelty and interest to the dinner table. Before orange won out in the 17th century breeding, carrots were available in a wide array of colours.
- Rochild
- Chantenay Red Cored
- Ya Ya F1

Problems

If blight is the bogeyman for spuds, then the carrot root fly is the same for carrots – this menace lays eggs in the soil around the carrots, and the little maggots tunnel in to roots which then rot. The main work involved in growing carrots therefore is to keep the carrot root fly away from your carrots – an effective way to do this is to cover the bed completely with bionet (this allows air, rain and sunlight in but not the carrot fly) or to put a 60cm barrier of fine mesh around the entire carrot bed. Be careful when thinning – the fly is attracted to the scent of the broken foliage. Remove all thinnings from the area and destroy. Some GIYers believe that intercropping with onions deters the fly as the smell of onions masks the smell of carrots (other GIYers hoot with derision at the idea). A solution of nettle, comfrey or garlic spray can be applied fortnightly to the foliage to disguise the smell of the carrot foliage from the fly.

GIY Tips

1. The main thing to watch out for with failed germination is seed falling down between clumps of soil and therefore being too deep to germinate. This is why a fine tilth is so important, an even seed bed ensures the seed stays at the right depth.
2. Carrots go green if exposed to the light so cover any exposed tops with soil.
3. Some GIYers have reported success with sowing carrots in toilet roll inserts, the seed is sown indoors or under cover in an insert full of compost and then when the seedlings have developed, you plant the whole thing (insert and all) in to a hole in the ground. Using this method you avoid tampering with the root. If you want prize carrots, you can also try making a v-shaped hole in the soil with a dibber (to a depth of 6 inches or so), fill it with potting compost and sow the seed on top. This is very effective, but also very time-consuming.
4. If your soil is poor or shallow, try growing the stump-rooted Chantenay variety.

Vegetable Directory

Cauliflower

Why Grow It?

Cauliflower is a difficult veg to grow well, takes up a good deal of space and doesn't store particularly well - so when it comes to deciding whether it's worth growing you really have to consider how much you like to eat it. Home-grown cauliflower is definitely tastier than the mass-produced alternative.



Sowing

A foolproof way to grow healthy cauliflower seedlings is to sow them in module seed trays – sow one or two seeds in each module 1.5cm deep. Thin out the weaker seedling. They will germinate in about a week and will be ready for planting about three weeks later (when 5cm tall). Make sure to harden off early sowings carefully. For a steady supply of cauliflower, sow a few plants in March, May and June. Spacing will determine the size of the curds - between 60-70cm is about right. The more space you can give them, the healthier the plants will be. As with cabbages, cauliflowers should be planted in to firm, fertile, free-draining ground – the root and stem will eventually have to support a very heavy head! Water plants well before sowing – create a hole with a dibber, pop the seedling in and then firm in very well. Include cauliflower in your brassica rotation – do not plant them where there have been brassicas for at least 3-4 years previously.

Growing

Keep plants free of weeds and water regularly – if they dry out they are inclined to bolt. Late sowings can be given a feed of an organic liquid feed to encourage growth. You can protect curds from sun and frost damage by folding some of the surrounding leaves over the curd and tying with a rubber band or some twine.

Harvesting

Harvest while curds are white, packed firm and tight. Remove the plant from the soil and cut the head from the stem. Wash carefully (slugs can make their home in the base of the curds).

Recommended Varieties

- Aviron F1 — is a very reliable and also delicious cauliflower.

Problems

Cabbage Root Fly maggots eat the roots causing the plant to stop growing. Prevention is better than cure – 15cm wide “collars” made from felt or carpet placed around the stem at soil level, can prevent the adult fly from laying its eggs. The other major pests are butterfly (large and small white) and moths which lay their eggs on the underside of leaves – the resulting caterpillars will munch their way through your crop in no time. You can remove the caterpillars as they appear, but again the best option is prevention – cover your crop with appropriate netting to stop the butterfly laying its eggs on the leaves. A more serious (though less prevalent) problem is clubroot, a fungus which can stay in the soil for up to 20 years. Acidic soils can cause “tip-burn” which discolours the curds.

GIY Tips

1. If you are space constrained, you can sow cauliflowers as close together as 15cm, you will get lots of mini curds about 7cm in diameter.
2. Cauliflowers will freeze quite well so this is a legitimate method of storage if you have a good crop that you can't eat all at once.

Vegetable Directory

Celeriac

Why Grow It?

If you like the taste of celery, but find it a little cumbersome, then celeriac is the vegetable for you. Celeriac has a similar flavour to celery, but is grown for its knobbly, turnip-shaped swollen stem. As vegetables go, it's ugly as sin, but don't let that fool you – it tastes delicious. It's very hardy and (unlike celery) stores extremely well. A decent crop of celeriac can see you right through the winter months to late March. Celeriac is also referred to as knob celery or turnip rooted celery.



Sowing

Grow celeriac as you would with celery, but because it stores well, there's no need for succession sowing. A single sowing in late March or early April is all that's required. Broadcast (sprinkle liberally) the seed in to a pot filled with compost. As is the case with celery, celeriac seeds need light to germinate so do not cover the seed with compost. Place the pot somewhere warm (a sunny windowsill or a heating mat) – it's slow to germinate so don't expect any action for two to three weeks. Keep the compost moist. Prick the seedlings out in to module trays (one seedling per module) about 2 weeks after germination (when about 3cm tall). If you grow 24 celeriac you can enjoy one a week from October to the end of March. You will need 1m of veg bed for every 9 celeriac (where the bed is 1.2m wide).

Growing

Dig the bed where you are going to grow celeriac in the winter or early spring and add plenty of well rotted manure or compost. After hardening off well, plant out the seedlings in to the bed in May or when the seedlings are 10cm tall. Space the plants 35cm x 35cm apart. Celeriac is shallow rooting which means two things – firstly it will dry out easily so you will need to water well in dry weather (and/or mulch around the plants to conserve moisture). Secondly you need to be careful when hoeing in case you damage the roots.

Harvesting

Celeriac are ready to rock from October onwards. They can be left in the ground in a mild winter (though they can be a little vulnerable to worms etc which will bore inside) or lifted and stored in sand. Use a fork to gently lift the plant, roots and all.

Recommended Varieties

- Prinz (ORGANIC) — very close to Giant Prague is the most common of celeriac varieties, it produces quite a high yield and has a taste similar to normal celery. BUY FROM OUR SHOP
- Giant Prague

Problems

It's a healthy veg, so not much will bother it if you follow the guidelines above. Slugs like the seedlings however.

1. GIY Tips
2. In summer pick off the outer leaves on the top of the bulb – this will encourage the bulb to swell.
3. Spread a mulch around the plants in summer to preserve moisture in the soil.

Vegetable Directory

Celery

Why Grow It?

Good question – though growing celery has been made a lot easier with the arrival of self-blanching varieties, it's still a tricky enough prospect to grow well. But stick with it and it will reward you well. Celery is incredibly good for you and is a staple “stock-pot” veg. It tastes great raw and freezes well. Traditionally, growing celery was incredibly labour intensive because trenches had to be prepared to grow them in and then the celery had to be regularly earthed up to blanch or whiten the stems. Most GIYers now grow self-blanching (green) celery which does not require earthing up or trenching. Happy days.



Sowing

Dig the bed in the winter and add plenty of well rotted manure or compost. Add organic fertiliser (e.g chicken manure pellets) before planting. Slow to germinate so grow in module trays and then transplant. Sow in March for planting out in May (when they have four to six true leaves). Harden off before planting out. Self-blanching celery is typically planted in blocks rather than in rows, so the plants shade each other from light (thereby improving the blanching process).

Growing

Dig the bed where you are going to grow celeriac in the winter or early spring and add plenty of well rotted manure or compost. After hardening off well, plant out the seedlings in to the bed in May or when the seedlings are 10cm tall. Space the plants 35cm x 35cm apart. Celeriac is shallow rooting which means two things – firstly it will dry out easily so you will need to water well in dry weather (and/or mulch around the plants to conserve moisture). Secondly you need to be careful when hoeing in case you damage the roots.

Harvesting

Celery will be ready in approx 40 weeks – usually August-Oct. Lift as required but finish harvesting when frosts arrive. Use a fork to gently lift the plant, roots and all. A head of celery will keep in the fridge for up to 3 days.

Recommended Varieties

- Victoria F1 —is absolutely fantastic, producing strong upright stalks that are crisp and succulent. If you have failed to grow crunchy celery before and have failed, Victoria will come to your rescue.

Problems

Slugs like it. Also prone to celery leaf miner (tiny maggots that cause leaf blisters) and leaf spot (brown spots on leaf that look like blight).

GIY Tips

1. Celery freezes well. Cut and blanch for 3 mins in boiling water. Cool, pack in freezer bags.
2. Celery seed stores well for up to 5 years.

Vegetable Directory

Chard

Why Grow It?

Incredibly useful in the winter veg patch, when its wonderful colours are most welcome, chard is incredibly good for you and is cooked like spinach. It is also incredibly easy to grow, withstanding all sorts of neglect. It is in effect two vegetables to one – you can enjoy the leaves and the coloured stems. It is an ideal vegetable for kids to try growing.



Sowing

There are basically two options here. If you're after large plants, then you should sow in module trays for later transplanting. Sow one seed per module. If you are after small 'cut and come again' leaves for salads, you can sow direct in the soil by making a wide drill about 2.5cm deep and sprinkling seeds in it. Leave 30cm between drills. Chard can also be grown in containers. Sow seeds from March onwards. Do a late summer sowing for winter harvesting.

Growing

Incorporate plenty of well rotted compost or manure to the soil the previous autumn. When you plant out the seedlings, allow 45cm between plants. If plants bolt in summer, simply cut them back and they will soon start to produce tasty leaves again. Weed regularly and water in dry weather. Cover in winter with cloches or fleece to keep the worst of the weather off them.

Harvesting

Pick often to encourage the plant to produce tender new leaves. For salad leaves, cut individual leaves as required when about 5cm long. On larger plants, start harvesting leaves from the outside and work your way in to the centre. Whenever harvesting leaves, always leave about 5cm of the stem so the plant can grow back. It will come again several times. Cook the stalks and leaves separately – the stalks take slightly longer to cook.

Recommended Varieties

- Rainbow Chard — each plant has different coloration ranging from white, yellow, pink and orange. You can easily plant it in your flower border. The whole leaf can be used and cooked like spinach or chard.
- Swiss Chard
- Rhubarb Chard

Problems

Chard is relatively immune to pests and diseases. Downey mildew can sometimes be an issue with densely sown 'cut and come again' chard.

GIY Tips

1. Chard is a very attractive plant and is often grown in flower beds. The bright yellow and red stems bring a great splash of colour to a winter border.
2. Larger chard leaves can be frozen raw for later cooking.

Vegetable Directory

Chicory

Why Grow It?

A bitter leaved, tangy salad plant, chicory is easy to grow and adds a nice texture to winter salads in particular. There are three types:

- Red chicory often known as radicchio or Italian chicory
- Forcing chicory – which is ‘forced’ by depriving the plants of light to produce tender, sweet white growths called chicons (which are a lot like tender cos lettuce)
- Sugarloaf chicory which is like lettuce



Chicory can be grown in a raised bed or open ground, or even in a pot – so it’s ideal for the balcony grower. You can grow them as baby leaves or let them grow on to produce a compact head. Forcing chicory can often be the only way of having tender young salad leaves in a very cold climate as you are forcing them indoors in pots – and the little chicons are a delicacy.

Sowing

Chicory can be sown direct or in module trays or pots for later planting (about three weeks after sowing). Sow indoors or under cover from March. Germination takes between one to two weeks. Sowing every two to three weeks should produce a reliable, consistent crop. A late sowing in August will give you leaves to harvest up to Christmas.

Growing

For module trays, sow approx. 1cm deep and plant out 3-4 weeks later (once they have reached 10cm tall) leaving 15 to 20cm between plants. Make sure the soil is moist and the seedlings do not dry out. Water well until they are firmly established.

To sow direct, sow 1 to 2 seeds every 10cm in rows 20cm apart. Once established, thin plants to 15-20cm in the row.

To grow in a pot, fill a large 45cm pot with good quality potting compost and sow the seeds thinly across the surface and cover with a 1cm layer of vermiculite.

Harvesting

You can start harvesting the baby leaves as soon as they are ready. Or leave to form a compact head – it will feel firm and plump to touch when it’s ready. Cut the plant at ground level. It will come back if you don’t dig it up for forcing (see below). The radicchio varieties grown for their red leaves will be green in the summer and only go red in the colder weather of autumn/winter.

To force in winter, you can either dig up a few plant roots and put them in big pots or buy dormant plants in pots in the autumn. If using your own, cut the plants back to about 2cm of foliage, dig up the roots and plant them in a big pot. Put a bucket over the top of the pot to block out light and store in a shed or somewhere frost free. Tender white chicons will form over winter – these can be cut off and eaten, and the process can then be repeated for spring. After this, remove the bucket from the top and allow plants to grow as normal.

Vegetable Directory

Recommended Varieties

- Witloof de Brussels, Red Treviso, Pallo Rossa

Problems

Sometimes you can have an issue with the leaves rotting in damp conditions (particularly those grown under cover) – make sure they have adequate ventilation and keep removing rotting leaves.

GIY Tips

1. Keep the soil evenly moist – plants that are stressed from lack of water produce bitter leaves
2. The dried tap root of chicory can be ground and used as a substitute for coffee.

Vegetable Directory

Claytonia

Why Grow It?

It might sound like a trash metal band but Claytonia (also called Winter Purslane or miners lettuce) is in fact a really useful, hardy, heart-shaped winter salad green that can be used to bulk up winter salads and stirfries. It was called Miner's Lettuce after the Goldrush miners who valued its high vitamin C content to ward off scurvy.



Claytonia is a succulent, almost-meaty salad green that will also withstand cooking (so is excellent as an alternative to spinach) and is very easy to grow. Though claytonia will grow in the spring/summer, it's real value is as a winter-hardy green, providing us with winter greens from October or November right up until April of the following year.

Sowing

We sow claytonia in module trays in August and September (with 4-5 seeds per module tray). After sowing, keep it well watered. The seeds will germinate rapidly.

Growing

After 2-3 weeks, carefully plant out each little clump of seedlings in to soil, allowing 7-10cm between plants. Claytonia prefers cooler temperatures which is why it is ideal for autumn sowing, and it will tolerate cold winter temperatures (although it might need to be covered with a fleece or cloche during very frosty weather if grown outside). Make sure to keep it well watered if you are growing it under cover, or if you get a very dry spell outside (unlikely in the winter).

Harvesting

Cut using a scissors, leaving a few centimetres of the base of the plant in place – you will get at least 4-5 cuts off each plant over the winter. Claytonia deteriorates quickly once picked, which is why you will almost never see it available to buy commercially – it will however keep in the fridge for a few days. The leaves are at their tastiest when young and tender.

GIY Recommended Varieties

- You will not see varieties of Claytonia as such.

Problems

It's a problem free plant, one would almost say fool proof. We've jinxed it now, haven't we?

GIY Tips

1. Claytonia will self-seed easily which you may or may not want – if you don't want it to see everywhere, pull up the plants before they go to seed.
2. Claytonia is also one of those rare plants that will do well in partial shade, so it's ideal for a shady part of your garden.

Vegetable Directory

Corn Salad

Why Grow It?

Often considered a weed, corn salad is a super-hardy and low-growing winter salad with a mild, nutty flavour. It is one of the many winter-hardy salad leaves we sow in the late summer and early autumn to last through the winter. We generally do a couple of sowings every two to three weeks from September to keep us going with occasional pickings of winter leaves until the new season salads arrive in spring.



Sowing

I've used two different methods for sowing corn salad and haven't noticed any real difference between the two. You can either sow it direct in the soil (in drills around 10cm apart) or in module trays for later transplanting (spacing the plants 10cm apart). Germination takes about 1-2 weeks. Corn salad will grow in most soils - it's not fussy. It's best sown at the end of the year, and won't do so well in the hotter weather of summer. So it's best sown from the end of August to October.

Growing

Keep the area weed free and moist if the weather is dry. Corn salad will get to about 10cm high and wide.

Harvesting

Corn salad will be ready to crop in about 10 weeks. You can either harvest the whole plant or cut them down at the soil and see if they will grow back (you might get a second growth this way). Alternatively take the outer leaves only on plants to encourage re-growth. The plants will run to seed eventually in the spring if left in the soil. A groundnut or peanut oil will bring out the lovely nutty flavour in a salad.

Recommended Varieties

- Vit
- Lamb's Tongue

Problems

Mildew can be an issue in the autumn/winter polytunnel if you don't keep it well ventilated. Slugs will be partial to it too - so time to put the beer traps back in action.

GIY Tips

1. Corn salad is a surprisingly strong performer when it comes to nutrition and is one of the healthiest of all salads. It has three times as much vitamin C as lettuce and more iron than spinach.
2. Corn Salad is often known as Lamb's Lettuce.

Vegetable Directory

Courgette and Summer Squash

Why Grow It?

They are easy to grow and incredibly prolific, growing feakishly fast in the summer. Two or three plants will be more than enough. Your only problem in fact will be working out what to do with all those courgettes. Courgette bread anyone?



Sowing

Sow seeds indoors in pots at a depth of 2cm from April. They will need temperatures of 20 degrees celsius to germinate so leave the pots on a sunny windowsill. Harden off well and transplant in June. Don't be fooled by their size when you are first planting the seedlings out. Courgettes grow to large, hungry and thirsty plants so leave 50-75cm between plants. Dig plenty of well rotted compost in to the soil before transplanting.

Growing

Never let the soil dry out – use a mulch around the plants to preserve moisture. They will need lots of water particularly when the courgettes are starting to swell. If you have added plenty of manure when planting, they shouldn't need feeding, but if you think the growth is slow use a general purpose organic fertiliser, or make your own comfrey tea. Courgette plants have male and female flowers on the same plant and insects will generally carry pollen from one to the other at which point the female flower starts to become a fruit. If the plants are grown under cover, you may have to pollinate them by hand.

Harvesting

Harvest regularly when the courgettes are about pencil length. They are at their best at this stage, and quickly become watery and relatively tasteless thereafter. The more you pick the more fruit the plant will produce. Don't leave big marrows on the plant as it will reduce the production of new fruits.

Recommended Varieties

- Defender F1
- Ambassador F1
- Atena Polka F1

Problems

Powdery mildew is the most common problem and appears as a white powder on leaves at the end of the summer. It is not a huge issue and mainly just affects the leaves. A weekly spray of milk at a concentration of 1 part milk to 9 parts water will significantly reduce the severity of powdery mildew infection. Slugs are an issue for newly planted seedlings – protect them carefully!

GIY Tips

1. Try sowing courgette seeds in biodegradable pots, they can then be sowed out (pot and all) in to the soil.
2. Allow at least some of your courgettes to grow in to giant marrows at the end of the season, then pick and store them. The thick skin will preserve them over the winter.

Vegetable Directory

Cucumber

Why Grow It?

Cucumbers are the quintessential salad addition and once they have started cropping, you know its summer. They are very prolific plants – a single plant can produce 30-40 cucumbers so you probably won't need more than a couple of plants. I saw a tub of pickled “organic” cucumber slices (I'd say there was half a cucumber in it) in a supermarket once for €4 - a packet of cucumber seeds will cost you about €3 and will contain approx 5 seeds - that means for €3 you get 200 cucumbers - talk about value for money! And of course, nothing makes you feel like an award winning GIYer than growing an 18 inch cucumber!



Sowing

Cucumbers need heat to germinate so you must sow them in pots and keep them indoors until the ground warms up. Sow from February over a heated propagation mat. Sow two seeds in a 8cm pot – place the seed on its side to prevent rotting. Sow at a depth of 2cm. Remove the weakest seedling.

Growing

Seedlings will be ready to plant out about a month after sowing but delay if weather is poor – harden them off well by bringing them outdoors each day for a few hours. You can plant cucumber plants in the polytunnel or greenhouse, or with some varieties you can sow (very successfully) outdoors. Dig a hole of about 30cm wide and 30cm deep and fill it with well rotted compost – draw the soil back over the hole to make a mound and plant the seedling in the mound. Leave a space of 45cm between plants but remember that a couple of plants should be more than enough.

Cucumber plants can be left to trail or they can be trained to grow up a cane wigwam, tied in securely (use the same support structure as you would use for tomatoes). Pinch out the growing tip of the plant once it reaches the top of the support. Cucumbers are composed mainly of water so in order for them to swell they need lots of watering – never let the soil dry out. Use a mulch on the surface if necessary. Water the soil, not the plants. You can feed them fortnightly as you would with tomatoes.

Harvesting

Harvest cucumbers as they ripen – if you leave them on the plant too long they will discourage the plant from producing more fruit. Keeping up with the harvest can be a problem in the summer. Cut rather than pulling from the plant.

Recommended Varieties

- Passandra F1
- Styx F1

Problems

If greenhouse cucumbers are pollinated they become bitter – all female varieties are available. In the polytunnel, cucumbers can be attacked by whitefly. Powdery mildew is a common problem as the summer progresses. Good air circulation is the main preventative measure. You can also apply a milk spray (1 part milk to 9 parts water) if you get mildew. Foot and root rot can also occur as a result of over watering. Cucumber mosaic virus is less common and characterised by yellowing skin and dark green warts – remove infected plants.

Vegetable Directory

GIY Tips

1. You can also grow cucumbers in grow bags.
2. Cucumbers don't store or freeze well, pickled in vinegar is the best approach to save them. Cover cucumbers in salt for 24 hours then put in sterilised jars full of warm vinegar. They are ready in about 2 months.

Vegetable Directory

Florence Fennel

Why Grow It?

Worth growing for its pretty foliage alone, florence fennel also offers the bonus of its delicious, white, aniseed-flavoured bulb. It's a little tricky to grow, but definitely worth a try. Has a relatively short growing season – will be ready to eat in 4 months.



Sowing

It's a Mediterranean crop that will get confused and bolt if exposed to fluctuating or low temperatures. Sow in late May and again in late June (as insurance against bolting and poor germination). Fennel seedlings are very sensitive to root disturbance – sow a couple of seeds in each module of a seed module tray about 1cm deep. If more than one germinates in each module, remove the weaker one.

Growing

About a month after sowing (when the seedlings are hardy), it's time to plant them out. If the temperatures are still low outside, you can delay planting by a few weeks by potting them on in to individual pots. Harden off the seedlings well before planting out. Grow in full sun. Add well-rotted manure or compost to the soil in late spring. Space the plants 35cm apart. Water, mulch and weed. If you're feeling particularly attentive, earth up the stems as they swell to blanch and sweeten them.

Harvesting

Expect bulbs to be ready 14-16 weeks after sowing (the bulb should be 7cm across). Cut the bulb off at ground level. Further, feathery shoots will appear which can be used as celery/dill-flavoured seasoning in the kitchen. Snip the leaves off the bulb – if you leave them on, they draw the moisture out of the bulb. The bulb is best eaten sweet, ripe and fresh (try it raw in salads) but it will also keep for several days in the fridge.

Recommended Varieties

- Romanesco
- Rondo F1

Problems

Slugs are a problem at seedling stage. Cold spells and dry weather will cause bolting.

GIY Tips

1. Urbanites rejoice, for fennel can be grown in 13cm-deep pots.
2. The bulb, the celery-like stalks and the feathery leaves can all be eaten.

Vegetable Directory

Garlic

Why Grow It?

Most of the garlic available in supermarkets is imported from China (over 5,000 miles!). Garlic is relatively easy to grow (although it can be hard to grow well) and stores extremely well. It's also incredibly good for you. The garlic requirements of an average family can be easily satisfied by even the smallest of vegetable patches. If you were to take any bulb of garlic, break out the cloves and stick them in to the ground spaced about 4 inches apart, each clove would eventually turn in to a bulb of garlic. That's the magic of it. However it is recommended not to use supermarket garlic for this purpose as it can bring disease in to your soil (if you are going to do this, sow the garlic in containers).



Sowing

Most GIYers sow garlic in early winter (Oct-Dec, but before the shortest day of the year – Dec 21st) as the bulbs benefit from a cold snap. Some varieties however can be sown in spring but they won't grow as big. Pick a sunny site, with good fertile, free-draining soil. Apply an organic fertiliser before sowing. Sow each clove just below the surface, about 4-5 inches apart, in rows 12 inches apart. If soil is very wet, sow in module trays and transplant when sprouted.

Growing

As with onions, garlic hates weed competition so keep the bed weed free. Hoe carefully around the bulbs every week or so. Water occasionally in dry weather but don't over-water.

Harvesting

Harvest when at least half to two-thirds of leaves on each plant are yellow. Autumn sown garlic will be ready in early summer. Do not allow them to go too far as they lose flavour. Lift carefully and dry on racks in sun (or indoors in wet weather) for two weeks. Hang in plaits.

Recommended Varieties

- Dukat
- Thermidrome
- Vallelado
- Printanor (spring planting)

Problems

Rust can affect leaves but it shouldn't affect bulbs. White rot (as per onions) is more serious as it attacks the root. No remedy – do not grow garlic in that soil again for 7 years.

GIY Tips

1. Sow garlic before shortest day of year and harvest before the longest day.
2. Remove any flowers that form on stems while growing

Vegetable Directory

Kale

Why Grow It?

It may not be everyone's idea of a good time, but kale can be a delicious crop and it's incredibly good for you. It's a hardy crop that will survive the worst of winter weather, giving you fresh greens in the crucial hungry gap months from February to April.



It's a prolific 'cut and come again' cropper. Kale can also be a very attractive feature in the winter veg patch, particularly the red-leafed varieties.

Sowing

Sow from April to late June.

A foolproof way to grow healthy kale seedlings is to sow them in module seed trays – sow one or two seeds in each module 1.5cm deep. Thin out the weaker seedling. Kale will germinate in about a week and will be ready for planting out about 6 weeks later. Make sure to harden off early sowings carefully.

Since they are a hungry crop, add plenty of compost or manure to the soil the previous autumn. Space plants about 50 cm apart in rows about 60cm apart. Include kale in your brassica rotation – do not plant them where there have been brassicas for at least 3-4 years previously.

Growing

Hoe around young seedlings regularly to keep weeds down.

Slug damage can be a real issue at this stage, so do what you have to do to prevent it.

Water regularly in dry weather to prevent the roots from drying out.

Earthing up stems will help the plant to support itself, particularly in a windy site. Remove yellowing leaves.

Harvesting

Start harvesting from autumn and if you play your cards right you should be able to continue harvesting until mid-spring the following year.

Remove leaves with a sharp knife, starting at the crown.

The plant will grow side shoots which you can harvest between February and May.

Recommended Varieties

- Nero di Toscana
- Red Russian
- Redbor

Problems

Kale is rarely bothered by the diseases that can blight other brassicas.

Vegetable Directory

GIY Tips

1. Water plants carefully before transplanting.
2. Tread on the soil around the plants every now and then which will firm up the soil and make sure the plants don't topple over in the wind.

Vegetable Directory

Kohlrabi

Why Grow It?

Kohlrabi is gaining in popularity and little wonder – it's quick-growing, relatively easy to grow and tastes great (like a very mild turnip), cooked or raw. It's a brassica so include it in your crop rotation. Available as green, white or purple varieties, kohlrabi stems grow above the ground. They are beautiful looking plants.



Sowing

Sow a small numbers of seeds every month from April to July for a continuous supply. Don't be tempted to sow too early as it will bolt if hit by cold weather. Your best option is to sow a couple of seeds per module in a module tray. Sow 2cm deep. Leave the tray inside or in a greenhouse. Remove the weaker seedling. The green varieties mature more quickly so sow these first.

Growing

The seedlings will be ready to transplant about a month later. Leave 25cm between plants and 30cm between rows. Kohlrabi like free-draining fertile soil. Water regularly throughout the season as they go woody in dry weather. You do not need to earth up kohlrabi as you would with some brassicas.

Harvesting

Depending on the variety kohlrabi take between six and sixteen weeks to mature. Lift when they are tennis-ball size. Later sowings can be left in the soil over autumn and early winter, but lift before frosts.

Recommended Varieties

- Azur Star, early blue variety

Problems

Generally easy to grow, but it's a brassica so clubroot can be an issue.

GIY Tips

1. Kohlrabi is delicious in coleslaws.
2. Kohlrabi do not store well so harvest as required.

Vegetable Directory

Leeks

Why Grow It?

Leeks are quite easy to grow and will withstand even the harshest winter. For many GIYers they are the only crop left in the soil during the winter months. You can grow a huge amount of leeks in a relatively small space. They are another of the classic stockpot vegetables. We eat the white part or stem of leeks – it is more accurately a rolled leaf rather than a stem (if you want to be pedantic about it).



Sowing

Leeks are best grown in modules before being transplanted to their final growing position later. They are very easy to grow from seed. Sow one or two seeds per module just 1cm deep (they are a small, black seed). They will take about two weeks to germinate. For a continuous supply of leeks sow as follows:

February – plant out in April, will be ready to eat in early autumn

March – plant out in May, will be ready to eat in early winter

May – plant out in June, will be ready to eat in late winter

Growing

Leeks are heavy feeders so it's best to grow them in fertile soil that has been enriched with plenty of farmyard manure or compost. Spread a general purpose organic fertiliser before planting out. They will be ready to plant out about 2 months after sowing (when they are pencil thick). The process of planting leeks is called "puddling in" and feels a little counter-intuitive but works very successfully. Here's how it works: Make a 6-inch hole with a dibber, drop the leek in and then fill the hole gently with water. Do not backfill with soil – over the coming weeks it will fill itself (see, I told you it would feel counter-intuitive!). Leave 15cm between plants and 30cm between rows. Keep the leek bed well weeded. Some people advise snipping the root and top before planting but this can reduce yields.

Leeks have to be earthed up during the growing season – this process encourages the bleaching or whitening of the stem. If you don't earth up you will be left with leeks which are predominantly green with just a small amount of edible white stem. Earth up twice during the season.

Harvesting

The best leeks are the small tender ones – they decrease in flavour as they grow larger, so don't aim to produce prize-winning ones. Lift the leek with a fork – their roots are surprisingly fibrous and strong. Winter varieties can stay in the ground until needed, they are practically indestructible.

Recommended Varieties

- Blue Solaise
- Hannibal
- Bluegreen Winter
- Northern Lights

Vegetable Directory

Problems

Leek rust is an issue – it's an airborne fungus that affects all the allium family, particularly garlic. Though the leeks look unattractive when infected, it doesn't in fact affect the taste at all. You can try cleaning them carefully, but this doesn't work in my experience. Leeks can also get white rot, which is why you should include them in your allium rotation.

GIY Tips

1. I've heard of GIYers who use kitchen roll inserts to 'earth up'• leeks, pop the insert over the leek and it does the same job as earthing up. Nice idea.
2. Be careful not to get soil in to the heart of the leek when earthing up, this can be a nightmare to get out when cooking.

Vegetable Directory

Lettuce

Why Grow It?

It's increasingly difficult to find good quality, fresh lettuce in the supermarkets. Lettuce is easy to grow and with a little planning, you can eat it fresh for 9 months of the year.



Sowing

There are four main types of lettuce. The first three - butterheads, cos and crispheads - form hearts at their centre and are therefore usually grown as proper heads of lettuce. They take longer to mature. The fourth type - loose-leaf - doesn't form a heart and is therefore generally grown as a "cut-and-come-again" crop – where leaves are cut as required. Sow seeds in module trays – if you are growing heads of lettuce, sow just one seed in each module. With loose leaf types, sow 3-5 seeds per module. Lettuce needs light to germinate so don't cover the seeds with compost. Lettuce will not germinate in temperatures above 25 degrees celsius so if the weather is warm you may need to move the trays in to cool shed for a few days until they germinate. Seedlings are ready to plant out when they have 4 or 5 leaves. Harden off well before transplanting.

Growing

Lettuce will do well in any reasonable soil, as long as it's moisture retentive – add well-rotted manure or compost the previous winter. Lettuce is a great space filler – you can pop it anywhere you have some space. Spacing is about 20-30cm depending on the type. Plant the seedlings well down in the soil with the cotyledons (seed leaves) just above the soil level. Keep the soil around the plants weed free and water copiously in dry weather – this will help prevent them bolting. Use fleece or cloches to protect early sowings from frost.

Harvesting

Cos, Butterhead and Crisphead varieties of lettuce need to be left longer to develop their hearts. Cut leaves of loose-leaf varieties as soon as they are of usable size. If you cut them about 5cm from the ground they will grow back and you will be able to take a second crop in a few weeks. Harvest lettuce leaves early in the day and they will keep far longer. This is because later in the day the moisture has evaporated from the leaves and so it wilts more quickly.

Recommended Varieties

- Butterhead: Sylvesta
- Cos: Little Gem, Red Cos
- Batavia: Roger, Red & Green Mix
- Crisphead: Saladin
- Loose Leaf: Matador (Lollo Rossa), Catalonga Cerbiatta

Problems

Lack of water causes the plants to panic and run to seed in a desperate attempt to reproduce before they die! This is called "bolting" and it's very bad news as the plants are too bitter to eat. Slugs eat young leaves and get in to the hearts of lettuces. Aphids (black or greenfly) can be a problem. Leatherjackets (the larvae of the Daddy Longlegs) eat through the stems of newly planted lettuce.

Vegetable Directory

GIY Tips

1. Sow successional, just 10 seeds or so at a time, every couple of weeks.
2. Try growing summer lettuce in partial shade, they don't like hot weather.

Vegetable Directory

Mibuna

Why Grow It?

When I first discovered oriental greens some years back and more experienced growers started listing off the various greens in this wonderful family – mustard, mizuna, mibuna, pak choi, bok choi etc – I often wondered whether they were just having a laugh and throwing out made up names for the craic. But no, mizuna and mibuna are in fact a real thing – two very similar but distinct oriental green varieties. We covered mizuna here back in early November – it has a slightly serrated leaf. Mibuna on the other hand has a spear-shaped slender leaf. It is not as vigorous as Mizuna but it has a more interesting and slightly stronger flavour in my view.



Mibuna is easy to grow and tolerates neglect and extreme cold with equal aplomb. It does not tolerate heat in the summer as well as Mizuna does. Mibuna has a refreshing mustard flavour that will bring interest to any salad bowl. Like most oriental greens, Mibuna can be eaten raw in salads or used in stir fries or soups.

Sowing

You can sow Mibuna direct in the soil or in module trays for later transplanting. I generally sow 5-6 seeds in each module in a module tray and plant out each little cluster of plants 3-4 weeks later. It's a very reliable germinator (2-3 days). I find the best results from a small regular sowing every 3-4 weeks from February until September. I do a larger sowing in September to last through the winter and early spring. Though larger Mibuna plants will tolerate temperatures up to -10 degrees celsius outside, I generally do my final sowing for the polytunnel (more out of habit than necessity).

Growing

Mibuna is a really versatile veg and there are a few different ways to grow it.

Grow it as single plants that are spaced 30cm apart and will grow up to 30cm tall with leaves harvested from it over a long period of time.

Grow it as a 'cut and come again' crop - where multiple plants are sown about 10cm apart with the leaves harvested when young.

Harvesting

At some times of the year you can harvest as early as 3 weeks after sowing, particularly when you are growing for 'cut and come again' small leaves. As the name suggest with a 'cut and come' again crop you can cut it back with a scissors and expect a second, fourth or even fifth crop of delicious leaves. You can either harvest individual leaves by hand-picking, or cut with a scissors down to about 5cm from the soil.

Recommended Varieties

- Kyoto, Mizuna Purple, Green Spray

Vegetable Directory

Problems

It's a brassica so in theory it should be included in your brassica rotation and can be prone to all diseases that brassicas get - in practice it's so quick-growing that you don't get many problems with it at all. Flea Beetle can be an issue on young leaves, during the summer - a fine net or fleece cover will help.

GIY Tips

1. In the summer months, you need to keep it well watered to prevent it from bolting but because I sow it so regularly, I am generally not too bothered if it does bolt (just whip the plants out for composting and replace with new ones).
2. Mibuna will tolerate semi-shade so ideal for a shady garden.

Vegetable Directory

Mizuna

Sowing

You can sow Mizuna direct in the soil or in module trays for later transplanting. I generally sow 5-6 seeds in each module in a module tray and plant out each little cluster of plants 3-4 weeks later. It's a very reliable germinator.



I find the best results from a small regular sowing every 3-4 weeks from February until September. I do a larger sowing in September to last through the winter and early spring. Though larger Mizuna plants will tolerate temperatures down to -10 degrees celsius outside, I generally do my final sowing for the polytunnel (more out of habit than necessity).

Growing

Mizuna is a really versatile veg and there are a few different ways to grow it:

- Grow it as single plants that are spaced 30cm apart and will grow up to 30cm tall with leaves harvested from it over a long period of time.
- Grow it as a 'cut and come again' crop - where multiple plants are sown about 10cm apart with the leaves harvested when young.

Harvesting

At some times of the year you can harvest as early as 3 weeks after sowing, particularly when you are growing for 'cut and come again' small leaves.

As the name suggest with a 'cut and come' again crop you can cut it back with a scissors and expect a second, third or even fourth crop of delicious leaves.

You can either harvest individual leaves by hand-picking, or cut with a scissors down to about 5cm from the soil.

Recommended Varieties

- Mizuna
- Tokyo Beau

Problems

It's a brassica so in theory it should be included in your brassica rotation and can be prone to all diseases that brassicas get - in practice it's so quick-growing that you don't get many problems with it at all. Flea Beetle can be an issue on young leaves - a fine net or fleece cover will help.

GIY Tips

1. In the summer months, you need to keep it well watered to prevent it from bolting but because I sow it so regularly, I am generally not too bothered if it does bolt (just whip the plants out for composting and replace with new ones).
2. Mizuna will tolerate semi-shade so ideal for a shady garden.

Vegetable Directory

Oca

Why Grow It?

Cultivated by the Incas since ancient times, Oca is a very unusual potato-type crop that has been adopted by growers here since it is blight resistant and very easy to grow. Oca produces multi-coloured tubers with a very distinct lemony flavour when raw and nutty when cooked. It is harvested at this time of the year. Oca tubers are a good source of calcium, iron and carbohydrates.



Sowing

Getting your hands on Oca tubers to sow will probably be the hardest part of growing them. Check out good garden centres, or good on-line horticultural retailers like Mr Middleton, The Organic Centre, Seed Savers or GIY. Or ask at your local GIY group!

Oca can be grown happily outside but might produce a better crop in a polytunnel or greenhouse. You can either sow your Oca tubers in pots for later transplanting or sow them direct in the soil.

Sow in pots: Sow individually in 15cm pots filled with multi-purpose compost in April. Leave the pots indoors as the emerging tips are frost-sensitive. Plant out in late May when risk of frost has passed. You might want to keep covered with fleece if growing outside.

Sow direct: Sow in May direct in the soil about 10cm deep. The advice of spacing Oca plants varies - anything from 30 to 90cm - they are quite a bushy little plant so I would allow around 40cm or so to give it room to grow. The more space it has, the more tubers you will get.

Growing

Oca plants are slightly unusual looking - they are bushier than a potato plant with more decorative leaves. Similar to potatoes, Oca plants are 'earthed up' during the growing season - that means that we draw soil up around the plants to encourage more tuber development. Regular watering is also essential, particularly from September on (if dry) as this is when the tubers are starting to form and need water to grow bigger. A mulch of compost or other organic matter in the summer will preserve moisture and also feed the plant.

Harvesting

Unlike potatoes, which are harvested from summer onwards, with Oca you are better to leave them alone until very late in the year - November or even December if possible. This is because Oca plants do not produce their tubers until late in the season. The plants may well be killed off by a frost in early winter, but the tubers are still forming (with food moving down from the stems of the plant to the tubers), so leave well alone! Harvest and dry the tubers, handling them carefully so as not to damage them. You will get about 15 tubers from each healthy plant. Store in a hessian sack or a box of sand in a frost-free place until the spring. When they start to sprout in the spring, you're ready to start planting them again!

In the kitchen, Oca has a variety of uses - basically anything you can do to a potato, you can do with Oca. But generally speaking in our house it's sort of a delicacy when we have it - so we generally just bake them whole in the oven with lots of seasoning and some olive oil. The tubers don't need to be peeled, just washed well.

Vegetable Directory

Recommended Varieties

- There are no varietal names, but there are different colours of Oca - everything from normal potato-coloured to yellow, red, purple and even black.

Problems

There are no major pest or disease issues. Hurrah for that.

GIY Tips

1. Oca is also known as “South American Wood Sorrel” and is related to the common wood sorrel
2. Oca leaves can also be harvested sparingly as an interesting, lemony addition to the salad bowl.

Vegetable Directory

Onions

Why Grow It?

We love onions at GIY because they are one of those vegetables that it's possible to become self-sufficient in, even if you don't have a huge amount of space. A decent sized raised bed for example could produce a couple of hundred onions which would be enough for most families for up to a year. They are relatively low maintenance, easy to grow and store relatively well (but finding a suitably dry place to store them can be a challenge in wet Irish winters). Above all, there's nothing better than having onions hanging in your shed and knowing you don't have to buy those dry, tasteless, imported supermarket onions this year!



Sowing

Generally most GIYers grow from "sets" (basically baby onions) but you can also grow from seed. Sets will mature quickly and are pretty much fool-proof - they are however more expensive than seed. Order sets early – the best varieties sell out quickly. Dig in some well rotted manure or compost the previous winter and apply an organic fertiliser (like chicken manure pellets) before sowing. Don't plant onions in the same place year after year. Include in crop rotation.

Sets: sow 4 inches apart in rows 8 inches apart in March/April. Hold off if the weather is very cold – onion sets won't do well in cold, damp soil. Push the set in to the soil so that the tip is just about visible above the surface. Firm in well. Frost can "heave" the sets from the soil at night – if this happens push them back in the next day. Seed: Sow in module trays from February and transplant when seedlings are well established.

Growing

Onions hate weed competition so keep your onion bed weed free. Hoe carefully around the bulbs every week or so and hand weed if necessary. Water if weather is dry or mulch (but remove mulch when bulbs start to form) – but never overwater. An occasional liquid feed will help.

Harvesting

Onions are ready to harvest when foliage turns yellow and topples over (approx 20 weeks after sowing). Gently loosen the soil around the onions at this point (or turn the onion very carefully and very slightly in the soil) and leave for another two weeks. Loosening the soil like this allows the onion to expand in the soil. Then lift carefully. Onions can be eaten fresh from soil. For storage, leave to dry on rack in sun (or indoors in greenhouse/polytunnel if weather is wet) for about 10 days. Then plait them in ropes or hang in nets. If there is a more impressive sight than an onion rope, we've yet to see it. Make sure to store them somewhere very dry - if there is any moisture at all in the air, the onions may rot. Check the rope frequently and use/remove any onions that are showing any signs of softening.

Recommended Varieties

- Golden Bear F1
- Santero F1

Problems

Most serious disease is onion white rot which causes leaves to yellow and wilt and bulb gets white mould. No remedy but to remove and burn. You can not grow onions in that spot for up to 7 years.

Vegetable Directory

GIY Tips

1. Try baked onions - leave skins on, cut in half and bake for 45 mins. Yum!
2. If your onions 'bolt'• and produce a flower spike on the stalk, remove it immediately.

Vegetable Directory

Oriental Mustards

Sowing

You can sow Mustard direct in the soil or in module trays for later transplanting. I generally sow 5-6 seeds in each module in a module tray and plant out each little cluster of plants 3-4 weeks later. The best results are from a small regular sowing every 3-4 weeks from February until September, but the late spring and summer sowings are often inclined to bolt. It really comes in to its own in the autumn / winter. I do a larger sowing in September to last through the winter and early spring.



Growing

As with most of the oriental greens family of veg, mustard is versatile and there are a few different ways to grow it.

Grow it as single plants that are spaced 30cm apart and will grow up to 30cm tall with leaves harvested from it over a long period of time.

Grow it as a 'cut and come again' crop - where multiple plants are sown about 10cm apart with the leaves harvested when young. Typically mustard leaves grow more peppery as the leaves grow larger (often inedible!).

Winter outdoor sowings might need a fleece cover. Water in very dry weather or if growing in a polytunnel or greenhouse.

Harvesting

At some times of the year you can harvest sparingly as early as 4 weeks after sowing, particularly when you are growing for 'cut and come again' small leaves. As the name suggest with a 'cut and come' again crop you can cut it back with a scissors and expect multiple crops of delicious leaves. You can either harvest individual leaves by hand-picking, or cut with a scissors down to about 5cm from the soil.

Recommended Varieties

- Osaka Purple
- Giant Red
- Green-in-the-Snow
- Green Frills
- Red Frills

Problems

It's a brassica so in theory it should be included in your brassica rotation and can be prone to all diseases that brassicas get - in practice you don't get many problems with it at all. Slugs do like a nibble on the leaves.

Vegetable Directory

GIY Tips

1. The versatility of mustard is highlighted by the fact that the seeds of some mustard plants can be harvested to use as mustard seed or make mustard and oils, while other varieties are often used as 'green manures' - fertilising the soil as they grow. Use the leaves to bring some colour and fire to salads (whole leaf when small, and chopped when larger), but also in quiches, soups and stir-fries.
2. Mustard leaves will grow happily in a container, but make it a decent size or you will be disappointed with the results.

Vegetable Directory

Parsley

Why Grow It?

One of the most popular herbs in the world, parsley is the classic “stock-pot” herb and a quintessential part of any herb garden.

Sowing

Parsley is dreadfully slow to germinate, taking up to a month. It is said that it doesn't transplant well and therefore is better sown direct in the soil. I've had no success with sowing it direct, and always sow it in module trays for later transplanting. If you minimise root disturbance when transplanting it will do fine. Alternatively, sow seeds in a large container such as a window box or large pot.



Growing

Plant out in a semi-shaded spot – in full sun, parsley leaves may scorch. It requires very little attention when growing but water well in dry weather. Parsley is biennial, which means that it lives for two years. In the first year it's at its best, providing lots of leaves. In the second year, it flowers, produces seed and dies.

Harvesting

Cut the outer leaves of the plant in the first year. In the second year, it will try to produce flowers – cut these stems off immediately and it will help to keep it going for another while. Parsley will produce leaves all year round but growth slows in winter.

Recommended Varieties

- Moss Curled
- Flat Leaf - Italian Giant

Problems

Bolting or running to seed is generally caused by root disturbance when planting or adverse weather.

GIY Tips

1. Eating parsley at the end of a meal aids digestion and sweetens the breath.

Vegetable Directory

Parsnip

Why Grow It?

Earthy and homely, parsnips really do provide the quintessential taste of winter. Worth growing just for the smell you get when you pluck a parsnip from the soil on a cold winter's day. Unlike carrots, they are relatively easy to grow (once you have persuaded them to germinate), needing very little attention. They will also stay in the ground quite happily (through even the worst winter weather) until you're ready to eat them.



Sowing

Dig bed deeply in winter but do not manure (causes forking in roots). Break down clods, rake well and add an organic fertiliser a week before sowing. Most parsnip seed packets will tell you to sow them in February - don't do it. Far better to leave it until late April or early May. The seeds won't germinate in cold, wet soil and later-sown parsnips are less likely to get canker. Germination takes up to three weeks. Make a drill 1cm deep – if soil is dry, dampen. Sow three seeds every 6 inches in rows 12 inches apart and cover in with soil. When seedlings appear, pull out the two weakest ones. This spacing will produce medium sized roots. If you want larger roots go to 8 inch spacing.

How much to sow?

According to GIY Patron Klaus Laitenberger, the parsnip "season" runs from October to March - you start eating them fresh from the ground in October and you will be able to store them until March (after that any remaining roots will most likely start to rot). So if you want to eat 3 parsnips a week for the 24 weeks between October and March you will need to grow 72 parsnips. In a standard bed (1.2m wide) you will get three rows of parsnips - if you space the parsnips at 6 inches in each row you will get 20 parsnips per meter, so you will need a bed 3.5m long to get 72 parsnips.

Growing

Little maintenance needed. Weed carefully until well established. Watering not necessary except in dry spells.

Harvesting

Parsnips are ready to rock when the foliage starts to die away in autumn but flavour improves after first frosts. Leave in soil until ready to eat but lift by February. Lift carefully with a fork. If you have water-logged soil in winter you should lift the crop and store in a box of sand in a frost-free shed.

Recommended Varieties

- Javelin F1

Problems

Canker (a fungus that produces brown/black growths on roots) is the main issue. Avoid sowing too early and use canker resistant varieties. Rotate parsnips as part of your root rotation. Earth up parsnips in summer - this will prevent spores reaching the roots. Occasionally carrot root fly can be a problem.

Vegetable Directory

GIY Tips

2. Always use fresh (this years) seed, parsnip seeds don't store well.
3. Try sowing seed indoors in toilet roll inserts filled with compost. Once seedling is established, pop the whole insert in to a hole in the ground. Works a treat!

Vegetable Directory

Peas

Why Grow It?

Peas produce a small yield from the space they occupy – so why grow them? Well, they are almost never available in the shops fresh, always frozen. As soon as a pea is picked from the plant the sugars inside it start to turn to starch which means the flavour starts to deteriorate immediately. So, peas that are cooked immediately after picking will always taste nicer than the frozen alternative.



Sowing

Peas can be sown direct in the soil, or in module trays for later transplanting. Sow 4cm deep. If sowing direct in the soil, make sure the temperature is consistently above 10 degrees celsius. Dig a trench 15 cm wide and 4cm deep and place the peas on the surface in two staggered rows at least 5cm apart. You can enjoy fresh peas from May to October if you succession sow (do at least two sowings – late March and late May).

Growing

Peas are hungry plants - dig in well-rotted manure or compost the previous winter and apply a good quality organic fertiliser just before sowing. Once they get going however you won't need to feed them as peas are nitrogen "fixers" – they can take nitrogen from the air. Peas need support. An effective support is to run lengths of chicken wire between posts with rows of peas on either side. You can also use "peasticks" (lengths of hazel). Pea plants send out little tendrils that grasp at anything they can find for support – I've always wondered how they "know" where to grasp?! Water well when they are flowering.

Harvesting

Peas are usually ready to harvest about 3-4 months after sowing. Harvest regularly to encourage pod production. Pinch off the growing tip of the plants when the first pods are ready – this will encourage the plant to focus on pod production. Most peas are taken from the pods to eat, but with mangetout and sugar snap peas the whole pod is eaten. Once the plant is finished cut it down but leave the roots in the soil – the nitrogen that the plant has taken from the air is "fixed" in the soil.

Recommended Varieties

- Sugar Snap - Delikett
- Garden - Greenshaft
- Mangetout - Garnet, Sweet Horizon

Problems

Mice can often eat the seeds in the soil, which is another reason to grow them in modules and transplant later. Peas can get powdery mildew in the summer which appears on leaves – use resistant varieties.

GIY Tips

1. Peas can be sown effectively in lengths of old rain-guttering. Fill the gutter with potting compost and sow seeds 5cm apart. When the seedlings are 8cm tall dig a trench in the soil about the same depth as the compost in the gutter and simply slide out the contents of the gutter in to the trench.
2. Many GIYers grow peas just to eat the growing tips of the young plants which are a trendy delicacy and look great in salads.

Vegetable Directory

Peppers (Chilli and Bell)

Why Grow It?

Peppers are quite compact plants and so don't take up a huge amount of space in your greenhouse or polytunnel. They produce a fine crop and can be grown well in containers and pots. Both chilli and bell peppers are part of the capsicum family. Chillipeppers are small and have a hot flavour while bell peppers are larger and milder in flavour.



Sowing

Peppers need a long growing season so the earlier you get started the better your chance of producing good, ripe fruit. Get the seeds sown in February on a heating mat if you can. They can take up to 2 weeks to germinate. Sow seeds at 20 degrees celsius in pots of compost or module trays. Transfer in to 9cm pots when the seedlings are large enough to handle. Pot up again to a 30cm pot when the plants look like they've outgrown the previous pot.

Growing

Harden off carefully before planting out in the greenhouse or polytunnel in May or June. You can grow the peppers in the pots in a conservatory or sunny kitchen but they will be demanding when grown this way and you will need to feed and water regularly. In the polytunnel or greenhouse, dig a deep hole and add plenty of well-rotted organic matter. Support with small canes if required. Feed regularly with a high-potash feed (comfrey tea works well) once they start to flower.

Harvesting

Harvesting peppers is a balancing act – you will have to wait a long time for them to ripen from green to bright red (about a month), but leaving them to mature like this reduces the overall yield of the plant. So do you want a small number of lovely red peppers or lots of lovely green ones? The choice is yours. At the end of the growing season, dig up the plant and hang it upside down in the greenhouse – this will help the unripened peppers to mature.

Recommended Varieties

- Chilli: Demon Red, Hungarian Wax, Navaho, Purple Tiger, Ring of Fire
- Bell: Bell Boy F1, Roberta F1

Problems

Make sure there is plenty of ventilation in the greenhouse. Red spider mite is a common pest – check the underside of leaves and spray with an organic pesticide if they appear.

GIY Tips

1. Peppers store well, they can be frozen, dried or stuffed in to jars and filled with oil.
2. Greenfly can be an issue for peppers. A spray made from crushed garlic, oil and washing-up liquid, sprayed on to leaves can deter.

Vegetable Directory

Potatoes

Why Grow It?

Where would the GIYer be without the humble spud? Spuds can be grown pretty much anywhere and will actually improve poor soil. They produce a high yield from a relatively small space and store well. No wonder they have been a staple diet for Irish families for centuries. Digging for your first new potatoes will be like Christmas morning – promise!



Sowing

Effectively there are two types of potatoes – earlies and maincrop. Earlies grow quickly, have no skin worth speaking of, and are usually out of the soil before blight arrives. Maincrop develop later, produce a higher yield, develop a thick skin and can therefore be stored – they are, unfortunately, more vulnerable to blight as they are in the ground during the summer months when blight conditions prevail.

Potatoes are grown from “seed potatoes” which are potatoes saved from the previous year’s crop. It was traditional for Irish GIYers to save their own seed potatoes but this is generally out of favour now – better to buy certified seed potatoes each year, in case your own potatoes carry over a virus.

“Chitting” the seed potatoes is allowing them to sprout to give them a headstart before sowing. Start this process in February – lay the seed potatoes out in a shallow tray or used egg cartons and leave them somewhere relatively bright and cool. By March they will have developed green sprouts. Some people pick off all but three of the sprouts before planting.

The soil in which you are planting potatoes requires a generous application of well-rotted farmyard manure, compost or seaweed before planting (ideally the previous winter). Too much nitrogen however encourages leafy growth at the expense of the tubers. Sow first earlies in mid March (St Patrick’s Day traditionally) in single rows, 15cm deep, 25cm apart and 45cm between rows. Maincrop spuds are sown in mid to late April. Increase spacing to 35cm. It is vitally important to include potatoes in your crop rotation as they are susceptible to disease if grown in the same ground year on year.

Growing

Cover young plants if there is any risk of frost. Potatoes require “earthing up” – this is a process of covering the stem (also called a “haulm”) with soil. Since the potatoes grow along the haulm, the more of it that is buried beneath the soil, the more spuds you get. Use a draw hoe to bring loose soil from around the plant up against the stem. When the stems are 20cm high draw soil up leaving just 10cm of foliage above the surface. Repeat once or twice during the summer, particularly if you see spuds popping through the soil – spuds go green if exposed to the light and are inedible (and poisonous).

Harvesting

Check earlies in mid June to see how they are getting on. Earlies will be ready about 14 weeks after sowing. Maincrops take 18 weeks. The presence of flowers on the plant is often (but not always) an indicator that the spuds are ready. We typically leave our earlies in the ground and dig as required - their thin skins mean they don’t store well. They do fine in the ground until September at which point we move on to maincrop. Maincrop can stay in the ground until the first frosts – but they are susceptible to scab, worms and slug damage so probably best to lift and store in sacks in October/November. Be sure to remove all spuds from the ground, even the tiny ones, when harvesting – if left in the soil they will sprout next year, causing problems for the crops that are planted there.

Vegetable Directory

Recommended Varieties

- Orla (earlies)
- Homeguard (earlies)
- Duke of York (earlies)
- Cara (maincrop)
- Pink Fir Apple (maincrop)
- Sarpo Mira (maincrop blight resistant)
- Setanta (maincrop)

Problems

Frost damage is a real problem for early sowings. Common scab on the skin of potatoes looks poor but doesn't affect the spud. Slugs are a real problem, eating holes in to the spuds.

The fungal disease potato blight is the bane of the potato grower – the first symptoms are dark decaying spots on leaves. Heavy rainfall and warm, humid conditions are ideal blight environments. Use blight resistant varieties such as sarpo mira, orla, setanta and cara.

GIY Tips

1. If blight strikes, cut down the stems immediately, leaving the tubers in the ground, they won't grow any more, but the blight won't reach them.
2. When storing maincrop potatoes, cut the stems down and leave the spuds in the ground for 10 days to allow the skin to mature. Store potatoes in hessian sacks in a dark, cool shed, do not store any damaged ones.

Vegetable Directory

Pumpkin

Why Grow It?

We associate pumpkins with halloween, and of course they are fun to carve faces in to – BUT, they are also very good to eat. For the home-grower that is trying to produce crops to store over the winter, pumpkins are an attractive option since they store particularly well, thanks to their very tough skin.



Sowing

Sow seeds in early May individually in 7cm pots. Sow about 2cm deep. The pots will need to be kept on a heating mat or a sunny windowsill. Transplant them to larger 12 or 15cm pots after about 3 weeks. Leave the pots indoors or in a greenhouse or polytunnel.

Growing

Make sure the soil where you are going to grow your pumpkins has had a decent application of well rotted manure or compost. Harden off the plants well and then plant out in early to mid June. Cover with fleece if it's cold at nights. Space the plants 2m apart – this seems a lot, but once these babies get moving, there will be no stopping them. A single plant can support just one or two decent sized pumpkins, so you should remove the smaller fruits and flowers to allow the plant to focus its energy on growing the larger fruits. Place a piece of slate or a brick under each fruit so that it's not touching soil – if the fruit is in constant contact with wet soil it will go soft and might rot.

Harvesting

Harvest when the leaves die back or before if there's a risk of frost. Cut off the pumpkin from the plant leaving the stalk attached to it. If they need to be ripened further put them out in the sun by day, before bringing them in again by night – do this for a week or so. Or leave them on a sunny windowsill to 'cure' – this is where the skin hardens up which means they will store for longer. Pumpkins will store right through the winter in a cool place.

Recommended Varieties

- Baby Bear
- Vif d'Etampes

Problems

They can take over a veg patch, sending shoots here there and everywhere. So probably not a great idea for a small garden. Keep them in check by moving the shoots back to the bed they should be in. They can be coiled carefully in to a circle.

GIY Tips

1. Grow them somewhere sheltered – they don't like wind.
2. When you plant the pumpkin plants out in June, interplant with fast growing crops like lettuce or spinach which can be eaten before the pumkins take over. This will use the space more efficiently.

Vegetable Directory

Radish

Why Grow It?

Try eating a raw radish with a bit of butter and some seasoning and you have all the reasons you need to grow them. Crunchy, peppery and delicious. They are tremendously easy to grow and mature quickly so there's a quick return – ideal therefore if you are just starting out. Don't dismiss them as a one-trick veg though – there are dozens of varieties including turnip-sized winter radishes which can be stored over the winter.



Sowing

They can be sown pretty much anywhere – often thrown in among other veg and even in partial shade. Always sow directly in the soil – they don't fare well when transplanted. Sow a small number of seeds regularly (every two to three weeks) from April on. Sow thinly 1cm deep and thin to 3cm apart.

Growing

Water regularly in dry weather but don't over-water as it will encourage too much leafy growth.

Harvesting

They will be ready to eat within a month which is one of the fastest growing times of all vegetables. Don't let them get too big as they become overly peppery and tend towards tasting "woody" when too large.

Recommended Varieties

- Short Top Forcing

Problems

Slugs can nibble at radishes but they are rarely so badly eaten as to be inedible.

GIY Tips

1. Fast growing radishes are often sown between rows of slower growing vegetables as they can be harvested without upsetting the other veg. They are a brassica however, so ideally you should keep them in the brassica group in your rotation plan.
2. Radish tops can be used in soups.

Vegetable Directory

Rhubarb

Why Grow It?

A healthy rhubarb plant will last up to 10 years, so it's an incredibly valuable investment. It is typically the first new season crop of the year, providing bountiful food from March onwards.

Sowing

Rhubarb will grow in most soils, provided it is reasonably fertile. Choose a site that's quite sunny – it won't do well in shade. Choose your site carefully, as the plants will be in situ for up to a decade if you're lucky. Dig in plenty of well rotted compost or manure in to the planting holes. The plants are incredibly deep-rooting. Three plants is more than enough for most households. Though it can be grown from seed, rhubarb is generally grown by buying young plants or encouraging a fellow GIYer to give you a crown (a piece of the plant's root with at least one dormant bud on it) from their own healthy plants. This is done by digging up the plant when it has died back in winter and using a sharp spade to slice off a 10cm piece of the root. Crowns are then planted in the soil about 3ft apart, with the buds just above the ground to prevent rotting. Best time to plant them is in winter or very early spring.



Growing

Regular mulching with well-rotted manure or compost will help the plants greatly. A heavy dressing of compost each winter will do wonders. If the vigour of the plant starts to decline (poor yields or very thin stalks), then it is a good idea to split the plant the following winter and create a new plant. Replacing your plants gradually over time will help to maintain a steady supply of good rhubarb.

Harvesting

Don't harvest rhubarb in its first season – you want to concentrate on building vigour in the plant for the first year and then start harvesting in the second year. When harvesting rhubarb, take a hold of the stalk low down and pull it off, rather than cutting.

Recommended Varieties

- Timperley Early
- Champagne

Problems

Rhubarb is a generally healthy plant. Old plants can get viruses where the leaves become yellow and mottled. Honey fungus and crown rot can be problematic. If so, dig up the plants and start on a fresh site.

GIY Tips

1. "Forcing" rhubarb is where we cover the plants in early spring to force them to produce a very early, blanched crop. It can be done by either (a) lifting the plant in winter and growing it in tub in a dark garage or basement or (b) in situ by covering the plant with a rhubarb pot (or similar) for about 5 weeks.
2. Apply a liquid feed if plant is looking poorly in spring.

Vegetable Directory

Rocket

Why Grow It?

Incredibly useful, hardy, delicious and easy to grow, rocket is a great salad crop. Easy to start with, it's a great crop for kids to grow. Can be grown in containers. There are basically two types of

rocket. (1) Wild rocket is a small plant with narrow leaves. (2) Salad rocket is a taller plant where the leaves and flowers are edible. Rocket can be enjoyed fresh all year around, though summer sowings are prone to bolting.



Sowing

Sow from August to October for a winter/spring crop. You can then sow successionaly from late January on. Sow in module trays, about 5 seeds per module and plant out about a month later. A single six-module tray (30 plants overall) should be more than enough for each sowing. Allow 25cm between rows and plants (with 5 plants at each station). You can also sow direct by making shallow drills (about 1cm deep) – allow 25cm between drills. Sprinkle seed in the drill and cover with a small amount of soil or potting compost.

Growing

Rocket grows quickly. Weed well by hoeing between rows. In the event of a dry summer (or if growing in a greenhouse or polytunnel), water well.

Harvesting

Either cut individual leaves as required, or cut the entire plant at about 5cm and allow it to grow back.

Recommended Varieties

- Salad Rocket: Victoria or Dentallata.
- Wild Rocket: Napoli.

Problems

Summer sowings are prone to attack from fleabeetles which leave tiny holes in the leaves. Cover with enviromesh in the summer if growing outside. Winter sowings will not need this.

GIY Tips

1. Rocket flowers are edible and an attractive addition to a salad.
2. Rocket will grow well in pretty much any type of soil, as long as it's reasonably

Vegetable Directory

Scorzonerera

Why Grow It?

This oddly named vegetable is relatively unknown in Ireland, but it is one that is well worth growing as it is delicious, trouble free and doesn't need to be included in your crop rotation. It is grown for its long brown/black slender roots which are similar in taste to artichokes, and (to a lesser extent) for its spring shoots which are like asparagus.



Sowing

Scorzonerera needs a light, sandy soil to grow well – it should never be grown in manured soil as (like carrots) it will fork. It's best to dig the soil before sowing (ideally a month or so before) so that the soil is good and friable. It is sown direct in the soil in late April or May in a well-prepared seed bed in rows 30cm apart and about 5cm deep in a drill. The seeds are large and easy to handle – you can sow two or three seeds every 10cm, and then remove the weaker seedlings leaving one at each 10cm interval.

Growing

Once they have germinated there is very little work required – keep the bed weed free and water in very dry weather. Be careful if hoeing around the crown so as not to damage it.

Harvesting

The roots can be harvested from October but allow them to experience a frost or two to sweeten them up. The roots can be left in the soil all winter. The roots (particularly the longer ones) are notoriously difficult to harvest without snapping them, so be careful. Some roots can be left to overwinter (with foliage removed) – the new spring growth the following year is asparagus-like in taste.

Recommended Varieties

- Scorzonerera Maxima

Problems

Scorzonerera is a relatively trouble free vegetable to grow and does not need to be included in your crop rotation.

GIY Tips

1. Scorzonerera can be baked or fried, but probably the easiest approach is to boil for 20 minutes unpeeled – the skins should rub off easily once cooked, and the delicate flavour is maintained. Toss in a little melted butter. The flowers of the scorzonera plant are also edible.
2. Try growing scorzonera in pots or containers with a sandy soil mix – harvesting the roots is much easier this way as the pot can be turned over to access them.

Vegetable Directory

Shallots

Why Grow It?

Shallots are a little more “finicky” to cook with than onions, but they have a fine and very distinctive flavour. They are very easy to grow.

Sowing

Similar to onions, shallots are grown from sets (small shallots). Plant in March, but leave until April if the weather is very poor or the soil is very wet. Make sure the soil is light, free draining and non acid – add some compost or manure the previous winter. Add some sand or compost if your soil is heavy when you go to plant. Push the shallot in to the soil with the tip just visible above the surface – allow about 5-7cm between sets.



Growing

Water only in dry weather and keep the bed weed free.

Harvesting

They are ready when three quarters of the leaf on each plant has turned yellow and fallen over. This is the same incidentally with garlic. Carefully lift them. You will need to dry them out fully before storing – if the weather is dry leave them on the bed (not touching each other) for about 2 weeks. If the weather outside is rainy, put them in a shed on a chicken wire rack kept about a foot off the ground (so the air can circulate beneath them).

Recommended Varieties

Golden Gourmet

Problems

As per onions, the most serious disease is white rot which causes leaves to yellow and wilt and bulb gets white mould. No remedy but to remove and burn. You can not grow onion family in that spot for up to 7 years.

GIY Tips

1. If you dry shallots carefully they should store until the following spring. You can plait them as you would with onions.

Vegetable Directory

Spinach, Annual

Why Grow It?

Annual spinach is more inclined to bolt than perpetual spinach but it's far tastier. Tender spinach leaves are a wonderful addition to salads. Spinach is very good for you and cooked properly can be very tasty. The bolting problem is caused by warm, dry weather – it will fare much better in cool, damp conditions.



Sowing

Given its propensity to bolt, succession sowing is the key if you want a constant supply of spinach during the season. Sow in module trays, 1.5 cm deep every three weeks from April to August. Sow three or four seeds in each module. You can also sow direct in the soil outside if you wish, but slugs can be a problem as the tiny seedlings are getting established.

Growing

Transplant to final growing spot, leaving 25cm between rows and 7-15cm between plants (depending on whether you want baby leaves or regular ones). Spinach can be grown pretty much anywhere and doesn't need to be included in your rotation – use it as a flexible filler and for intercropping. Summer sowings should be done in partial shade to prevent bolting. Water copiously particularly in summer – as soon as the plant dries out, it will bolt. Apply an organic liquid feed (nettle is good – high in nitrogen) if growth seems lacklustre.

Harvesting

Spinach will be ready to harvest 8-10 weeks after sowing. Take the outer leaves first. You can also cut the entire head off at ground level – it will sprout new leaves and you will be able to crop again in a few weeks.

Recommended Varieties

- Bonbini F1

Problems

Bolting – annual spinach is far more interested in reproducing (producing flowers and seeds) than it is in producing leaves that you can eat. You may need to net seedlings from birds. Downy mildew can be an issue – it will manifest as white fluffy patches on leaves – prevent this by giving plants plenty of space.

GIY Tips

1. Small, tender spinach leaves make an excellent addition to salads.
2. Summer sowings are better done direct in the soil to prevent bolting.

Vegetable Directory

Spinach, Perpetual

Why Grow It?

Easier to grow than annual spinach, perpetual spinach is actually from the same family as beetroot and is therefore often known as leaf beet or spinach beet. It is less prone to bolting than regular spinach but is not quite as flavoursome. What it lacks in flavour however, it more than makes up for in sheer doggedness – it will last right through even the toughest winter and will be churning out leaves when all else around it has succumbed. Spinach is very good for you and cooked properly can be very tasty.



Sowing

Sow in module trays, 2.5 cm deep.

From one seed several seedlings will appear – this little magic trick comes courtesy of the fact that similar to beetroot, the seed is in fact a cluster of seeds.

Get rid of all the seedlings bar the strongest one.

Sow under cover in March (3-5 plants) and again in June.

Growing

Transplant to final growing spot, leaving 30cm between plants. There is no particular care required – simply keep it weed free and water during dry spells. A few plants in a polytunnel will also be incredibly prolific and the leaves will be slightly more tender than those grown outside. Remove any damaged leaves.

Harvesting

Harvest continuously throughout the season – in the summer you can take as much as half the plant in one go and it will bounce back. Be more sparing in the winter. To harvest, twist leaves away from the base of the plant – don't pull at them.

Recommended Varieties

- Perpetual Spinach

Problems

Without wishing to put a hex on it, almost nothing can go wrong... perpetual spinach is incredibly hardy. You don't even have to rotate it.

GIY Tips

1. Small, tender spinach leaves make an excellent addition to salads.
2. Perpetual spinach is so resilient, it doesn't even mind that no-one has bothered to come up with a proper variety name for it, the most common variety is simply called 'perpetual spinach'.

Vegetable Directory

Spring Onions/Scallions

Why Grow It?

Quick growing, useful and deliciously mild, spring onions are the quintessential salad crop. They can be grown in containers or anywhere you have some space. A great crop for kids to grow.



Sowing

Spring onions like a rich, well drained soil in a sunny location. They are best sown in module trays indoors for later transplanting. Sow about 8-10 seeds per module. About a month later plant out each little clump of spring onions, spacing the clumps about 20cm apart. Alternatively, you can sow direct in the soil if you rake it to a fine tilth first. Make drills about 1.5cm deep and 15cm apart. Sow the seed thinly in to the drill and then cover with soil. It doesn't really matter if the onions are growing close together because (a) you are not trying to grow bulbs and (b) you can remove and eat as way to thin them out. Sow little and often (perhaps every fortnight) between March to July. A sowing of a winter hardy spring onion variety in Autumn will give you an early spring crop.

Growing

Keep them in your allium (onion, garlic, leeks etc) rotation to prevent build up of diseases such as onion white rot. Hoe between the rows to keep weeds down. In the event of a dry summer (or if growing in a greenhouse or polytunnel), water well.

Harvesting

Spring onions are ready to eat when about 15cm tall (usually about 2 months after sowing). They don't keep well once harvested, so simply pull what you need and leave the rest to grow on.

Recommended Varieties

Ishikura Bunching

White Lisbon

Problems

They are so quick growing, they generally don't get affected by pests or diseases. They are relatively easy to grow.

Of course spring onions are great raw in salads, but don't forget that they are the classic stirfry vegetable too.

Don't forget that thinnings of regular bulb varieties of onion can be used as "spring" onions too.

Vegetable Directory

Squash (Summer and Autumn)

Why Grow It?

Squashes can produce a high yield of fruits that will store well through the winter. Ideal for soups, stews or roasts.

Sowing

Sow seeds in early May individually in 7cm pots. Sow about 2cm deep. The pots will need to be kept on a heating mat or a sunny windowsill. Transplant them to larger 12 or 15cm pots after about 3 weeks. Leave the pots indoors or in a greenhouse or polytunnel.



Growing

Make sure the soil where you are going to grow your squashes has had a decent application of well rotted manure or compost. Harden off the plants well and then plant out in early to mid June. Cover with fleece if it's cold at nights. Space the plants 2m apart (or 1m apart for bush-varieties) – this seems a lot, but once these babies get moving, there will be no stopping them. They can take over a veg patch, sending shoots here there and everywhere. So probably not a great idea for a small garden. Keep them in check.

Harvesting

When you harvest, depends on whether you are growing summer or autumn squashes. The former is grown to eat in the summer, while the latter is grown for storage. The summer squashes can be harvested as required from August and benefit from regular harvesting – the more you harvest the more prolific the plant will be. Harvest autumn squash in October when the leaves die back or before if there's a risk of frost. Cut off the squash from the plant leaving the stalk attached to it. If they need to be ripened further put them out in the sun by day, before bringing them in again by night – do this for a week or so. Or leave them on a sunny windowsill to 'cure' – this is where the skin hardens up which means they will store for longer. Squashes will store right through the winter.

Recommended Varieties

- Uchiki Kuri
- Delicata
- Crown Prince

Problems

A key issue with squashes can be failure to set fruit in cold, wet summers. You can help them along by hand pollinating – if this sounds very 'David Bellamy', don't worry, it's actually quite straight-forward. You are simply transferring the pollen from the male to the female flower using a soft brush. You can identify which is which by looking at the flower stalk - the male stalk is plain while the female flowers have a small fruit on the stalk.

GIY Tips

1. Grow them somewhere sheltered – they don't like wind.
2. Protect young plants from slugs in early stages.

Vegetable Directory

Swede

Why Grow It?

The yellow-fleshed turnip we eat in Ireland is in fact not a turnip at all, but a swede. It's related to the turnip of course, but it's a slower growing version which is left to grow much larger than the quicker-growing turnip. Swedes grow well in Ireland and store well – they are not particularly fussy about the soil they grow in, though they will fare better if the soil is manured the previous autumn.



Sowing

Though they can be sown direct, a foolproof way to grow healthy swedes is to sow them in module seed trays – sow one or two seeds in each module of the tray 2cm deep. Thin out the weaker seedling. They will germinate in about a week and will be ready for planting about a month later. Harden off early sowings. Plant seedlings out, spacing 30cm between rows and plants. Do not plant turnips where there have been brassicas for at least 3-4 years previously. Since swedes store well it's worth putting some thought in to growing for winter storage – if you sow 30 swedes in May or June, they will be ready to lift in October and will last you from October to April (consuming one a week). You will need 2m of growing space approximately to grow this many swedes.

Growing

Keep plants free of weeds by hoeing, and water regularly during dry weather. Plants won't need feeding if you have added compost/manure to the soil the previous year.

Harvesting

Swedes take up to five months to mature (turnips take just 6-8 weeks). Harvest when 10-15cm diameter, by simply pulling the root from the ground by the stem. Swedes can be left in the ground for the winter but there is a risk of them rotting in water-logged soil, so best to take them out and store them in sand.

Recommended Varieties

- Gowrie

Problems

Swedes are affected by the same problems that afflict all brassicas, though they are rarely badly impacted. Cabbage Root Fly, clubroot, and flea-beetles are the main culprits.

GIY Tips

1. Store swedes in a cool shed in a box of sand or create a swede clamp• (a pyramid of swedes on a bed of straw, covered with another layer of straw and soil).
2. You could also do an earlier sowing of swedes in April for summer eating, but we tend to use quicker growing turnips for this instead (and honestly, swedes are not exactly what you want to be eating in summer anyway).

Vegetable Directory

Sweetcorn

Why Grow It?

Sweetcorn takes up a good deal of space and gives a relatively low return – just two cobs per plant – it can also be difficult to grow well in Ireland given our relative lack of sun. But the sheer pleasure of harvesting a fresh cob of corn and the incredible sweet taste make it worth a try. They say you should run from the veggie patch to the kitchen when you harvest sweetcorn to cook it immediately – this is because as soon as you pick it the sugars in the corn immediately start to turn to starch and so the flavour is degrading literally by the hour. So in other words – you will never taste anything like homegrown sweetcorn



Sowing

Sow indoors in small pots about 2-3cm deep – one seed per pot. Delay sowing until May. They will need temperatures of 20 degrees celsius so a warm sunny windowsill or a heating mat is required. Harden off well before planting out.

Growing

Plant out the seedlings when they are 8cm tall (in June). They need warmth, shelter and sunshine to thrive. Sweetcorn plants are wind-pollinated so to facilitate this they are sown in “blocks” or double rows rather than a single long row. Plant them 40cm apart. Weed carefully around plants to avoid damaging the plant’s shallow roots. Sweetcorn plants don’t need a lot of watering except when the cobs are starting to fatten up. Earth up around the stems to give plants support. A top dressing of good compost around plants will help. Sweetcorn can be grown wherever suits in your patch – they don’t need to be included in your rotation plan.

Harvesting

Timing is crucial – sweetcorn is generally ready when the tassles at the end of the cobs turn brown. To test whether a cob is ready, peel back a few leaves and prick one of the kernels with your nail. If the juice that comes out is milky, then you’re ready to rock. If it’s watery, leave it another while. If it’s starchy, you’ve left it too long! To harvest cobs, hold the stem steady and then pull the cob downwards.

Recommended Varieties

- Sweet Nugget F1

Problems

Mice, birds, squirrels and badgers love sweetcorn so you may have to net the whole crop if that’s a problem.

GIY Tips

1. You can grow lettuce and other quick growing, ground-hugging plants underneath sweetcorn. This is called undercropping.
2. When you plant the seedlings out first, cover with a bionet cloche, this will give them protection from wildlife, wind and cold nights.

Vegetable Directory

Tomatoes

Why Grow It?

Few vegetables have suffered at the hands of the commercial food chain as much as the tomato. The simple fact of the matter is that most of the tomatoes that we buy year-in, year-out in our supermarkets taste of absolutely nothing at all. It is not until you grow your own that you realise this! Commercial growers pick varieties which have thick skins so that they last longer and are less prone to wastage in storage and distribution. The home-grown tomato on the other hand is a delectable treat, a meal in itself, best eaten fresh in the warmth of the greenhouse for maximum effect. Sure tomatoes do require a certain level of TLC – pinching out sideshoots, watering, feeding etc. But it's worth the effort!



Sowing

There are basically two types of tomato plants. Vine (or cordon) tomato plants are an orderly affair and have a tall central stem which produces two types of side stems (1) trusses or fruit bearing branches on which the tomatoes grow and (2) leaf bearing stems. Bush tomatoes are more compact but disorderly – they have trailing side branches.

Tomatoes have a long growing season and can be started in February indoors on a heating mat to get a head start. Otherwise wait until March. Sow seeds in pots or module trays indoors in a warm, sunny spot. When they have developed three true leaves prick out in to 3-inch pots. They won't be going in to the soil until May. Keep the potting compost moist.

Growing

Though lots of GIYers have grown tomatoes successfully outdoors, to my mind this mediterranean vegetable fares best in the warmth of a greenhouse, polytunnel or conservatory. They can be sown direct in the soil but will also grow well in pots as long as the container is good and deep (toms are quite deep rooting). Grow bags also work well. Wherever you plant them, make sure it's the warmest, sunniest place possible. They like rich, fertile soil – dig in a well-rotted manure or compost before planting or use poultry manure.

Vine tomatoes grow very tall and will require support – an ideal way to provide this is to put strong twine around the roots of the plant before you plant it in to the soil. This twine is then buried in the soil and tied to a horizontal on the roof of the greenhouse or tunnel, providing a taut vertical for the main stem to grow up. Leave approx 40cm between plants.

As the plant grows, pinch out side shoots which regularly appear in the angle between the main stem and leaf stems. These waste the plants energy if you allow them to grow. When the plants are 4ft tall remove the leaf stalks below the first fruit truss. This will improve air circulation around the base of the plants and makes it easier to water. Remove yellowing leaves as they appear.

Water evenly and regularly - irregular watering causes fruit to split. Never water the foliage on a tom plant as it will burn in the sunlight. Approx water requirements are 11 litres per plant per week.

Left to its own devices, the main stem of a healthy tom plant will just keep on growing up and up. But growing toms is a balancing act between allowing the plant to grow to a good height and forcing it to focus on producing fruit. Keep an eye on the number of trusses that are forming on the plant. If the plant is healthy allow seven or eight trusses to form. If it is not healthy, stop when the plant has formed five or six trusses by pinching out the growing point (top of the main stem).

Vegetable Directory

Once toms are starting to appear, feed fortnightly with a high-potash feed. Liquid tom feeds are available commercially or you can make your own comfrey tea by soaking 500g of comfrey leaves in 3 gallons of water and leave to stew for a month. Dilute before applying to plants - one part comfrey tea to ten parts water.

Harvesting

Harvest when the fruits are ripe. Fruit will split if left on the plants so remove as it ripens – surplus fruit can be made in to sauces for the freezer. Later sown plants may continue to produce fruit right in to late October and early November. You are likely to be left with lots of green fruit at the end of the season – use these for chutneys. Never serve tomatoes straight from the fridge – flavour is best when served warm.

Recommended Varieties

- Tigerella
- Rosada
- Sungold F1
- Shirley F1
- Beefsteak

Problems

The best way to avoid problems is to ensure that air is circulating around the plants. The same blight that affects potatoes can be devastating to tomatoes, particularly outdoor ones (though it can make its way in to greenhouses and polytunnels too). It causes leaves to curl and blacken. Try removing affected leaves or plants quickly but there's little you can do once it takes hold. The most common pests are whitefly, aphids and spider mites. Rolling or curling of tomato leaves is common and can be due to wide variation between day and nighttime temperatures. It is not a problem.

GIY Tips

1. For effective watering sink a pot in the ground beside the plant and water in to this. This gets water right down to the roots.
2. At the end of the season put a layer of green tomatoes in a drawer with a ripe apple or banana. These ripening fruits give off the ripening gas ethylene which encourages the tomatoes to ripen.
3. Bake surplus tomatoes in the oven for 8 hours on a very low heat “ cut them in half first and drizzle with some oil and salt. These sundried tomatoes can be stored in olive oil or frozen.
4. When you remove a side shoot from the plant, instead of throwing it out, stick it in a pot of compost - it will become a brand new tom plant which can be planted out later to prolong your cropping season.

Vegetable Directory

Turnip

Why Grow It?

The classic Irish yellow “turnip” is actually a swede which is a different (though related) vegetable. Real turnips are incredibly quick growing (you can harvest them just 2 months after sowing) and generally have white flesh. They are generally problem free and very tasty (particularly if harvested when not much larger than a golfball).



Sowing

Sow 5 or 6 turnip plants every three weeks from April until late July. Though they can be sown direct, a foolproof way to grow healthy turnips is sow them in module seed trays – sow one or two seeds in each module of the tray 2cm deep. They will germinate in about a week (thin out the weaker seedling) and will be ready for planting about a month later. Harden off early sowings. Plant seedlings out, spacing 30cm between rows and plants. Do not plant turnips where there have been brassicas for at least 3-4 years previously. Add some manure or compost to the soil the previous autumn. It’s a good idea to do a sowing of turnips in late summer, perhaps in a bed freed up from another crop (eg. Onions or garlic). The turnips will be ready to eat (and much appreciated) in early October, before the weather turns bad.

Growing

Keep plants free of weeds and water regularly during dry weather. Plants won’t need feeding if you have added compost/manure to the soil the previous year.

Harvesting

Harvest when the roots are 5-10cm in diameter. This can be as early as 6 weeks after sowing. Turnips will not store as well as swedes – hence it’s not a good idea to sow too many of them. Harvest by simply pulling the root from the ground by the stem.

Recommended Varieties

- Milan Purple Top
- Tokyo Cross

Problems

Turnips are affected by the same problems that afflict all brassicas, though they are rarely badly impacted. Cabbage Root Fly, clubroot, and flea-beetles are the main culprits.

GIY Tips

1. For a cluster of small, golf-ball sized roots, sow three or four seeds in each module of a module tray and rather than thinning out, plant them out in a group, allowing them to grow on together.
2. Young turnip tops', the leaves on top of the root, can be cooked and eaten as spring greens.

Vegetable Directory

Yacon

Why Grow It?

Though the Yacon looks like a very large potato, it has a surprisingly sweet, apple-like taste and a juicy texture. It's creating quite the buzz among nutritionists because of the unusual way it stores its carbs - as indigestible sugar (insulin) rather than starch. It is therefore highly promising as a way to introduce sweetness in to the diet of diabetics.



Sowing

In our climate, Yacon will do best in a polytunnel or greenhouse but can be grown outside if you have a very sheltered, sunny spot for them. Similar to potatoes, it is grown from tubers from last year's crop. Yacon grows two types of tubers - the knobbly 'stem' or root tubers that grow just under the surface around the stalk of the plant and look a lot like Jerusalem artichokes, and the large, smooth edible tubers that grow outside of these. The former are the ones used for propagating the following year's crop, while the latter are for eating. As with Oca last week, getting your hands on the tubers can be a challenge - they are a rarity - but on the plus side, once you have them you will never need to buy more.

Separate the knobbly tubers in spring, making sure you have a growth point on each. Plant each one in to a large pot with good quality potting compost. Place the pot on a heated bench or sunny place in doors.

Growing

Plant out in the ground in May, being careful of the weather - a good guide would be to only plant them out when you happy to plant out your tomatoes. Space 1 metre apart. Water regularly. The plants can be slow to get going but in the summer will get to a height of 2m. As it's a hungry plant, it's a good idea to ensure the soil is good and fertile with plenty of added compost or farmyard manure.

Harvesting

Like Oca, Yacon tubers do a lot of their growing late in the season, so leave the plants to be killed off by the first frosts in winter. Then, dig the whole plant carefully - the yield will be 5-10 large tubers per plant. Snap these off. They will store in a frost free shed in a box of sand and will sweeten further over time. Cut the stem of the plant back to about 10cm and store this 'crown' with the knobbly root tubers attached for next year's crop, also storing in sand.

Oca and Yacon are far more palatable raw than the potato, and Yacon is surprisingly sweet and tasty as a raw snack. Cooked, it has a variety of uses - basically anything you can do to a potato.

Recommended Varieties

- There are no varietal names.

Problems

It is blight resistant just like Oca, and almost completely immune to problems..

GIY Tips

1. Yacon was valued by the Incas for its thirst-quenching qualities.
2. Yacon is related to the Dahlia.