



How to Grow Chives

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September 2026

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The easiest herb in any UK garden



How to Grow Chives in the UK

Chives were the first herb I ever grew successfully. Twenty-odd years on, I still rate them as the easiest, most forgiving plant in any UK garden. Mine come up every March without me doing anything, crop until October, and disappear quietly back into the soil for winter. There is no fussing, no rescuing, no propagation drama. You plant chives once and they look after themselves for years, which is genuinely rare in gardening.

This guide is how I have come to grow them in Oxfordshire over two decades. From sowing seed (which I have stopped bothering with) to dividing established clumps (which I do almost every spring), plus the garlic chives that nobody seems to mention but absolutely deserve a place in any UK herb garden.

Why Chives Are the Best First Herb for a UK Garden

If anyone asks me which herb to start with, chives is always the answer. They are properly hardy in any UK garden. They tolerate cold, wet, partial shade, poor soil, neglect, and being chopped to the ground regularly. They come back every spring for years, which means one plant is genuinely an investment that keeps paying for a decade or more.

They are also one of the first edible plants up in spring. My chive clumps push up green shoots in late February most years, weeks before anything else is producing. After a long winter of dried herbs, those first fresh chive snippings feel almost ceremonial. growing herbs in the UK garden covers the wider herb picture, but chives are the one I would tell any beginner to start with first.

Chives vs Garlic Chives: Both Worth Growing



Common chives on the left with hollow leaves and round purple flowers, garlic chives on the right with flat leaves and white star flowers.

Most UK guides only talk about ordinary chives, but there are actually two main types worth growing and they behave quite differently.

Common chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*)

The familiar one. Thin hollow green leaves with a mild oniony flavour. Lovely round purple-pink flowers in May and June. This is the chive you put on baked potatoes, scrambled eggs, and into omelettes. Crops from March to October, dies back in winter, returns every spring.

Garlic chives (*Allium tuberosum*)

Flat solid leaves rather than hollow, with a distinct mild garlic flavour. White star-shaped flowers later in summer (August to September) that the bees love every bit as much as common chive flowers. Garlic chives are a brilliant addition to a UK herb garden and almost nobody grows them, which is daft because they crop later than common chives and bridge the gap when other herbs are slowing down.

If you have space, grow both. Common chives for spring and early summer cooking, garlic chives to keep cropping into late summer and autumn. They live happily in separate pots side by side. The growing rules below apply to both unless I say otherwise.

Growing Chives Outdoors in the UK

Chives are about as easy as outdoor plants get. They are fully hardy across the whole UK, including the colder parts of Scotland and Northern Ireland, and they tolerate a wider range of conditions than nearly any other herb.

Sun and position

Chives prefer full sun but they will crop perfectly well in part shade. A spot with morning sun and afternoon shade is often best in southern England, because hot afternoon sun can scorch the leaves in a heatwave. North-facing borders that get only a few hours of direct light still produce a useful crop. If you have got a half-shaded corner where nothing seems to grow, try chives.

Soil

Chives are not fussy. They grow in clay, loam, sandy soil, almost anything as long as it does not stay waterlogged. If you don't know your soil yet, how to tell if your garden soil is clay, loam or sand covers the simple tests. Adding a bit of compost before planting helps but is not essential. Mine grow happily on Oxfordshire clay with no special treatment.

Spacing

One clump every 20 to 30cm. A single mature chive clump produces more than most households can use, so two or three plants is usually plenty unless you are cooking a lot or making chive butter in bulk. Garlic chives need a bit more space, about 30 to 40cm apart, because the clumps spread wider.

Growing Chives in Pots



A pot of chives near the kitchen door gives fresh leaves from March to October every year.

Chives are brilliant in pots and one of the most reliable herbs for container growing. Unlike mint, they will not try to take over the world. Unlike basil, they cope perfectly well with British weather. A single pot of chives by the kitchen door will give you fresh leaves from March to October for years on end.

Pot size

Bigger is better. The minimum I would use is a 20cm pot, but 25 to 30cm is much more sensible. A small pot dries out fast in summer, gets root-bound within a season, and produces a sad-looking plant. A bigger pot gives you a clump that crops properly and only needs dividing every two or three years rather than every spring.

Compost

Standard peat-free multipurpose compost is fine. Nothing fancy required. Peat-free compost in the UK covers what to expect from the modern stuff, and the best compost for vegetables walks through which brands are actually worth buying. Growing vegetables in pots in the UK covers the wider container basics that apply equally to herbs.

Watering pot-grown chives

Container chives need more attention than ones in the ground. Check the pot every few days in summer and water when the top inch of compost feels dry. They are not as drought-tolerant as Mediterranean herbs but nor do they want sodden compost. How often to water plants in the UK covers the principles.

Growing Chives from Seed

Chives are easy from seed but here is my honest opinion after 20 years. Buy a starter plant for £3 to £5 instead. Or get a clump off a gardening friend or neighbour for free, because anyone who has had chives for more than two years has too many. Chive seed takes two to three weeks to germinate, the seedlings are slow and grass-like for weeks, and you need to wait until year two for a properly cropping plant. A bought starter plant gives you usable chives the same week and a full crop in the same year.

That said, if you genuinely want to grow from seed, it is straightforward.

Sow indoors in March or April into a small pot or tray of seed compost. Cover lightly with about 5mm of compost.

Keep on a warm windowsill at around 18 to 20°C. Germination takes 14 to 21 days.

Sow several seeds together rather than spacing them out, because chives grow better in clumps than as individuals.

Pot on into a bigger pot once seedlings are 5cm tall.

Plant out into the garden or final pot in late May once the plants are 10 to 15cm tall.

For the wider seed-sowing approach, how to grow vegetables from seed in the UK covers the technique in full detail.

Garlic chive seed germinates a bit slower (sometimes up to 4 weeks) but is otherwise identical to grow.

Dividing Chives: The Easiest Plant Propagation There Is



One mature chive clump divides easily into three or four new plants in early spring.

Here is the genuinely useful bit. Chives multiply themselves underground, which means every two or three years a mature clump can be split into two, three, or even four new plants. Free chives, forever. I have not bought a chive plant since around 2008 because the original few keep generating new clumps.

The method is dead simple. In early spring (March or early April), before the plant has put on too much growth, dig up the whole clump with a fork. The roots will come up as one tight mass with multiple little bulbs all wedged together. Either pull the clump apart by hand into smaller sections (4 or 5 bulbs per section is plenty) or cut through it with an old kitchen knife if it is properly tight. Each section becomes a new plant. Replant straight away into fresh compost or a new spot, water in, and you are done.

Within a few weeks each division is producing its own leaves and looks like a proper chive plant in its own right. The first year after division crops slightly less than an established clump, but by year two each new plant is as productive as the original. If you have got friends who garden, this is the easiest plant to give away. One mature clump of mine usually produces enough divisions to keep three or four neighbours in chives every spring.

Harvesting Chives Properly



Cut whole stems down to 2cm above the soil rather than snipping the tops, the plant comes back stronger eve

This is where a lot of people go wrong without realising it. The natural instinct is to snip a few leaves off the top with scissors when you want some. That works but it is not the best approach.

The better way is to cut whole stems right down to 2 or 3cm above the soil. The plant responds by producing new fresh growth from the base, and you get a fresh flush of long tender leaves rather than uneven scraps of cut tops. I cut my chives back hard every 6 to 8 weeks through the growing season, even if I do not need that much. The cuttings get frozen in ice cube trays with water for winter cooking.

Cutting hard like this also stops the plant flowering for a while, which keeps the leaves at their best. Once chives flower, the leaves can go slightly tougher and less flavoursome, though the flowers themselves are useful and lovely.

The Chive Flowers (Don't Cut Them All Off)



The round purple-pink flowers are edible, brilliant for bees, and pretty enough to plant just for the look.

Round purple-pink flower heads appear on common chives in May and June, white star-shaped ones on garlic chives in August and September. They are pretty enough that I plant them in the front of borders just for the look. The bees go mad for them too, which is reason enough to keep some, and chives earn their place in any bee friendly planting scheme.

Better still, the flowers are edible. Pull the individual florets off the round head and scatter them over a salad or a baked potato. They taste mildly oniony like the leaves and they look like nothing else in the kitchen. Garlic chive flowers have a gentle garlic flavour and work brilliantly in stir-fries and as a salad garnish.

If you do not want flowers, snip the flower stalks off as soon as they appear. The plant will put the energy into more leaves instead. My usual compromise is to let one or two clumps flower for the bees and to harvest hard from the others to keep them productive.

Chives Through the Year

Late winter (February). Established clumps start pushing fresh shoots. Don't disturb yet.

Spring (March to April). Best time for dividing established clumps. Buy or plant out new starter plants once the worst frosts are past. Start harvesting once leaves are 10cm or more. UK vegetable planting calendar covers everything else at this time of year.

Late spring (May). Common chives flower. Harvest hard between flowering periods. Garlic chives still putting on leaf growth.

Summer (June to August). Peak cropping. Harvest weekly. Keep watered in pots. Common chive flowering tapers off, garlic chives start to flower in August. June gardening jobs in the UK covers what else needs doing.

Autumn (September to October). Last harvests. Leaves slow down and start yellowing as the plant prepares for dormancy.

Winter (November to February). Above-ground growth dies back completely. The clump is alive underground. Leave well alone. The plant will return in spring without any help. Frost damage on plants in the UK covers protection for less hardy crops.

Common Chive Problems

Chives are nearly trouble-free, which is one of the reasons I rate them so highly. The problems that do come up are minor and easily fixed.

Leaves yellowing in summer. Usually too dry, especially in pots. Water properly and the plant bounces back within days.

Plant looking tired and sparse. The clump needs dividing. Lift in spring, split, replant. This is the single biggest reason established chive plants decline, and the fix is free.

White rust spots on leaves. Allium rust, more of a problem in damp conditions and crowded plantings. Cut affected leaves off, improve airflow, divide overcrowded clumps. Severe cases sometimes need the whole plant binning and starting fresh.

Slugs and snails. Honestly not much of an issue with chives. The strong oniony scent puts most slugs off. How to get rid of slugs in the garden covers what to do where slugs do strike.

Aphids. Very occasional, particularly on stressed plants. Spray with diluted soapy water or just leave them, ladybirds usually sort it out within a week.

One useful thing worth knowing: chives planted near apples, brassicas, and lettuce are said to discourage aphids and some pests. There is genuine truth in this from my own experience, though I would not rely on it as the only defence. A chive plant near the salad bed is a nice bonus rather than a guaranteed pest controller.

Storing and Using Chives

Chives are at their best fresh, which means cut and used within an hour or two. They do not dry well, the flavour goes flat and grassy. But they freeze beautifully. Chop the leaves, pack them into ice cube trays, top with a little water, freeze, and you have got fresh-flavoured chives for soups and stews all winter. They will not work in salads after freezing because the texture goes soft, but for cooking they are nearly as good as fresh.

Chive butter is the other classic use. Soft butter mixed with finely chopped chives and a pinch of salt, rolled into a log in greaseproof paper, frozen, then sliced off as needed for steaks, baked potatoes, vegetables, or anything else that wants a hit of fresh herb butter. Will keep in the freezer for 6 months.

Common Questions About Growing Chives

Are chives easy to grow in the UK?

Chives are one of the easiest herbs to grow in the UK. They are fully hardy across the whole country, tolerate cold wet conditions, return reliably every spring, and need almost no attention once established. They are the herb I would recommend any UK beginner to start with.

How long do chives take to grow from seed?

Chive seeds take 2 to 3 weeks to germinate, then 6 to 8 weeks to reach a usable size. From sowing to first proper harvest is 10 to 12 weeks. A bought starter plant is ready to harvest immediately, which is why most UK gardeners skip seed for chives.

Are chives perennial in the UK?

Yes. Chives are fully hardy perennials in every part of the UK. The above-ground growth dies back over winter but the underground bulbs survive and produce fresh growth every spring. A well-looked-after chive clump can crop reliably for 10 years or more.

How often should you water chives?

Chives in the ground rarely need watering except in dry spells. In pots, check every few days in summer and water when the top inch of compost is dry. They are not as drought-tolerant as Mediterranean herbs but they hate sitting in waterlogged soil.

Can you grow chives indoors?

You can, but they grow better outdoors. Chives need a proper winter dormancy and lots of light, both of which are harder to provide on a windowsill. If you do grow them indoors, choose a south or south-east facing window and accept that the plant will be less productive than an outdoor one.

What is the difference between chives and garlic chives?

Common chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*) have hollow leaves and a mild oniony flavour, with round purple-pink flowers in spring. Garlic chives (*Allium tuberosum*) have flat solid leaves and a mild garlic flavour, with white star-shaped flowers later in summer. Both are easy to grow and worth having in any UK herb garden.

How do you divide a chive plant?

In early spring, dig up the whole clump with a fork. The roots come up as a tight mass of small bulbs. Pull the clump apart by hand or cut through with a knife into sections of 4 or 5 bulbs each. Replant each section in fresh compost or a new spot. This is the easiest plant propagation there is and gives you free chives every couple of years.

A Sensible Place to Start

If you have never grown chives, here is exactly what to do. Buy one small chive plant at any garden centre in spring for £3 or £4. Repot it into a 25cm pot of fresh peat-free compost. Stand the pot in a sunny or part-shaded spot, water when the compost feels dry an inch down, and start harvesting once the leaves are 15cm or longer. Cut whole stems back to 2cm above the soil rather than snipping the tops.

That single plant will give you fresh chives from March to October. In year three, divide it into three or four new plants in early spring and you have got a free chive collection. After 20 years of growing chives in Oxfordshire, that is still genuinely all there is to it.

How to Contact the Editor

If you have comments or you know I have given wrong advice then please contact me by email at

info@yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

If you have something to contribute or have a say on allotment life, then please use my email to send your contributions.

I am going to process the magazine issue once a month, so if there are comments you would like to make they can be answered in future editions.

I would like to add that most of the articles are taken off the web and some well known gardening and allotments magazines have been read in the making of our magazine content.

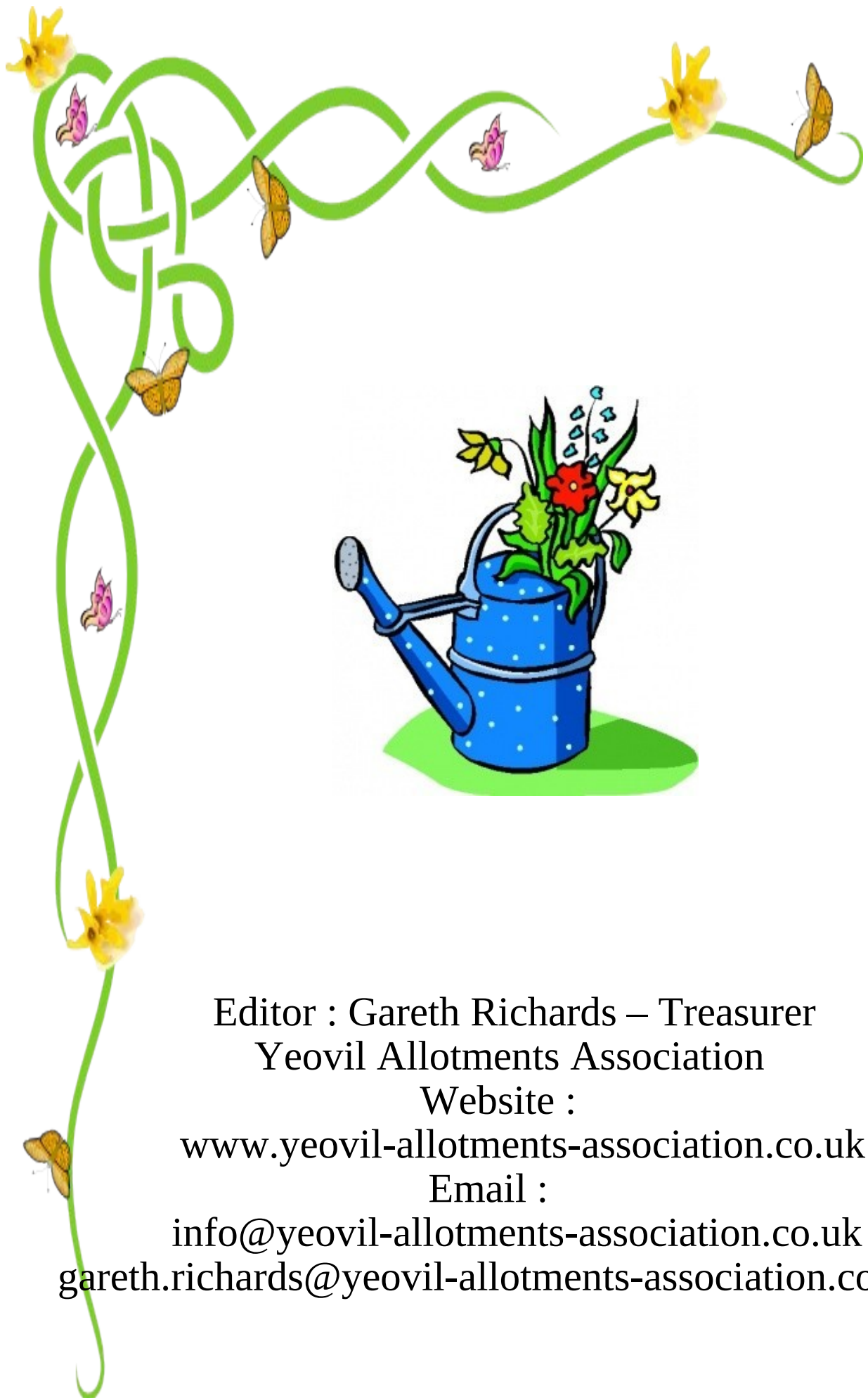
We also have our own website at :

www.yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

where you can find this magazine as well as a catalogue

Happy Allotmenting and best wishes,

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