



OPPOSITE PAGE: Cleve carrying hazel sticks to be made into wigwams. THIS PAGE, L-R: assorted lettuce, rocket and tomatoes seedlings are started off in the greenhouse to give them a chance against the slugs. Planting seeds in biodegradable pots.

MARCH: GET SET

ORGANIC VEGETABLE GROWING HAS NEVER BEEN MORE POPULAR. IN OUR NEW 12-PART SERIES GARDEN DESIGNER CLEVE WEST SHARES HIS EXPERIENCES AS AN ALLOTMENTEER. PHOTOGRAPHS BY HOWARD SOOLEY

When I first started making gardens some 15 years ago I never once thought I'd want an allotment. Pushing the boundaries of contemporary garden design was my only ambition, so flat caps and turnips just didn't figure in my plans to shake things up at the cutting edge. Today, with three sheds, a greenhouse and four plots to look after you'd be forgiven for thinking that youthful ambition has been hijacked by one of the most traditional and basic forms of gardening – growing food. However, while the allotment takes up substantial amounts of our time, it has become a way for us to keep in touch with the process of gardening that is so easily lost when creating gardens in the confines of an office on a drawing board.

My partner Christine, a printmaker, was initially just as dubious, but our small town garden practically looked after itself, so it was only a matter of time before we would start yearning for more. Neither of us wanted to move out of

London and, with a preference for fresh organic food, an allotment seemed a sensible choice.

'Grow your own' has never been more popular. Inner-city waiting lists for allotments now extend to the suburbs. Owners of larger gardens are more willing to resurrect the vegetable patch and even the smallest spaces are being used for pots of herbs and tomatoes in growbags. There's nothing mysterious about growing vegetables, but it does need organisation and perseverance, especially if, like us, you grow them organically away from home and can't look after them as you would if they were on your doorstep.

Preparation, therefore, can make life so much easier in the long run. Clearing a plot for the first time might be a daunting task, but it is worth the effort to remove any signs of perennial weed, such as bindweed, ground elder and couch grass, which will compete for nutrients, water and air and make future maintenance very difficult. Our plot was covered in brambles. However, this turned out to be a

blessing as leaves from the thicket blocked light and suppressed other weeds from taking over. Sturdy loppers and a mattock to grub out the roots of the bramble made light work of what initially looked quite hopeless. From then on, hoeing little and often was the only way to maintain control without it becoming a burden.

We quickly learned from other allotment holders that there are three basic rules for those who have never grown vegetables before. First, plant what you like to eat. While there are some good-looking vegetables around, there's no point in spending valuable time growing something to give away. Second, choose vegetables that are relatively easy to grow. Once you have seen how easy it is with vegetables such as potatoes, beans and garlic, you're less likely to be discouraged if your cauliflowers don't live up to expectations. Third, make sure you don't plant more than you need.

Like most organic gardeners we rotate our crops on a four-year cycle. Crop rotation reduces the build up of pests

and diseases and also helps maintain the soil's fertility by meeting with each vegetable's differing needs. For example, a new plot with plenty of organic matter added to it will be perfect for heavy feeders like squash. The leaves of the

squash will shade much of the ground and suppress weeds in the first season. Runner beans and sweet corn are good companions and can be planted in the same bed. In the second year potatoes also help shade out and weaken weeds, while benefiting from the organic matter added in the previous season. In year three other root crops, such as parsnips, beetroot and carrots, can be planted and, finally, in the fourth year, crops sensitive to over-rich soil, such as onions, can be planted before manuring again and repeating the four-year cycle.

Soil differs from plot to plot, so allowances must be made.

Ours, being sandy, free-draining loam, will warm a lot quicker than clay, for example, but because of the slugs we plant very few seeds in open ground until late April,

JOBS FOR MARCH*

GENERAL

Prepare soil for sowing; lift and divide rhubarb; protect any early potatoes; check parsnips and lift and store before new growth develops

HARVESTING

Brussel sprouts, leeks, radish, sprouting broccoli, kale, rhubarb

SOWING

Outside – early beetroot, broad beans, Brussels sprouts, summer, autumn & winter cabbage, spring onions, lettuce, parsnips, spinach, turnips, radish
Under glass – aubergines, beetroot, Brussels sprouts, carrots, endive, kales, leeks, lettuce, peas, tomatoes

*These listings are just a selection of possible jobs for the month



OPPOSITE PAGE, L-R: burning the last of the winter debris. Lettuce grown in pots in the unheated greenhouse.
THIS PAGE: the area at the front of the allotment showing two sheds with sedum roofs, raised beds and a wigwam for beans.

early May. The one time I succumbed to temptation and planted radish and lettuce early in March, with the idea of getting a head start, they were knocked back by a combination of bad weather and slugs so ravenous they were even found eating allium leaves. I have now resolved to pay heed to the old wives' tale that the soil is only ready for seed sowing when it's warm enough to sit on comfortably with no knickers on.

We have, however, planted seeds of parsnip. They are painfully slow to germinate, and often get lost among weed seedlings, so we sow parsnip seeds thicker than most and plant a few in a pot to remind us when we should be looking out for them. Turnips and radish can also be sown early and, being quick to germinate, can be planted in between the rows of parsnips before the parsnip leaves start blocking out the light. Known as 'catch cropping', this method makes good use of all available space and can even be adopted in the flower border if there is no room for a vegetable plot.

The rest of our hopes for the season lie in the greenhouse and cold frames where peas, lettuce, dill, coriander, chopsuey greens, leeks, sprouts and cavalo nero have been sown. Most are grown in pots to give them a better chance against slugs. This isn't ideal and is borne out of the fact that we are unable to keep a regular check on our produce as the plot is a ten-minute drive from our home. Biodegradable

paper pots are our preferred choice, as plants can be transferred into the ground with minimum disturbance to their roots. Tomatoes and basil (sown in February) remain on our window sill at home where, despite having a tendency towards lankiness, they are better off than in an unheated greenhouse with extremes of temperature.

As for being able to crop anything in March, it's up to rhubarb, leeks and broccoli to keep up morale. Wonderfully dramatic, the jungly leaves and colourful stems of rhubarb give a sumptuous feel to the vegetable garden just when the plot is starting to look barren and, with adequate moisture, can be picked until mid-summer. Our three clumps have been nurtured from small plants that were found during the initial clearance. 'Champagne Early' is our earliest cultivar, with thick stems and a sharp taste. 'Timperley Early' comes next, with thinner, sweeter stems (picked towards the end of the month) and 'Victoria' is not quite ready for picking until mid-April. Rhubarb can be 'forced' to produce earlier, sweeter, blanched stems by covering with chimney pots, or purpose-made forcing pots, but with such a long harvest period we've never bothered.

March is the last month of the dormant period during which established rhubarb clumps can be divided. A chunk sliced off the woody crown should be planted where it can be left undisturbed for years. Mulching the crown with well-rotted compost will feed the plant and keep it moist.

Stems are generally left unharvested during the first year as the plant needs all its strength to build a healthy root system.

Leeks ('St Victor'), whose leaves' violet sheen puts them into that exclusive 'looks good, tastes good' category, will keep us going for a few more weeks and broccoli, without a doubt one of my favourite veg, is cropping heavily, the seed having been sown almost a year ago. I'll never live down my impatience with this vegetable in my first year when, convinced it would come to nothing after 11 months, pulled up the plant literally days before it was due to send out its first florets. An embarrassing moment to say the least. Older and wiser, I now grow the fine purple spears of *Brassica oleracea* 'Rudolph' that, if picked regularly to stop the flowers from opening, produce delicious slender florets from mid-March to the middle of May. Like all brassicas these need constant protection from pigeons.

Finally, one of the most satisfying introductions to vegetable growing has got to be potatoes. Chitting, which involves leaving tubers in a light, cool place from early

February, so that they develop buds, should give you a head start, although it is not strictly necessary. Potatoes take up a fair amount of space and with over 100 cultivars there is never enough room to plant all we want. Cultivars are split into four groups (according to the length of time they take to mature): earlies (harvesting in June/July), second earlies (July/Aug), early main (Aug/Sept) and late main (Sept/Oct). We always plant a few of each to give a harvest of fresh potatoes from the middle of June onwards.

There is much to do from March onwards and once the first potatoes are in the ground, a new season is well under way. The feeling of euphoria and hope for the coming year is tempered by a sense of urgency and the occasional whimper (a male thing I'm told) of: "There's too much to do... we should never have taken it on." Christine has heard it all before and, knowing I'll be lauding it by summer, ignores my pessimism and goes about her business pulling bindweed, feeding birds and quietly removing the first of the season's slugs into a pot. ■

FAVOURITE POTATOES

'MIMI' AND 'ROCKET'

Our first earlies, planted in the last week of March 10cm deep, 30cm apart, allowing 60cm between furrows.

'ROYAL KIDNEY' AND 'BELLE DE FONTENAY' (A SALAD VARIETY) AND 'SYMFONIA'

These second earlies are planted two or three weeks later.

'RATTE' (A SALAD VARIETY) AND 'KING EDWARD'

Our main crop varieties are planted around the middle of April.