

A Beginner's Guide to Home Gardening in March/April



Part 1

Why Grow Your Own Food?

Growing vegetables, fruits and herbs establishes a vital link between us and the food that we eat. We know then exactly what it contains and where it comes from, with the taste of our own organically grown food so much better than the tightly wrapped equivalent that is coated with preservatives often found on a supermarket shelf which may have travelled half way around the world. If we plan our

backyard garden well, we can have varieties of delicious food all year round.

Gardening also connects us with the natural world, giving us an



understanding of the seasons of the year, an ability to forecast the weather by looking at the sky, the experience of sheer joy at the splash of rain or the warmth of sunshine upon our faces, the excitement of seeing the first swallow in April, the knowledge of being able to distinguish between

the calls of different bird species in the tree branches above, the happiness of knowing the key role that tiny bees and butterflies darting from flower to flower play in the circle of life. We can relax in our new found insights into the fundamental building blocks of life of Earth that are water, air and soil.

Our physical and mental health benefits from outdoor activities that can be referred to as the

Green Prescription. By working with our neighbours, school students or work colleagues, we can also develop a sense of community, a feeling of belonging, a sense of worth

and of purpose. We also play a part in tackling Climate Chaos by reducing food miles and therefore our own and society's carbon footprint.



Why Grow Food Organically?

Soil is made up of air, water, minerals, urban matter and an array of living elements- fungi, bacteria, earth worms and insect life. It is a precious but fragile resource that is being increasingly depleted due to such activities as chemically-based monoculture farming,

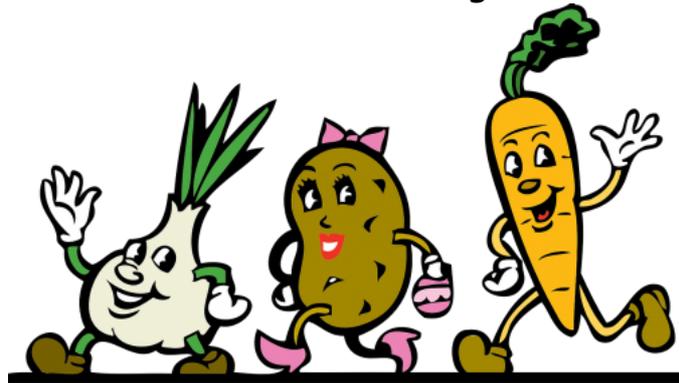


deforestation, ranching and heavy ploughing that is undermining its ability to produce food and support biodiversity. By growing our own food organically without the use of destructive pesticides and herbicides ('cide' = killer in Latin), we learn that what we take from the earth needs to be returned in order to maintain its life-giving fertility and provide

habitats for wildflowers, birds, bees, butterflies and invertebrates. In the process, we immerse ourselves in and be at one with the rest of Nature.

Growing area- Size is not a barrier

No matter how small a space that is available, we can all grow food at home. Even a container pot can yield a wide variety of foodstuffs, ranging from potatoes to strawberries. But if we have a front or back lawn then we should consider transforming at least part of it into an area for a food garden.



Making a sustainable Vegetable Garden at home

Tools



- Spade
- Fork
- Spade
- Rake
- Hoe
- Trowel (hand-held)
- Water can
- Suitable clothing (gloves, boots...)

Preparing the ground

Designate an area of the garden that is south facing (captures the sunlight), protected from strong winds, sufficiently deep for plant roots (not too close to concreted paths/buildings) and not prone to water retention.

Lay out the area in such a way that each planted vegetable can be reached by one's outstretched hand.

Remove weeds and their roots.

Install a simple suitable low perimeter fence (wood, plastic etc) around the plots to protect crops from being contaminated by cats and other pets peeing and defecating.

Enrich the soil's fertility by the addition of compost and farmyard manure which adds organic nutrients to the soil.

Test if you can the acidity of your soil. A pH of 7 is neutral, less than 7 is acidic and more than 7 is alkaline. A slightly acid soil of 6.5pH is best for growing most vegetables. A test kit can be purchased in most garden centres. If the soil is too acidic, lime should be added.

Rake the soil to ensure that it is smooth and level. Compact soil hinders drainage and makes it impossible for roots to grow. Raking loosens and breaks up clumps of soil, takes out stones and other debris whilst mixing in the fertiliser and compost.



What Vegetables Should I Grow?



This is primarily a personal choice as well as depending on the time of year and the suitability of the growing area. But for this exercise I will select three popular vegetables that require relatively low maintenance, are easy to grow and can be planted in March/April, namely *potatoes*, *onions* and *lettuce*.

Crop Rotation

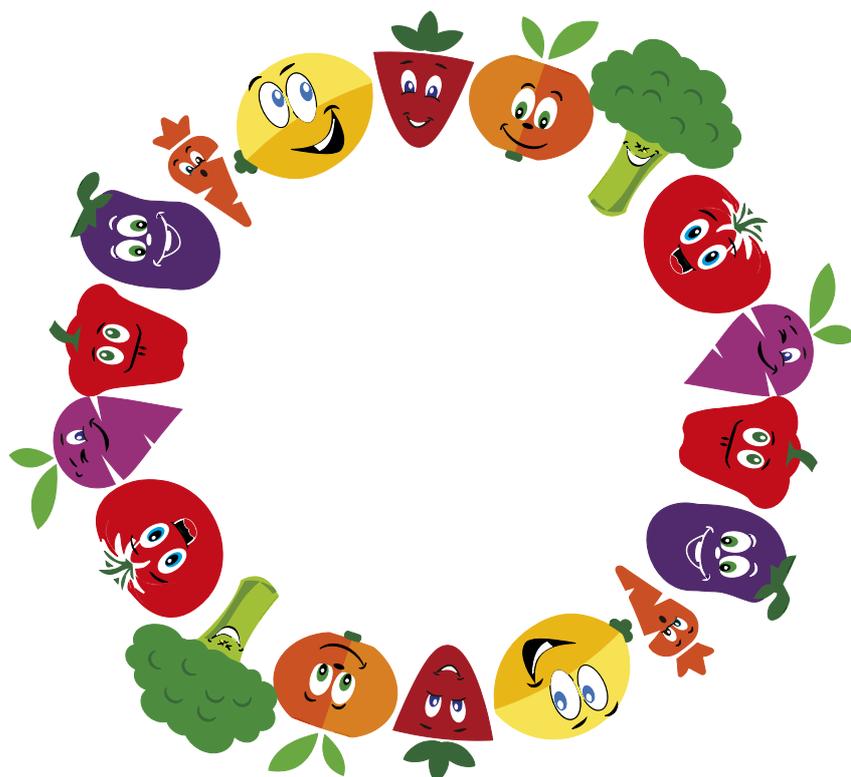
Each family of vegetables has different nutrient requirements. In order to reduce the possibilities of particular soil deficiencies developing as well as stopping a build-up of pest and disease problems associated with specific types of vegetables that can and will impact

negatively on crop yields, different types of plants should be grown in different locations of the garden each year.

This method of gardening is known as *crop rotation*.

If space permits, divide the garden into three distinct plots.

In our garden a three year cycle of rotation will be practised based on:



Year 1

Plot 1 Potatoes (root type)

Plot 2 Onions (stem type)

Plot 3 Lettuce (leafy type)

Year 2

Plot 1 Lettuce

Plot 2 Potatoes

Plot 3 Onions

Year 3

Plot 1 Onions

Plot 2 Lettuce

Plot 3 Potatoes



Crop 1: Potatoes

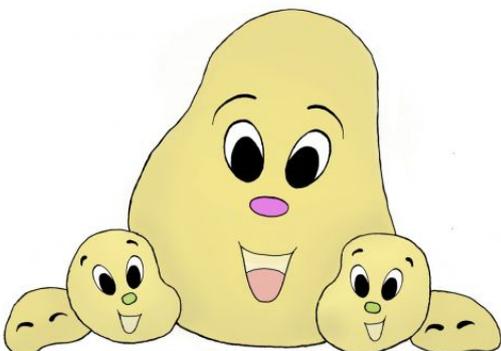
Potatoes (so-called 'earlies' types) can be planted in March.

Ensure that manure or other fertiliser has been placed into the ground before planting.

Purchase seed potatoes from a garden centre or some other source.

Seed potatoes are potato tubers that have buds (known as *eyes*) that sprout in spring. These eyes will grow into a new plant.

Once the seed potatoes have sprouted, they are ready to be planted in the soil.



However you do not need to use the whole seed potato as one planting. They can be cut into pieces that can be grown separately, so long as the pieces have at least one eye each. If you do decide you want to cut your seed potatoes into separate pieces, do not plant for a day or more until the newly exposed areas

have hardened. This sealing protects the tubers from rotting and being damaged by soil-borne diseases.

Plant with the eyes pointing up.

Place potatoes singly in individual holes or positioned in a row along a trench made with a hoe, spade or shovel.

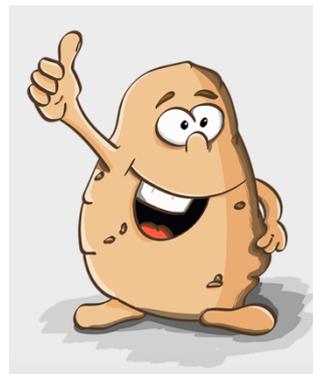
Plant 10-15cm (4-6in) deep.

Be gentle with the tuber when planting so as not to damage the 'eyes'.

Cover over with soil.

Leave a space of 25cm(10in) between each tuber.

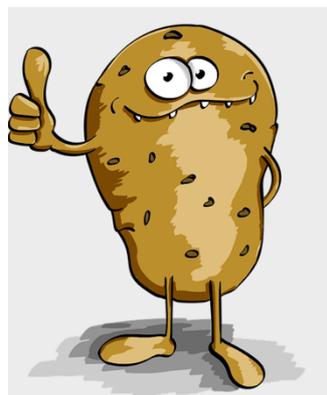
Leave a space of 45cm (80in) between rows.



Once the first shoots have grown to about 20cm above the ground, use a hoe or spade to scoop soil from between rows and mound it up against the plants, burying the stems halfway.

Repeat this process a few times during the growing season.

Lots of regular watering is recommended especially during dry spells.



Remove weeds as required.

These earlie (spring grown) potatoes are ready for harvesting when the flowers open or the buds falls off. This normally occurs 14 weeks after sowing.

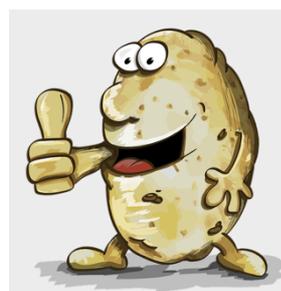
Check their readiness by scraping away a little of the soil cover to make sure they are large enough to be harvested.

Gently dig them up with a garden fork so as not to spear the tubers.

Dispose of any diseased tuber as these could damage the rest of the crop.

Health benefits

Organically grown potatoes are excellent low calorie high fibre vegetables that provide protection against cardiovascular disease and cancer.



Crop 2: Onion

Plant in March/April.

For planting use baby onions ('sets') that can be purchased in garden centres.



Ground should be raked and prepared with an organic fertiliser. But don't plant onions onto freshly manured ground as this can lead to rotting.

Manure should normally be placed in the proposed growing areas during

the winter.

Leave a space of 10cm(4in) between each baby onion.

Leave a space of 25cm-30cm (10-12in) between rows.

Do not plant if the weather is very cold as the sets won't do well in cold, damp soil.

Push the set into the soil so that the tip is just about visible above the surface. Firm in well.

Regularly weed the onions beds.

Be careful when weeding so as not to damage the bulbs.

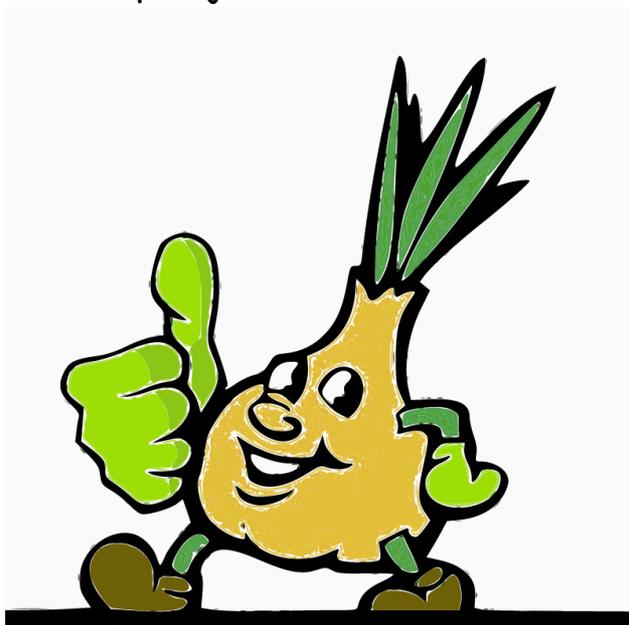
Water if weather is dry.

Onions are ready to harvest when the leaves begin to yellow and fall over (mid-late summer- approximately 20 weeks after sowing).

Use a fork to loosen the bulbs from the soil.

If you decide to store some of your onion crop rather than immediately eat them, lay the bulbs on a rack in the sun to dry.

Using the stems and leaves as a rope, bunch and hang them together in a dry place.



Alternatively the bulbs can be placed in net bags.



Health benefits

Onions are known as one of the superfoods. They help reduce the risk of breast cancer, keep the blood sugar steady and protect the skin and colon, heart and kidneys.

Crop 3: Lettuce

The most popular type of lettuce is known as *loose-leaf*, the so-called "cut-and-come-again" crop where leaves can be cut as required.

Lettuce is a handy crop to have as it is a great space filler, growing anywhere you have some space.

Sow seeds in drills to a low depth of 1cm.

Leave a space of 15cm-30cm

(6-12in) between rows

depending on the variety

(read details on pack).

Weed regularly.

Keep the plants well-watered.

If they don't get enough

water, they will quickly seed

(known as *bolting*). If this happens the taste is quite bitter.

Harvest lettuce by cutting off leaves at ground level rather than pulling up the plant.

Lettuce will then often regrow leaves but always leave two or three leaves for the plant to continue to function.



Beware Snails and Slugs!

Snails and slugs are a big problem for vegetables such as lettuce as they eat the leaves. To reduce their damage, rake around the plants regularly removing the slugs. Use small containers full of beer with

the rim just positioned above ground level near the plants. Snails and



slugs are attracted to the smell of beer.

Cover with a loose lid to stop other little creatures falling in. They also find horticultural grit gravel, bark or wood chops, or egg shells uncomfortable to move over.

But attracting birds and hedgehogs into the garden also helps a lot as they will enjoy eating these pesty little creatures. However birds too may develop a taste for your lettuce. So install netting over and around your plants if that situation arises.

Health Benefits

Lettuce is rich in antioxidants like vitamin C and other nutrients such as vitamin A, vitamin K and potassium. It helps fight inflammation, lowers high cholesterol levels that often lead to cardiovascular diseases, relieves anxiety and as an anti-cancer source.



Part 2 (to follow next week)



Growing Strawberries

Growing Spinach

How to make your own compost

Harvesting rainwater

