

YEOVIL ALLOTMENTS
ASSOCIATION

MAY

A May Guide to
Growing and Harvesting
of Flowers, Fruit &
Vegetables & Herbs

Dear Fellow Allotmenters,

Welcome to May's Guide. We look forward to the longer days of sunshine and lighter evenings as Summer is not to far ahead. I hope you enjoy the read.

It is only a general guide and and has been composited from the Internet.

As usual any questions or queries can be directed to me via our email :

info@yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

Many thanks for reading,

Gareth Richards
Treasurer
Eliz Flats, Plot 14

May Gardening: Your Monthly Garden Guide

May can be a mixed bag as far as the weather goes, with warm sunny days followed by rainy days and even the occasional late frost. It's a busy month in the garden and a great chance to get lawns in shape for summer, so make the best of that warm weather when it does arrive. Keep an eye on the forecast and be prepared to protect young plants with fleece if the temperature drops suddenly. When it comes to deciding what to grow in May, you'll have abundant options both in the vegetable patch and the flower garden.

What to plant in May and other May gardening tips

If you're wondering what to plant in May then there are plenty of seeds to sow and young seedlings to plant out. Whatever your gardening plans this month – whether you're growing your own fruit and veg, or planting flowers for a spectacular summer display – choose a category below for our essential May gardening tips.

Grow your own

May is a beautiful time of year to be enjoying your garden. Luckily, if you have a vegetable or fruit patch, you'll have plenty of excuses to get out and bask in the spring sunshine. There will be much to harvest in time for those refreshing summery salads, and it's a great time of year to plant herbs and spices.

Vegetables

If you're looking for vegetables you can plant in May, then broccoli, Brussels sprouts, turnips and kale all tend to do well at this time of year, alongside leeks and tomatoes. Elsewhere in your vegetable patch there's

plenty of maintenance to be done and even a few vegetables that will be ripe for the harvest.

What vegetables to plant in May

May is a busy time for sowing seeds, especially in the vegetable garden. Although the weather is much warmer, there's still a chance of cold snaps in early May, so some seeds are better sown in pots or modules indoors. Place them in a greenhouse or on a sunny windowsill to germinate and grow until June. For seeds sown directly outdoors, prepare the ground first by digging it over, clearing weeds and stones, and raking it smooth.

This is a good opportunity to enrich your soil, providing a fertile environment for your vegetable seeds to put down strong roots. You can mix your soil with a naturally derived, peat-free compost to help control water availability, and even enhance it with a granular plant feed specifically designed for vegetables.

Some of your more tender seedlings may need hardening off before you plant them out, so simply place them outdoors during the day and move them back inside at night. Do this for between 7-10 days before planting them out permanently.

If you've been growing leeks or tomatoes in pots, now is an ideal time to plant them out. Leeks can go outside in the garden, and tomatoes in greenhouses.

If you're eager to give your vegetable patch a new lease of life, then the following vegetables can all be planted outside in May:

- Beetroot
- Broccoli
- Brussels sprouts
- Carrots
- Parsnips
- Radishes
- Swiss chard

Plant seedlings of the following

How to grow cucumbers

Delicious in salads and sandwiches, the crisp, sweet crunch of a cucumber is one of the joys of summer. Growing cucumbers takes a little care and attention, but the results are well worth the effort. To learn how to grow cucumbers, follow our essential guide. Soon your summer salads will be sweet, delicious and super-satisfying.

Choosing the best cucumbers to grow

Cucumbers are divided into indoor- and outdoor-grown varieties, so growing cucumbers starts with choosing which type of cucumber you want.

Indoor-grown cucumbers are usually long, with smooth skins, and need to be grown in greenhouses to protect them from the changing weather.

Outdoor-grown cucumbers are hardier and often shorter with ridged or bumpy skins. They need less care than indoor varieties, so they're a good choice for a first time grower.

Here are a few cucumber varieties to look out for...

Indoor cucumbers

- Cucumber 'Emilie' AGM
- Cucumber 'Femdan' AGM
- Cucumber 'Carmen' AGM

Outdoor cucumbers

- Cucumber 'Marketmore' AGM
- Cucumber 'Burpless Tasty Green'

What you'll need to start growing cucumbers

To begin your cucumber-growing journey, you will need:

- 1.9cm pots for sowing seeds
- 2.Dibber
- 3.Multipurpose compost such as **Miracle-Gro Premium All Purpose Compost**
- 4.Long canes or other supports
- 5.Spade
- 6.25-30cm diameter pots for indoor-grown cucumbers
- 7.Compost or farmyard manure for outdoor cucumbers



When to sow your cucumber seeds

- When to sow cucumbers depends on whether you are growing indoor or outdoor varieties, and also on where you plan to grow them.
- In heated greenhouses, sow indoor cucumbers from late winter to early spring.
- If your greenhouse is unheated, wait until mid-spring before sowing indoor cucumbers.
- Start outdoor cucumbers off indoors by sowing in pots in late spring.
- Outdoor cucumbers can be also sown outside directly into the soil in early summer. They need a sheltered, sunny spot in good soil.

How to grow cucumbers from seed

- 1.Fill 9cm pots with multipurpose compost.
- 2.Using the dibber (or a pencil), make a hole 2.5cm (1in) deep in the centre of the compost.

3.Sow one seed per pot, placing it in the hole on edge rather than flat. This reduces the risk of the seeds rotting.

4.Cover with compost, and water well.

5.When sowing cucumber seeds directly outdoors, sow them 2.5cm (1in) deep, as for pots, and cover the young seedlings with cloches or horticultural fleece to give them protection in cool weather.

How and when to plant your cucumbers?

Once the seedlings are big enough to handle (usually around 3-4 weeks after germination), transplant indoor cucumbers into individual 25-30cm diameter pots filled with multipurpose compost. Place a long cane in each pot to support the plant as it grows.

Outdoor cucumbers that have been sown indoors in spring can be planted outside in early summer. Harden the seedlings off for a week first by placing them outside in their pots during the day and bringing them back inside at night.

Before planting cucumbers outdoors, prepare the soil by digging in compost or well-rotted farmyard manure, then scatter a general-purpose fertiliser at 100g/m² over the soil and rake it in.

Plant outdoor cucumber seedlings 90cm (3ft) apart and water well. You don't need to provide supports for them unless you are trying to save space – they will grow happily sprawling across the ground.

How to care for your cucumbers?

The key to growing cucumbers is not to stress the plants while they are growing, as this will make the fruits taste bitter. Follow these tips for the best harvest:

- Water regularly, keeping the soil or compost moist but not waterlogged.
- To reduce the risk of fungal disease, avoid watering the leaves of the plants.
- Once flowers appear, feed the plants fortnightly with a balanced liquid feed.
- Train greenhouse cucumbers up canes or other supports to increase yield.
- Pinch out plants (remove the new leaves at the tips of growing shoots), to encourage the plants to put all their energy into producing fruit rather than foliage. Pinch out the growing tips on the main stems of greenhouse cucumbers once they reach the greenhouse roof. Make sure that you pinch out the tips of outdoor plants earlier, once the main stem has produced seven leaves.
- Pinch out any flowerless side shoots once they reach 60cm (2ft) long (for indoor cucumbers) or have produced seven leaves (outdoor cucumbers).
- Remove male flowers from indoor cucumbers to prevent pollination (see below).

How to pollinate cucumbers

When it comes to pollination, cucumbers have a few quirks. One of these quirks is that they produce separate male and female flowers.

It's easy to tell the male flowers from the females, as the male flowers are on thin stems, while the stems of female flowers look like tiny cucumbers (which is what they will develop into).

Some cucumber plants have been bred to produce only female flowers, and these are called all-female plants. Other cucumbers produce both male and female flowers on the same plant.

Most indoor cucumber varieties are all-female and can develop fruits without needing to be pollinated. In fact, if they are pollinated, the cucumbers will taste bitter, so if any male flowers do appear on greenhouse cucumbers, remove them immediately to prevent pollination.

Outdoor cucumbers produce both male and female flowers on the same plant. They need to be pollinated in order to produce fruit, so don't remove any flowers from outdoor plants, just let the pollinating insects do their thing.

When to harvest your cucumbers

Harvest cucumbers any time between July and October once the fruits are between 15-20 cm (6-10in) long. Use a sharp knife to cut cucumbers off the plant. Pick frequently to encourage the plant to produce more cucumbers.

It's time to give cucumber-growing a go. Once you've tasted your own cucumbers fresh from the plant, you'll never look back.

Common pest or disease problems with cucumbers

Powdery mildew

Powdery mildew is a common cucumber disease. This is a fungal disease that appears as a white powdery deposit on cucumber leaves, stunting growth and causing leaves to shrivel. Drought-stressed plants are more susceptible to this disease.

- Dig organic material into the soil before planting to improve soil water retention
- Space plants when planting to ensure good air circulation
- Remove any affected growth promptly
- Water regularly in dry periods

Cucumber mosaic virus

Cucumber mosaic virus can cause yellow leaves on cucumber plants, with a characteristic 'mosaic' patterning. Affected plants produce few or no flowers, and any cucumbers that develop are small and inedible.

- Remove and destroy affected plants promptly
- Wash hands and tools after handling affected plants
- Plant disease-resistant varieties
- No chemical controls are available

Cucumber plants wilting

If cucumber plants start to wilt suddenly despite normal watering, this may be due to sudden changes in temperature, or draughts caused by opening greenhouse vents or doors.

- Don't water wilted plants unless the soil is dry as this could cause root rot
- Keep greenhouse temperature and humidity levels as constant as possible
- Plants may recover if quickly moved out of draughts

Glasshouse red spider mite

Glasshouse **red spider mite** is a sap-sucking mite that can affect greenhouse-grown cucumbers. Severe infestations cause plants to drop leaves and eventually die. Symptoms include a fine webbing covering leaves and stems, and mottled leaves with tiny mites and eggs on their undersides.

- Ensure good ventilation in greenhouses
- Mist plants to raise the humidity levels, or damp down greenhouse floors
- A predatory mite can be used as a biological control
- Use pesticide sprays suitable for use on edible plants

Glasshouse whitefly

Glasshouse **whitefly** suck plant sap and excrete a sticky substance called 'honeydew' which covers cucumber leaves and encourages the growth of sooty mould, stunting plant growth. They can also transmit viruses.

- A parasitoid wasp can be used as a biological control
- Keep gardens clear of weeds which can harbour whitefly
- Use pesticide sprays suitable for use on edible plants

Key features of cucumbers

Flowering season(s)	Summer
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn
Sunlight	Full sun
Soil type	Loamy
Soil pH	Neutral to slightly alkaline
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	30cm (12in)
Ultimate spread	30cm (12in)
Time to ultimate height	3-4 months

How to plant, grow and care for courgettes

Courgettes are a common summer staple in the vegetable garden and are relatively easy to grow. They taste great in salads, lightly steamed, stuffed or roasted. Courgettes and marrows are the same thing – although courgettes plants are bred to be a much bushier and to produce lots of small, tasty fruit.

Courgette varieties

Courgettes come in many shapes and sizes, as well as the traditional long green one's, courgettes can be yellow, stripy, round and nearly black.

Different varieties to try include:

- Sunburst- (yellow)
- Eight ball (round)

- Tondo chiaro di Nizza (round and speckled)
- Green Tiger F1 (Striped)



What you'll need to start growing courgettes

For indoor sowing:

- 9cm (3.5in) pots
- seed sowing compost**
- Propagator or warm windowsill
- Courgette seeds

For outdoor planting:

- Spade or trowel
- Farmyard manure**
- Watering can
- Fruit and vegetable plant food**

Cultivating courgettes

Courgettes need a sheltered position in full sun and a fertile soil that holds plenty of moisture. They are reasonably large plants, so need plenty of room, spacing them up to 90cm (3ft) apart. Some more compact varieties are also available - and these are best suited for growing in containers.

Courgettes are hungry plants so when planting outside add some well rotted farmyard manure to the planting area about two weeks before planting. Leave a low mound of the soil and manure at the top and then in two weeks you can plant your courgette into this mound.

As courgettes need plenty of water, a top tip is to sink a 15cm (6in) pot alongside them when planting out. Watering into the pot ensures the water goes down to the roots and doesn't sit around the neck of the plant, which can lead to rotting. It also keeps it off the foliage, which helps reduce problems with powdery mildew.

How to grow courgettes from seed

For the best results, sow the courgette seeds indoors from mid to late April 13mm (½in) deep individually in 7-9cm (3-3½in) pots filled with compost.

Sow the seed on its side as this helps prevent water pooling on the top. Place the pots in a propagator or other warm place at 18-21°C (65-70°F) and as soon as the seeds germinate, take any cover off. Harden off the young plants for 7-10 days before planting outside in late May/early June after the last frosts have passed.

Outside, sow 2 or 3 seeds 2.5cm (1in) deep in weed free, fertile soil, in late May or early June and cover with a cloche. Thin the young seedlings to leave just the strongest one.

How to care for courgette plants

As the young courgette plants are susceptible to frost and cold weather, cover them with fleece or a cloche if the weather turns cold early in the growing season

Feed around the base of the plant with a **granular plant food** as they start to grow. And keep the plant well watered, making sure to water around the base not the leaves, water deeply every few days rather than little and often. Once the first fruit starts to swell, feed every 10-14 days with a **high potassium feed**, to encourage tasty fruits.

Can you grow courgettes in pots?

Some courgettes grow well in containers, but they will be a bit higher maintenance. Choose the largest container you can and fill with a **good quality compost**. Don't allow the compost to dry out, **mulching** around the stem once it starts to grow will help retain moisture. Start feeding with **liquid plant food** about 3 weeks after planting and as soon as you see flowers appearing.

Good varieties for containers include "Midnight" and 'Sure Thing'.

Harvesting courgettes

Courgettes are best Harvested when they are fairly small, about 10-12.5cm (4-5in) long. Regular picking when they are small not only ensures a longer cropping period over several months, but the fruits have much more flavour when picked early. Courgette fruits can seem to grow large overnight, so keep checking under leaves and behind the plant so you don't miss any.

Some courgette leaves can be quite prickly so wear gloves and long sleeves when harvesting. If you want a few marrows then let them grow on, but they will be watery.

Courgettes produce large crops, so one or two plants is all that's needed to feed a large family.

Common pests, diseases and problems of courgette plants

Powdery mildew

Powdery mildew on courgettes can be a common problem. This is a fungal disease that appears as a white powdery deposit on the leaves, stunting growth and causing leaves to shrivel. Drought-stressed plants are more susceptible.

- Dig organic material into the soil before planting to improve soil water retention.
- Space plants when planting to ensure good air circulation.
- Remove any affected growth promptly.
- Water regularly in dry periods and try not to get the leaves wet.

Yellow courgette leaves

Older courgette leaves often turn yellow and drop off the plant. This is not a cause for concern as they will be replaced by new growth, but also see Cucumber mosaic virus.

If younger leaves are turning yellow then this could be a sign that they need supplementary feeding with a balanced feed.

Cucumber mosaic virus

Courgette leaves turning yellow can also be due to cucumber mosaic virus. This causes deformed, stunted leaves with a characteristic 'mosaic'

yellow patterning. Affected plants produce few or no flowers, and any fruit that develop are small and inedible.

- Remove and destroy affected plants promptly.
- Wash hands and tools after handling affected plants.
- Plant disease-resistant varieties.
- No chemical controls are available.

Grey mould/botrytis mould

Grey mould is a fungal disease that appears as powdery grey mould at the stalk of courgette, gradually covering the whole fruit, which then rots.

- Remove any dead leaves or flowers.
- Remove any affected fruit promptly.
- Space plants well when planting to allow good air circulation.
- There are no chemical controls available for grey mould.

Courgettes rotting when small or not setting

Courgette fruits can appear to start swelling but then rot or drop off the plant while still small. This occurs when the flowers are not pollinated, and is usually more of a problem early in the season, especially if it has been cold and wet. If the problem persists, you can hand-pollinate flowers using a small paintbrush.

Slugs and snails

Slugs and snails will eat the leaves of young courgette plants, and can be identified by the slime trails that they leave, as well as the damage they do.

- Check plants at night and remove slugs and snails by hand.
- Covering the soil around plants with crushed eggshells or [a grit barrier](#).
- Scatter environmentally-friendly [slug pellets](#) if other methods are not sufficient.

Key features of courgettes

Flowering season(s)	Summer, Autumn
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn
Sunlight	Full sun
Soil type	Chalky, Clay, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Neutral
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained, Poorly drained
Ultimate height	Up to 30cm (1ft)
Ultimate spread	Up to 3m (10ft)
Time to ultimate height	4 months
When to plant	May and June

How to grow and care for runner beans

Runner beans (*Phaseolus coccineus*) are among the easiest and most rewarding vegetables to grow. And with their colourful flowers and heart-shaped leaves, they look as good as they taste. Follow our simple guide for a bountiful harvest of runner beans.

Best runner beans to plant

Whether you're planting runner beans in rows on your allotment or just growing a few plants in a pot, there are plenty of varieties to choose from. Here are some of the most popular types of runner beans:

- Runner bean 'Red Rum' AGM – a heavy cropper that does well in all weather conditions.
- Runner bean 'Celebration' AGM – very attractive, with pink flowers and tender, tasty pods, almost stringless when young.
- Runner bean 'Tenderstar' – pretty pink and red bicour flowers and smooth, tender, stringless pods.
- Runner bean 'Scarlet Emperor' – bright red flowers and masses of smooth dark green pods that can reach up to 35cm (14in) in length.
- Runner bean 'Snowstorm' – white flowers and plenty of tasty pods.
- Runner bean 'Hestia' – a dwarf variety growing to 45cm (1.5ft) tall, ideal for containers.

Essential equipment

To grow runner beans you will need:

- Bean seeds
- Small pots
- **Multipurpose compost**
- 2.4m long poles to create a support framework
- String
- Garden fork and spade
- Garden compost or well-rotted **farmyard manure**

When and where to plant runner beans

Sow runner beans indoors in pots in mid-spring, or sow directly into the ground outdoors in late spring and early summer once all risk of frost is gone.

A rich, well-drained soil in full sun is ideal for planting runner beans. You can also **grow them in containers** filled with multipurpose compost.

Sowing runner beans indoors

- 1.Fill small pots with multipurpose compost.
- 2.With a dibber or pencil, make a hole 5cm (2in) deep in the compost and drop in a bean seed. Plant one seed per pot and sow a few extra pots in case seeds fail to germinate or young plants are eaten by slugs and snails.
- 3.Cover over with compost and firm it down gently.
- 4.Water the pots and put them on a sunny windowsill or in a greenhouse to germinate. This should take about one week.
- 5.Let the seedlings grow on indoors until all risk of frost is past, then plant them out. Harden the seedlings off for a week before planting by placing the pots outside during the day and bringing them back in at night.

Sowing runner beans directly outdoors

- 1.Dig the area over a few weeks before planting and clear the soil of all weeds and stones. Dig in well-rotted farmyard manure or compost to improve the soil structure and drainage.
- 2.Rake the soil to create a level surface with a light, crumbly texture.
- 3.Put in sturdy supports for the bean plants, such as two rows of poles sloping towards each other. Traditionally, the poles are tied

together at the tops to create an A-frame but tying them in the middle to create an X-shape makes it easier to pick the beans, as they are not all clustered together at the top of the frame. Space the poles 45-60cm (1.5-2ft) apart. If you are only growing a few plants, a wigwam of poles makes a good support for them to climb up.

4. Sow the bean seeds 5cm (2in) deep, sowing two seeds at the base of each pole.

5. Water regularly.

6. Once the seedlings are around 10cm (4in) tall, pull out the weaker seedling from each pair.

Tips on how to care for runner beans

- Beans will twine automatically around their supports, but you may need to tie the young seedlings into the poles at first.
- Once the plants reach the tops of the supports, pinch out the growing tips. This will encourage the plants to put out side shoots, producing more beans.
- Water regularly, especially during dry periods and when the flowers are setting (i.e. developing into beans).
- Protect young plants from slugs and snails, using crushed eggshells, sawdust, beer traps, copper tape on pots, or wildlife-friendly pellets.
- Colonies of **aphids** often appear on young shoots. In large quantities they can distort the plant's growth and reduce vigour. Check young plants and wipe off aphids as soon as you see them to stop them becoming a problem. Natural predators like ladybirds will help to control aphid infestations. If using pesticide sprays,

- always check that they are suitable for use on edible plants. To avoid harming pollinators, don't spray when the plants are in flower.
- In hot, dry weather, flowers sometimes drop off the plant without developing into beans. To ensure you are caring for runner beans, regular watering will help, and the problem usually resolves itself once cooler weather returns.

Growing runner beans in containers

If you're short on space, dwarf runner beans are ideal for containers, growing into bushy plants around 45cm (1.5ft) tall.

1. Choose a container at least 30cm (1ft) in diameter, with good drainage holes. Fill with multipurpose compost.
2. Sow seeds 5cm (2in) deep directly into the compost in late spring or start seedlings indoors in mid-spring and transplant into the container once they are big enough (around 10cm/4in tall).
3. Water regularly and feed the plants with a high potassium feed (such as tomato feed) fortnightly once the flowers start setting.

Harvesting runner beans

Harvest runner beans when the pods are between 15-20cm (6-8in) long, before the beans start to swell in the pods. Harvesting runner beans encourages the plant to produce more, so pick frequently.



Common runner bean problems

Pods failing to set

One of the most common runner beans problems is plants flowering but failing to develop pods. This can be caused by a range of environmental conditions, including very hot weather, lack of water, few pollinators, and birds damaging flowers. The problem often resolves itself as the season progresses.

- Water plants regularly in dry periods.
- Plant near other flowering plants to attract more pollinators.

Blackfly

One common runner bean pest is the blackfly. Blackflies are a small black sap-sucking insect that infests the soft new shoots on bean plants, stunting and distorting them. The best way to get rid of blackfly on runner beans is to check regularly and tackle the problem as soon as it appears.

- Wipe off small colonies with a damp cloth.
- Encourage natural predators like ladybirds and hoverflies.
- Pesticide sprays** are available for blackfly.

Slugs and snails

Slugs and snails will eat the leaves of young runner bean seedlings, and can be identified by the slime trails that they leave, as well as the damage they do. As the plants grow taller, they are less at risk of slug and snail damage.

- Check plants at night and remove slugs and snails by hand.
- Covering the soil around plants with crushed eggshells or grit may have some effect.
- Scatter environmentally-friendly **slug pellets** if other methods are insufficient.

Key features of runner beans

Flowering season(s)	Summer, Autumn
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn
Sunlight	Full sun
Soil type	Chalky, Clay, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Alkaline
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Up to 1.8m (6ft)
Ultimate spread	Up to 30cm (1ft)
Time to ultimate height	6 months

How to grow sweetcorn

Sweetcorn, or maize, is sweet, tender and delicious – especially when cooked as soon as it is picked. Plenty of sun and dry weather are needed for the plants to grow well and to set cobs full of well formed kernels.

Sweetcorn varieties

Hybrid F1 varieties produce the sweetest kernels, and 'Early Extra Sweet' is the standard that all new varieties try to beat, although 'Marika', 'Sweet Perfection' and 'Early Bird' are good varieties.

The latest plant breeding has produced enhanced sweetness, with varieties such as 'Butterscotch' or 'Swift'. But if you prefer a less chewy texture, then the tendersweet varieties 'Lark' and 'Extra Tender and Sweet' are the ones for you.



What you'll need to start growing sweetcorn

Growing sweetcorn doesn't require complicated equipment. Here's what you need:

- Garden fork and spade
- Trowel
- Well-rotted farmyard manure
- General purpose fertiliser
- **Liquid feed**
- Sweetcorn seeds
- Cloches or clear plastic covers (1 per plant)

For indoor sowing:

- 9cm (3.5in) pots
- **Seed sowing compost**

How to grow sweetcorn

Cultivation

Choose a position that receives lots of sunshine and is sheltered from strong winds.

Sweetcorn will grow in most soils, providing it is well drained, but holds plenty of moisture. Before sowing or planting, improve the soil so that it is rich in nutrients and organic matter by digging in some well-rotted manure, garden compost or soil improver. Then add a good dressing of **a general plant food**.

Sowing sweetcorn

Because sweetcorn is pollinated by wind transfer of pollen, the plants must be grown together in a square/rectangular block, rather than a single row or dotted around the garden.

If you wait until late May/early June, you can sow seeds directly in the ground where you want it to grow. You will get better results if the soil is pre-warmed for 2 weeks with cloches or clear plastic covers. Leave the

covers in place after sowing until the plants have grown and touch the top.

To get an early start and produce an earlier crop, sow seeds in individual pots or cells filled with a good seed sowing compost in late April or early May and germinate in gentle warmth. Keep the plants indoors until early June, when they will be ready for planting out.

Sow seeds or plant out 45cm (18in) apart in the block.

How to care for sweetcorn

Water the soil thoroughly during prolonged periods of dry weather; this is vital when the plants are establishing and when they are flowering and the cobs are swelling.

Liquid feed every fortnight when the plants start to flower and the cobs begin to swell.

If roots appear at the base of the stem, cover them with soil to improve wind stability.

You can tap the plants when the male flowers (tassels) open to help pollination, as poor pollination will result in poorly filled cobs.

How to harvest sweetcorn

When the silks (female flowers) on top of the cobs have turned chocolate brown, test the kernels for ripeness. Pull back some of the the leaves that cover the cob and press one or two kernels with a thumbnail. If the content is creamy then it's ripe to eat. If the content is clear, the cob is unripe, so wait. If the content is solid then you've left it too long.

Cook as soon as possible after picking in plain water (no salt) and you will taste perfect sweetcorn! Avoid picking more than you need, since cobs that are left in the fridge for a day or two will gradually lose their sweetness.

Common sweetcorn pests

Birds

Birds, especially pigeons, peck at the leaves of young sweetcorn seedlings, often destroying them.

- Grow plants under netting while young. Taller plants are less attractive to birds.

Slugs and snails

Slugs and snails will eat young sweetcorn seedlings, and can be identified by the slime trails that they leave, as well as the damage they do. As the seedlings grow taller they are less at risk from slugs and snails.

- Check plants at night and remove slugs and snails by hand.
- Covering the soil around plants with crushed eggshells or grit may have some effect.
- Scatter environmentally-friendly slug pellets if other methods are insufficient.

Mice

Mice will dig up and eat sweetcorn seeds sown in the ground.

- Cover the ground with a thick layer of prickly holly leaves.
- Start seeds off in pots out of reach of mice and plant them out as seedlings.

Key features of sweetcorn

Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer
Sunlight	Full sun
Soil type	Chalky, Clay, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Neutral
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Up to 1.8m (6ft)
Ultimate spread	Up to 90cm (3ft)
Time to ultimate height	4 months

How to grow pumpkins

Delicious in pies, soups and stews, and full of vitamins and minerals, pumpkins are a tasty autumn and winter treat. Follow our simple guide to growing pumpkins for a bumper harvest.

Choosing the best pumpkins to grow

Pumpkins (botanical name Cucurbita pepo) belong to the same family as squash. There's a wide range of different pumpkins available, from the huge 'Dill's Atlantic Giant', which can produce fruits weighing up to 800kg (around 1750lb) to the tiny 'Jack Be Little' which bears miniature pumpkins just 7cm (3") across.

Most pumpkins need space, but if you don't have a big garden, you can grow smaller varieties as climbers. And if you want a change from the traditional orange-skinned pumpkin, there are pumpkins with striped, knobbly or pleated skins, and even white or blue pumpkins. It's safe to say, there's a pumpkin for every taste! Here are few to look out for:

- Pumpkin 'Evergold' – the classic pumpkin, perfect for both cooking and carving.
- Pumpkin 'Becky' – smooth orange fruits around 20cm (10in) across, with very tasty flesh.
- Pumpkin 'Munchkin' – a small variety producing fruits with attractive pleated orange skins.
- Pumpkin 'Queensland Blue' – an unusual variety with blue-green skin and rich, sweet orange flesh.



Your essential equipment list for growing pumpkins

Here's what you'll need for growing perfect pumpkins in your garden.

For seed sowing:

- 9cm pots
- Seed compost such as **Levington Seed & Cutting Compost**
- Labels
- Propagator or clear plastic bags

For planting out:

- Compost or **farmyard manure**
- Spade
- Slate tiles or bricks

For growing pumpkins as climbers:

- Wooden poles, around 2m (6.5ft) long
- String

How to grow pumpkins from seed

Sow pumpkin seeds indoors early in the year, in mid to late April, as the plants have a long growing season.

1. Fill individual 9cm pots with seed compost.
2. Plant the seeds 2.5cm (1in) deep, on their sides.
3. Water the pots and place them in a propagator or in clear plastic bags in a well-lit position at a temperature of around 20°C (68°F). The seeds should germinate in around five to seven days.
4. After germination, take the pots out of the propagator or plastic bag and let the seedlings grow on in a greenhouse or on a sunny windowsill until they are large enough to be planted out.

How to plant pumpkins

Planning when to plant pumpkins depends on the weather. Pumpkins won't grow in the cold, so wait until late May or early June before planting them in a sunny, sheltered position.

A few weeks before planting, create planting pockets by digging a hole for each plant, approximately 20cm (10") square x 20cm (10") deep. Allow 2-3m (6.5-10ft) between plants and between rows.

Fill each hole with compost or well-rotted farmyard manure. Pumpkins are hungry plants and need rich, fertile soil to produce good fruits.

To train pumpkins as climbers, drive three sturdy poles firmly into the ground around a planting pocket and tie them together at the top to create a tripod or wigwam to support the plants. Make sure the structure is strong, as even small pumpkin plants weigh a lot by harvest time. Allow 1m (3.5ft) between climber-grown pumpkin plants.

Harden seedlings off for a week before planting, by placing the pots outside during the day and bringing them back in again at night.

Plant one seedling in each planting pocket. Firm the soil around the plant and water well.

Tips for pumpkin care

Caring for your pumpkins is essential as they grow. Water your pumpkins thoroughly once a week. In very hot, dry weather, increase this to twice a week. Always water the soil, not the leaves, to reduce the risk of fungal disease.

If you're growing pumpkins as climbers, tie the trailing stems to the support poles as they grow.

When fruits start to develop, feed the plants fortnightly with a high potassium liquid feed (tomato feed is ideal). Slide a piece of slate under each pumpkin or place them on bricks to keep them off damp ground and protect them from slugs and rot. Pumpkin plants will usually produce two to three fruits per plant, although the smaller varieties can produce more.

Key steps for harvesting pumpkins

1. Leave the fruits to ripen on the plants as long as possible for the best flavour. If there's a risk of early frosts, protect the pumpkins with cardboard and straw.
2. To judge when to harvest pumpkins, knock gently on the fruit. If they sound hollow, they're ready to harvest.
3. Use secateurs to cut pumpkins off the vine, leaving a long stalk on the fruit.

4. Before storing pumpkins, first cure the skins by leaving the fruits out in the sun for around 10 days. In poor weather, place them in a greenhouse, or on a sunny windowsill.

5. Once the skins have cured, store the pumpkins in a well-ventilated, cool room, at a temperature of around 7-10°C (44-50°F). Check periodically for any signs of rot and remove any affected fruits. Stored pumpkins can last for up to six months.

Potential pumpkin problems

Pumpkins can be affected by **powdery mildew**, a fungal disease that leaves white powdery markings on the leaves, and in heavy cases can stunt the plants' growth. Drought makes plants more susceptible to powdery mildew, so reduce the risk of infection by watering regularly, and avoid wetting leaves when watering. Remove and dispose of any affected leaves as soon as you see them.

In cool weather, fruits sometimes fail to develop, or drop off the plant while small. This is due to the flowers not being pollinated. Once the weather warms up, the problem usually resolves.

Key features of pumpkins

Flowering season(s)	Summer, Autumn
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn
Sunlight	Full sun
Soil type	Clay, Loamy
Soil pH	Neutral
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Up to 45cm (18in)
Ultimate spread	Up to 3m (10ft)
Time to ultimate height	4 months

How to grow butternut squash

Butternut squash are a late season favourite, with attractive fruits which will keep well throughout the autumn and winter. The flesh is a deep orange colour, and the flavour warming and gently sweet. Growing them in the UK is straightforward and very satisfying - let's look at how to grow this rewarding plant.

Squashes are grown as annuals in Britain, and are classified as either summer- or winter-squash. The seeds of both are sown in late spring.

Butternut squash is a type of winter squash, usually harvested from September onwards, and brought indoors to mature before the first frosts arrive. Winter squash such as butternuts are excellent for storing and will keep for up to six months in the right conditions.

Summer squash, such as courgettes, are grown to be used straight away. The skins do not thicken in the same way that winter squash skins do. The fruits are more prolific and quicker to grow, taking as little as 10 weeks from sowing to harvest. Winter squash have a longer growing period, needing four to five months from sowing to harvesting.

The botanical name for butternut squash is *Cucurbita moschata*. They are also known as butternut pumpkin, and gramma. Some of the varieties worth trying include:

- Butterbush F1. Unusually for butternut squash, this one is a compact variety which has more of a bush habit. Great if short on space, this one can be grown in containers.
- Butterscotch. Produces small fruit, this one also has more of a bush habit, making it great for containers.

- Harrier F1. Slightly paler skin than other varieties, this one will produce fruits that store very well.
- Hunter. Produces lots of small fruit which will store well.
- Sweetmax F1. A good one for the climate of the United Kingdom, this variety flowers early, giving the fruits longer to mature.
- Tiana F1. This one produces lots of smaller fruits weighing about 1kg each, so expect great flavour.
- Waltham. Stores very well and has a small seed cavity, meaning more flesh to eat!

If your interest has been piqued by the wonderful butternut squash, have a look at other types of winter squash. There are spaghetti types, which have stringy flesh just like pasta of the same name. There are also some with dramatic skin, such as the polar white pumpkin, and the orange and yellow speckles and stripes of the 'blaze' variety. There are then of course the traditional pumpkins, available in various shades and sizes.



What you'll need to grow butternut squash

Although seed packets say that butternut can be sown from March onwards, they need warm overnight temperatures. They are quick to germinate, so a sowing in late April or May will soon catch up, without the worry of protecting plants from cold weather.

To grow butternut squash you will need:

- 12cm (5") pots.
- Compost**.
- Butternut squash seeds.

To sow the butternut squash seeds:

- 1.Fill pots with compost.
- 2.Place one seed in the centre of each pot, gently pushing it into the compost so that the 'sharp' long edge faces upwards, about 1cm (½") deep.
- 3.Water, and move to a warm place, such as a windowsill or greenhouse.

Once seeds have germinated and are showing three or more leaves, or if you have bought plants, they can be planted outside. This will be in May or June, once the risk of frost has passed. You will need:

- Garden fork.
- Compost**, **manure** or other organic matter.
- Trowel.
- Butternut squash plants.
- One cane or stick per plant.

1. Work in plenty of organic matter using the garden fork, to each spot where a butternut squash will be planted.
2. Use the trowel to create a hollow mound in the soil. This is so that the hollow will retain water rather than it running off.
3. Dig a hole in the middle of the hollow, big enough for a butternut squash to be planted.
4. Fill the hole with water. Once it has soaked in, remove the plant from the pot and place in the hole, backfilling with soil and gently firming in.
5. Insert a stick or cane in the hollow, close to the plant, so that it is easy to see where to water once the plant puts on leafy growth.

Look out for large yellow flowers which will be enjoyed by bees as they visit to pollinate the butternut squash plants.

Where to plant and grow your butternut squash

Butternut squash prefer hot, humid conditions, so ideally plant out in a sunny spot away from cool winds. They like rich soil, so add a **suitable compost** to the soil before planting out. Feed regularly with **Miracle-Gro® Performance Organics Fruit & Veg Concentrated Liquid Plant Food**.

Butternuts are usually vining plants and can be left to sprawl across the ground, or trained up supports. Allow 1.5 metres (5') between plants. The fruits can easily reach 3kg, so if they are allowed to climb, make sure each hanging fruit is propped up with strong supports to stop it snapping from the plant. Bush varieties, grown in containers, are the exception as they need less space - allow 1m (3') between plants.

Caring and nurturing for your butternut squash

British weather is quite temperamental, so be prepared to protect early sowings. Monitor night-time temperatures in the weeks after they have been planted out, and if temperatures are forecast to fall below 12°C (54°F) overnight, place a cloche or fleece over them.

Once fruits have appeared, feed fortnightly with **Miracle-Gro® Performance Organics Fruit & Veg Concentrated Liquid Plant Food.** Butternut squash are hungry plants will benefit from a plentiful supply of nutrients. Water regularly for larger fruits.

In early September remove any leaves shading young fruit, so that the sun can reach the skin to ripen it. Allow butternut squash to ripen on the plant if possible.



Harvesting butternut squash

Butternut squash are ready to harvest from September and October onwards, when the skins lose their greenness and start to turn orange. Squash must always be harvested before the first frosts. The skin should be hard and difficult to push a fingernail into.

Using a sharp pair of secateurs, cut the butternut squash from the plant, leaving 15cm (6") of browning vine either side of the top of the squash. They can be used straight away, but the flavour will develop more if left to cure.

Always handle butternut squash by the bottom of the fruit, and not the stem, however tempting it is to carry them by what looks like a handle. The attached vine acts like a seal on the fruit, stopping bacteria from reaching the flesh.

Once in storage, check the skin of the squash near to the stem every fortnight. Look out for darkening or soft patches, which indicate that the fruit is starting to spoil and should be used. Store at about 10-15C (50-60F) in a ventilated place.

Common pests and diseases with butternut squash

Butternut squash plants are very resilient to most pests and diseases. As mentioned earlier, they do like warm weather, and a cool summer can limit the amount of fruit produced. This is somewhat uncontrollable - just wait for warmer conditions to arrive.

Slugs and snails. Will attack young plants and can kill them completely. Encourage frogs, toads and hedgehogs, which will eat these predators. Try placing crushed eggshells, coffee granules or copper coins around plants to deter them.

Powdery mildew. Very common on all types of squash, appearing as a white powder on the upper surface of leaves. Unattractive and reduces

the vigour of plants. Avoid by keeping plants well watered, and remove any infected leaves from the plant.

How to grow French beans

French beans are a versatile vegetable, producing attractive, long, thin pods, and creamy haricot beans. They are a heavy cropper, with each plant producing potentially hundreds of beans from each single bean sown. Like many other types of bean, they are a great nutritional source of protein and iron, and offer superb value as the seed can be saved and resown from year to year.

French beans, or *Phaseolus vulgaris*, can be climbing (pole) or dwarfing (bush) types. There are thousands of varieties to choose from, with variously coloured flowers and pods.

Climbing French beans are great where ground space is lacking, or where height will add interest to an area. Varieties to try include:

- 'Blue Lake'. Green pods containing lots of pale green - white beans.
- 'Cobra'. Traditional green pods produced in abundance.
- 'Golden Gate'. A very heavy cropper producing flat yellow pods.
- 'Neckargold'. Very long round yellow pods.
- 'Violet podded'. Attractive and easy-to-find mid-dark purple pods.

Dwarf French beans grow to about 30cm (1') tall and can work well when grown around much taller plants, such as sweetcorn or climbing beans. They can be grown in a row or a square, or placed in gaps in the flower bed to create a 'potager' effect. Varieties to try:

- 'Barlotta'. Very attractive green pods speckled with red flecks.
- 'Blauhilde'. Light purple flowers and long, dark purple pods.
- 'Ferrari'. A quick grower producing straight green beans.

- ‘Purple teepee’. Purple pods reach an impressive 15cm (5") long.
- ‘Yin Yang’. Green pods, and spectacular black and white beans.

French beans can be sown throughout late spring and summer to keep more crops coming, so it’s worth trying several varieties.



What you’ll need to grow French beans

French Beans are frost-sensitive, so need to be given a head-start indoors. To do this you will need:

- French bean seeds
- A jar of warm water
- Seed tray or pots
- Multipurpose compost**
- Dibber

From late April to mid-July:

- 1.Add the bean seeds to the jar of warm water, and allow to soak for 12 hours.

2.Fill a seed tray or pot with multipurpose compost.

3.Use the dibber to create 5cm (2") deep holes in the compost.
Allow 3-5cm (1-2") between seeds.

4.Sow one seed in each hole, cover with compost and water well.

French beans germinate quickly, and you should see them sprouting after about a week.

Move the French beans outside once all risk of frost has passed, usually from mid-late May onwards. You will need:

- Long canes or sticks (for Climbing French Beans)
- String (for Climbing French Beans)
- A trowel or dibber
- French bean plants

To transplant them successfully:

- If growing Climbing French Beans, insert canes or sticks into the ground 15cm (6") apart and secure to one another with string.
- Use the trowel or dibber to create a hole big enough for each germinated bean root ball to fit. Create two holes around each pole for Climbing French Beans, or 1 hole per 30cm (1") for each Dwarf French Bean.
- Fill the hole with water, and allow to soak in.
- Place each plant in a hole, backfill with soil and firm in gently.

French bean seeds can also be sown directly in the soil throughout the summer. Sow more than needed as some are likely to be given up to slugs, snail and mice.

Where to plant and grow your French beans

Climbing French Beans can grow up to 2 metres (6') high, so grow in a sheltered position to protect the plants and supports from wind.

Climbing French Beans can look great as a tall pyramid shaped centrepiece of a bed, or in a more traditional row.

Dwarf French Beans do not need support, and can be grown in the ground or in containers.

All French beans are tender, so have cloches or fleece ready to protect them when night-time temperatures are forecast to drop to below 10°C (50°F).

French beans will grow well in sandy, clayey, or medium soils. They prefer neutral or neutral-alkaline soil, which should be moist but well-drained. They enjoy full sun, but will tolerate shade as long as it is warm.

Caring and nurturing for your French beans

Check supports of Climbing French Beans to ensure they are sturdy and able to withstand strong winds. Water in spells of very dry weather to encourage flower production.

Harvest French bean pods from July through to October. This will help the plant to produce more beans. Snip them off with scissors. Always cook French beans before eating them to remove the poisonous 'phytohaemagglutinin' toxin.

Towards the end of the summer, leave some beans to ripen on the plant to be harvested as haricot beans or to grow again next season. The pods should at this point be brown and rattle when shaken. Remove from the plant and leave in a warm, dry place such as a windowsill. Crack open the crispy pods and place the beans in a container for eating throughout the coming months. Place a few in a labelled envelope for sowing next year.

French beans do not need feeding and can actually improve nitrogen levels in the soil. In the autumn, cut plants just above soil level, leaving the roots behind. These will help to boost nitrogen levels as they decay in the soil. The tops can be added to the compost heap.



Common pests and diseases with French beans

Established French beans are largely unaffected by pests and diseases, but there are a few worth looking out for..

Bean Mosaic Virus

The main symptom is puckering of leaves and gnarled pods. Control aphids which can spread the disease and remove badly affected plants.

Black bean aphid and blackfly

These cluster in large numbers around new growth, sucking sap, damaging leaves and flowers, and reducing the ability of the plant to produce beans. Squish by hand, and encourage predators such as ladybirds.

Slugs and snails

Slugs and snails can attack young plants which have just been planted out, and also young beans which are trailing on the ground. Remove by hand, encourage frogs, toads and hedgehogs which will predate them, and use grit to discourage them. See our helpful article for more tips on protecting French beans from [slugs and snails](#).

Key features of French beans

Flowering season(s)	Summer, Autumn
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn
Sunlight	Partial shade, Full sun
Soil type	Chalky, Clay, Loamy
Soil pH	Alkaline
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Climbing varieties up to 1.8m (6ft)
Ultimate spread	Up to 60cm (2ft)
Time to ultimate height	3 months

How to grow chard

Chard, or Swiss Chard, is a delicious and beautiful plant which will bring harvests to the kitchen and colour to the garden all year round. *Beta vulgaris* subsp. *vulgaris* is a deep green leafy vegetable with brightly coloured stems, quick to grow from seed and needing little aftercare. It's an easy plant for new gardeners to begin growing, and will quickly become an essential part of any keen home grower's vegetable patch.

Types of chard to grow

There are many varieties of chard, all of them having the characteristic large fleshy leaves and thick crispy stalks. The plant is also known as 'silver beet' and 'leaf beet'.

Chard can have red, burgundy, yellow, bright pink, white or orange stems. They look stunning all year around, but particularly against a frosty or snow-white ground. The names of different chard varieties often give a clue to the stem colour:

- 'Bright Lights' - a mixture of varieties with differently coloured stems
- 'Bright Yellow' - golden coloured stems and slow to set seed
- 'Fantasy' - red stemmed and resistant to downy mildew
- 'Fireworks' - a mixture of varieties with different coloured stems
- 'Rainbow' - multicoloured stems
- 'Green Wave' - green stems and leaves, looking rather like perpetual spinach
- 'Peppermint' - pink and white striped stems
- 'Ruby Red' - bright red stems
- 'White Silver' - white stems

The leaves can be picked young and eaten in salads or, as they mature, cooked like spinach, whilst the stems can be chopped and cooked in stir-fries or pasta sauces. All varieties of chard are high in vitamins A, C and K, iron and fibre, making them a great addition to any dish.



What you'll need to grow chard

It's simple to grow chard from seeds. You can sow chard seeds direct in the ground from March through to September. You will need:

- A trowel or hoe
- Watering can with fine rose
- Water
- Chard seeds

1.Create a shallow drill in the soil, no more than 1.5cm (1/2") deep, using the trowel or hoe.

2.Water the drill, and then place a seed every 10cm (4") apart along the length of it.

3.Cover the seeds with soil, and water again using the fine rose on your watering can.

4.Water every day until the seedlings germinate. Thin to 40cm (16") apart as plants grow larger.

The seeds can also be sown in modules, with young plants then transplanted to their final location.

You can also grow chard in pots or containers. Simply, follow our guidance above, filling the container with a peat-free multi-purpose compost. Be extra vigilant in watering them, as pots tend to dry out more quickly.

Young chard leaves can be harvested after just two months, and fully grown leaves after three months. Cut them from the outside of the plant, close to the soil. New leaves will shoot from the centre of the plant as the season progresses.

Where to plant and place your chard

Chard is a hardy and robust plant and will grow well in most soil types. Ideally, plant them in an open sunny position although they will tolerate partial shade.

Chard looks great planted informally amongst other plants in the border or vegetable patch. It is also stunning when planted in a more formal pattern, with careful thought given to how the plants are arranged to show off their colourful stems. Chard will grow to 50cm (20") in height, and as the stems are the eye-catching feature, position them so that they can be seen towards the front of a bed.

Caring and nurturing your chard

Water regularly during hot spells, so that the plants do not flower and set seed. At some point, regardless of your efforts, chard will do this - you can leave the seedheads to spread and germinate at random for next year, or collect them for drying and sowing in another location.

Harvest throughout the year, although growth will slow in very hot and very cold weather, so quantities will fluctuate. When harvesting, always leave some greenery on the plant so that it can continue to absorb sunlight and convert this into energy for new growth.

Mulch around mature plants in the summer and autumn with farmyard manure help retain moisture around the plants. Water regularly in dry spells. Feed fortnightly with **Miracle-Gro® Performance Organics Fruit & Veg Concentrated Liquid Plant Food** to encourage continuous leafy green growth.

Frequently asked questions about chard

Can I eat all of the Chard plant?

You can eat the leaves when young, raw, in salads, or cook the stems and leaves as they mature. Larger stems and leaves are very versatile, and go particularly well in pasta dishes, pizza, omelettes and curries.

Can I grow chard in containers?

Yes! Chard looks great in containers as a central, feature plant, with low-growing bedding plants around the edges. Sow in modules first then transplant when they have a few true leaves. Choose a large container filled with a good peat-free compost, such as **Miracle-Gro® Peat Free Premium All Purpose Compost**. Water regularly as containers can easily dry out.

Can chard grow in shade?

Chard will grow in shade, but much more slowly than plants receiving sunlight.

Does chard come back each year?

Chard is not a perennial plant, but their lifespan does cover two growing seasons. Plants will freely seed themselves, meaning that you can plant them once and have many years of self-grown plants appearing in your garden.

Common pests and diseases with Chard

Why do the leaves of my chard plant have white-grey patches on them?

Downy mildew thrives among crowded plants, so thin as needed to ensure good air circulation.

Why does my chard plant have furry grey patches on it?

Grey Mould can affect any part of chard, spreading to and damaging other plants too. Ensure good air circulation by thinning plants as needed.

Why are the leaves of my chard plant shredded around the edges?

Birds can tear the edges of chard leaves in search of moisture. Cover plants with netting if this has become a problem.

Why do the leaves of my chard have white or brown blisters and blotches?

Beet leaf miner maggots can tunnel into the leaves, making them look unattractive. Add fine mesh to deter beet leaf miner flies from laying their eggs on leaves, and squash maggots on sight.

Key features of chard

Botanical Name	<i>Beta vulgaris</i>
Plant Type	Biennial
Family	Amaranthaceae
Light Exposure	Sun to partial shade
Soil pH	Neutral to slightly acidic

Carrots are relatively easy to grow and can be sown regularly throughout the season for an abundance of carrot crops. They now come in a variety of colours, from white to purple (and, of course, orange).

How to grow carrots

Cultivation

For the best results, carrots need a sunny position and fine, crumbly soil that has not been freshly manured, without too many stones.

Carrot varieties

For early crops, choose 'Early Nantes', 'Amsterdam Forcing' or 'Mignon'.

For the main sowing season, sow 'Autumn King', 'Red Intermediate' or 'Chantenay Red Cored'.

For stoney soil, try the shorter or stump-rooted varieties, such as 'Rondo' or 'Parmex'.

And to tempt kids, you could try 'Sugarsnax', 'Parmex' or 'Bolero'.



Sowing carrots

The seeds need to be sown where they are going to mature. Follow our [how to grow carrots](#) guide for full details.

How to care for carrots

If you have sown too thickly they will need thinning out. Don't compost the larger thinnings as they make a delicious addition to salads. It is better to sow thinly, rather than having to thin out seedlings, as handling and bruising the plants can attract carrot fly.

Harvesting

Carefully lift carrots as soon as they are large enough to use. Don't leave them to get very large or you'll sacrifice flavour.

Read our [how to grow carrots](#) guide for further advice and information.

Pests

Carrots may be susceptible to the following problems: Forking, Cracking, Carrot Fly.

Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn
Sunlight	Full sun
Soil type	Clay, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Neutral
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Up to 15cm (6in)
Ultimate spread	5cm (2in)
Time to ultimate height	3 months

READY OUR GUIDE ALL ABOUT GROWING KALE

Growing and eating kale, or borecole, has never been more popular. It is now regarded by many as a superfood – and is even an ingredient in smoothies! Recent plant breeding has improved its flavour, making it sweeter and less bitter than older varieties.

READY OUR GUIDE ALL ABOUT GROWING KALE

GROWING AND EATING KALE, OR BORECOLE, HAS NEVER BEEN MORE POPULAR. IT IS NOW REGARDED BY MANY AS A SUPERFOOD – AND IS EVEN AN INGREDIENT IN SMOOTHIES! RECENT PLANT BREEDING HAS IMPROVED ITS FLAVOUR, MAKING IT SWEETER AND LESS BITTER THAN OLDER VARIETIES.

It has lots of benefits for the gardener too. It tolerates cold weather and frost better than many other brassicas and isn't usually troubled by the scourges of brassica growers – pigeons, clubroot and cabbage root fly.

Many kales are also colourful and attractive additions to the winter vegetable garden – especially the curly-leaved varieties. Grow the black-leaved and red-leaved varieties in containers on the patio, which will make it more convenient to pick them too in cold weather.

Cultivation

Kale prefers to be grown in an open, sunny position, but it will also crop well in a semi-shaded place. It needs a fertile, deep soil, that is preferably

alkaline, with lots of added bulky organic matter. If your soil is acidic or neutral, add garden lime before sowing or planting out.

Kale varieties

There are four main types of kale:

- Curly kale:** The most popular type. The leaves are curled and frilly, making them quite ornamental. F1 hybrid varieties are much sweeter than older varieties, which can be bitter.
- Plain-leaved kale:** Taller and coarser, so it is usually better to eat the young shoots in spring rather than the autumn leaves.
- Rape kale:** Grown for its tender young shoots in spring. Sow it where you want it to mature, as it doesn't like transplanting.
- Leaf and spear kale:** A cross between curly-leaved kale and plain-leaved kale. Pick the young leaves from November, then in spring harvest the leafy sideshoots, then pick the immature flower heads, which are cooked like broccoli.

Curly kale: Black Tuscan, Dwarf Green Curled, Nero di Toscana, Redbor, Red Russian, Winterbor

Plain-leaved kale: Cottagers, Thousand Head

Rape kale: Hungry Gap

Leaf and spear kale: Pentland Brig

Curly kale seeds and plants are the most readily available – you may have to search for seeds of the other types.



Sowing kale

For best results, sow seeds thinly in a separate seed bed in rows 15-23cm (6-9in) apart in a shallow drill about 13mm (½in) deep from March to May. Cover with soil and water in well.

For an early crop sow under cloches in pre-warmed soil, and sow in June for a later crop.

For a very early crop in late summer or early autumn, sow indoors in cell trays in a heated propagator or on a windowsill in late January/February.

How to care for kale

When the young plants have 5 or 6 leaves, carefully lift and transplant them to their final growing position. Improve the soil first with some organic matter and **a general granular plant feed**. Space plants 45cm (18in) apart. Firm the soil well around each plant afterwards and water in thoroughly.

Water plants well during periods of dry weather and cover the soil with a mulch to conserve soil moisture. Occasional feeds with **a liquid plant food** through summer will improve the crop.

Harvesting

Start to remove young leaves from the top of the plant from October onwards. For the best flavour, pick the leaves when they are young and tender.

Sideshoots are formed after the main crown is harvested and these are ready for use from February to May; pick shoots that are 10-15cm (4-6in) long and still young.

Flowering season(s)	Summer
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter
Sunlight	Partial shade, Full sun
Soil type	Chalky, Clay, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Alkaline
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Up to 75cm (30in)
Ultimate spread	Up to 50cm (20in)
Time to ultimate height	4-6 months

The following vegetables can be sown indoors in May:

- Sweetcorn
- Courgettes
- Squash
- Pumpkins
- Lettuce
- Cucumbers

- Runner and French beans
- Kale

Growing Vegetables in May

Once you've decided what vegetables to plant in May and harvested any veg that have come into season, you can start thinking about the maintenance of your existing plants, and there's lots to do.

As the weather warms up, weeds start growing and garden pests like slugs and snails become more active. Watch out for early signs of pests and disease, and tackle them before they get out of hand but remember that not all garden visitors are harmful. Insects such as ladybirds help tackle garden pests, and you can encourage them into your garden by providing appropriate shelter and pollen-rich blooms. If pests continue to be a problem, you can consider using a naturally derived pest control product to discourage blights such as aphids, mealy bugs and red spider mites.

Earth up your potatoes, drawing soil up around the lower part of the plant to exclude light from the developing tubers, which become green and poisonous if exposed to light.

Once beans start to appear, pinch out the tips of broad bean plants to reduce the risk of blackfly, and put up supports for climbing beans and pea plants.

May is a good opportunity to transplant Brussels sprouts plants to their final cropping positions, and you can start hardening off tomato seedlings ready for planting outdoors next month. Consider enriching

the soil with a granular organic plant feed formulated to produce more flavourful produce.

How To Plant and Grow Potatoes: The Ultimate Guide

Potatoes (*Solanum tuberosum*) are tubers that grow and form at the plant's roots. The plant also produces flowering shoots that appear above ground. These edible tubers that we know and love are an important carbohydrate and rich in potassium. They make a versatile ingredient, eaten both hot and cold and prepared in a variety of ways, from chips to crisps and much more. Luckily, it's easy to grow potatoes at home, both in containers and the ground, and just a few plants has the potential to provide large harvests.

Varieties of potato

The texture of cooked potatoes varies between waxy and floury, and some are best for boiling, others for roasting and even more for chips. For example 'Red Duke of York' isn't great boiled, as it falls apart, but for roast potatoes or mashed there it's absolutely delicious. For examples of the varieties available check out the table below:

First Earlies	Second Earlies	Maincrop	Salad
Rocket	Estima	Desiree	Lady Christl
Foremost	Wilja	Romano	Pink Fir Apple
Epicure	Kestrel	Maris Piper	Ratte

When to plant potatoes

When you buy your seed potatoes, take some time to research the variety name and what kind of potato they are, as different varieties are suitable for different cooking methods. Generally, young potatoes are better for boiling and salads, as they contain less starch and so don't break down as quickly, while larger potatoes are best suited to mashing and baking.

In the UK, potatoes are categorised into three groups: first-earlies, second-earlies and maincrop. These groups indicate when to plant potatoes and when to harvest potatoes, although these times can differ depending on your last local frost dates.

- First-earlies are quick to crop, usually planted in late March and harvested in June to July. These small potatoes are often referred to as new potatoes. With a thin skin and sweeter taste, they are best eaten fresh and are not suitable for storing.
- Second earlies are usually planted in the first half of April and harvested July to August. These will be larger than first-earlies, but smaller than maincrop.
- Finally, maincrop potatoes are planted in the second half of April and harvested from August to October. These are invariably larger and can be stored and eaten throughout the winter.

Potato growing equipment list

Here's what you'll need to get started growing potatoes:

- Seed potatoes
- Potato **fertiliser**
- Deep container or **grow bag**

- Trowel
- Garden fork and spade
- Watering can
- Storage crates, bags, or sacks

How to plant potatoes

Rather than use old sprouting potatoes from the back of your cupboard, it is recommended to buy certified seed potatoes, as they will be disease-free. Seed potatoes are available from late winter to spring. If you purchase them prior to planting, you can give them a head start by allowing them to chit.

The process of chitting involves leaving seed potatoes in a cool, light, and frost-free place to sprout. Take care when handling sprouting potatoes, as the sprouts are fragile and can break off. If you don't have time to chit the potatoes before planting, they should still sprout underground but it may take a bit longer for the shoots to appear.

Planting potatoes in the ground

- 1.Potatoes grow in most soil types, but crop best in loose, fertile soil in full sun.
- 2.You can prepare your soil by adding well-rotted manure the autumn before planting, or potato fertilisers prior to planting.
- 3.Dig shallow trenches 7.5-15cm (3-6in) deep and plant the potatoes with the sprouts, or eyes, facing upwards. If you are planting first-earlies, you can plant them closer to each other.
- 4.Backfill and cover the seed potatoes with soil before watering. Try not to water too frequently before you see shoots, as seed potatoes can rot in waterlogged soil.

Planting potatoes in containers

If your soil is a heavy clay, or you are short of space, you might have more success growing potatoes in raised beds, or containers. While you can grow maincrop potatoes in containers, the restricted room for tubers to form may mean it is preferable to select first- or second-early varieties, as they have smaller tubers.

1. Allow about 10 litres of compost per seed potato, so for a 40-litre container, plant up to four seed potatoes.

2. When planting potatoes in containers, use a good quality compost and potato feed, and make sure the container, or sack has adequate drainage holes.

3. Fill the container a quarter full with compost and place the seed potatoes on the compost surface, again with their shoots or eyes facing up.

4. Continue to cover the seed potatoes with more compost to about an inch below the top of the container. Give it a water and wait for the shoots to appear.

How to grow potatoes

While in active growth, keep the plants well-watered, especially during dry spells, and continue to feed for higher yields. Flowers are a sign that potato tubers are forming in the soil.

You will also need to 'earth up' or mound the soil around the base of the plants as they continue to grow. This helps to keep the plant roots cool and protects tubers forming near the soil surface from exposure to the sun, where they run the risk of turning green and poisonous.

Potato shoots are tender, so if shoots appear during forecasted frosts, you can protect them with cloches or horticultural fleecing. This is another benefit to growing potatoes in containers, as you can easily move the containers undercover if there is a risk of frost.

How to grow potatoes in your garden

Potatoes will grow in almost any soil, however, they cultivate much better if the soil is enriched with heaps of organic matter. Potatoes grow best in an acid soil so **add well-rotted manure** and garden compost. It is also important that you do not lime soil at any time.

How to grow potatoes in grow bags

After chitting your potatoes, take five or so tubers and plant into your bag specifically designed for growing potatoes, around 10-12 centimetres deep, with the shoots facing upwards. Add more compost into the bag until each tuber is covered with a gap of around 5 centimetres to the top of the bag.

An application of **a high potash fertiliser** at the rate suggested on the pack will increase yields. Avoid fertilisers high in nitrogen as these will delay maturity of the crop.

Water the compost as to make sure to keep it moist, especially around flowering time. **Do not saturate the compost** as this will cause severe rot!

First early potatoes arrive around June/July time, when the leaves have fully matured and opened. Second earlies and salad can be harvested and eaten at the same time of year.

For main-crop potatoes, **look to store your potatoes in a hessian bag** in a cool, dry environment. The potatoes will be ready to harvest

once there is a yellow colouring on the stems and leaves. Then remove the stems and harvest 7 days later in full.

For plenty of small 'new' potatoes ready to eat in July, plant a variety known as 'early'. For a large crop of big tubers that will be ready in September and can be stored for months, go for a 'maincrop'.

Growing seed potatoes

By buying seed potatoes, you are able to begin growing them before planting them in January/February time. Seed potatoes are actually small tubers specifically grown for the purpose. Remember, always **buy certified seed potatoes** - this way you will then know they are free from virus infections.

Seed potatoes are normally available in the first few months of the year, well before they can be planted outside.

Chitting potatoes



To get them growing when you buy them, place them in egg boxes or a seed tray, with the end with most eyes or buds facing upwards. Stand them somewhere that is cool, but frost-free, and in good light. The aim is to produce small, sturdy, green shoots. To get the biggest crops it's important to 'chit' your seed before planting. Chitting is said to improve yields, but probably is used only to gain a few weeks in the time needed for growing earlies in the ground and to provide the right conditions for storage.

There are a number of methods for growing potatoes – for example, under black polythene or in large containers. To plant using black polythene, plant the tubers through the black polythene. An advantage of this method is that there is no longer a need to earth up the new potatoes so there is no digging involved to harvest them. If you choose to use containers, line the bottom of the container (15cm/6in) with **potting compost** and then plant the tuber below.

Keep adding the compost until the container is full, as the stems begin to grow. Remember, newly emerging foliage is susceptible to damaging frost – avoid this by earthing up with the surrounding soil or by covering the shoots with a fleece.

Planting seed potatoes

The tubers are ready to plant when the shoots are about 2.5cm (1 in) long. In late March or April dig a trench 15cm (6in) deep and plant the potatoes. Carefully push your seed potato (with the shoots facing upwards) into the loosened compost leaving a gap of 30cm (12in) between each one. Take care not to damage the shoots as you plant the seeds and ensure the potatoes are evenly spaced and not touching each other. Leave a space of 60cm (2ft) between rows.

Fill the trench with soil mixed with **garden compost**, or other organic matter, for harvesting from the end of June.

Caring for potatoes

When the green shoots have grown to 20-30cm (8in-1ft) tall pull some extra soil around the stems to make a ridge. This soil is to exclude light from the potatoes that are forming on the surface. **Water in dry weather.** A **liquid feed** every fortnight of a general fertiliser can help grow yield.

How to harvest potatoes

Dig up the whole plant with a fork or spade, taking care not to spear any potatoes in the process. Some potatoes will fall away easily, while others can be gently detached from the plants' roots.

After harvest, you can leave the potatoes somewhere dry to cure, giving soil left on the potatoes a chance to dry up, which makes cleaning easier. When selecting which potatoes to eat and which to store, test the skin with a finger. Those with skin which tears easily when pressed should be used quickly, while those with a firmer skin can be stored. Store somewhere dark, cool, and well ventilated, such as a paper bag or burlap sack.

There's nothing quite like growing, cooking, and eating your own potatoes. Just think of the culinary possibilities.

Common potato pests and diseases

Potato blight

This is a common disease that occurs in damp, warm summers. Initially, a brown watery rot will rapidly spread affecting both the stem and the

leaves. In terms of tubers, they turn a reddish-brown colour when infected. They appear firm to begin with, but then develop into a soft rot below the skin. **Potato blight** is a difficult one to remedy, as unfortunately once it has struck, it is not easy to stop.

- There is currently no chemical product that can be used to fight blight, however you can apply a protectant in June if you predict the summer to be a wet one.

Potato blackleg

A common disease, blackleg is a bacterial disease which causes blackened rotting at the base of the stem. Infection can cause stunted growth and yellow-coloured stems. Tubers may turn grey/brown and rotten if they continue to form.

- Destroy all infected potatoes and rotate crops.
- It is advisable to purchase resilient potatoes varieties to avoid this problem – varieties such as ‘Charlotte’ and ‘Pixie’ are best.

Potato scab

Causing scab-like lesions on the surface of the potato, this disease is easily removed from the outer skin by peeling and does not affect the taste of the potato itself.

- There is no remedy for potato scab as such as you most likely will not recognise the issue until harvest time.
- The best advice is to **keep your potatoes well watered** as scab worsens in dry weather.

Potato rot

Potato rot is a significant problem that follows a wet growing season, especially if the tubers are lifted from wet soil. The best way to remedy potato rot, is:

- Use good quality sees tubers that are resistant certified
- Harvest at a time when the soil is not wet nor dry.
- Store your potatoes in cool and dry conditions.

Slugs

A huge nuisance where potatoes are concerned, **slugs** will eat holes in the potato leaves, and will burrow into the tubers themselves. The tell-tale sign of a slug problem is the slime trail visible on the soil near your crop, and also on the leaves themselves.

- Check plants (at night) and remove slugs by hand.
- Covering the soil around plants with crushed eggshells or grit may have some effect.
- Scatter environmentally-friendly **slug pellets** if other methods are insufficient.

Key features of potatoes

Flowering season(s)	Summer
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn
Sunlight	Full sun
Soil type	Clay, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Neutral
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Up to 90cm (3ft)
Ultimate spread	Up to 60cm (2ft)
Time to ultimate height	4 months

Broad beans are a delicious vegetable that's easy to grow and well worth the space in the garden. The flowers are highly perfumed, the roots trap nitrogen for the next crop, so broad beans are beneficial in many other ways apart from their eating qualities. You should expect to be picking your own crop between June and August.

How to grow broad beans

Cultivation

For best results, grow broad beans in a warm, sunny site. Protection from cold and strong winds will ensure good flower pollination by pollinating insects.

Most soils will give a good crop of beans, but if yours is heavy clay or light sand, then you should dig in some organic matter such as well-rotted garden compost or soil conditioner. Then

improve the nutrient level of the soil with a light dressing of **a general granular plant food**.

Broad bean varieties

Most varieties are called longpods, which should contain 8 or more beans per pod. Masterpiece, Aquadulce and Exhibition Longpod are good, traditional varieties; Witkiem is a more recent introduction. In exposed sites choose a dwarf variety, such as The Sutton.

Although most varieties are sown in spring, you can produce an earlier crop by sowing a winter-hardy variety in late autumn, such as Aquadulce Claudia or The Sutton.

Sowing broad beans

Indoors For a really early crop, sow seeds in individual cells or pots of seed and sowing compost in February. Seedlings will be ready for planting out in March.

Outdoors Sow seeds 5cm (2in) deep in March in a shallow drill with a gap of 20cm (8in) between each seed and cover with fine soil. For maximum use of space, a double row with rows 20cm (8in) apart is normal. Separate each double row by a 60cm (2ft) gap. Then water in well.

Further sowings can be made during April and May for successional crops into early autumn.



How to care for broad beans

Ensure the soil is kept constantly moist - especially when the flowers are setting - and mulch the soil in June and July to conserve soil moisture. **A liquid feed** applied over the foliage and around the roots every couple of weeks will ensure the plants are fed and watered at the same time and help improve cropping further.

Keep weeds under control with a hoe.

After flowering and when the pods have started to set, nip out the growing tip of each plant. This will direct all energy to producing beans and take away the favourite resting spot for **blackfly**.

When the crop has finished, don't pull up the roots, but simply cut off the stems at soil level and compost in the normal way. This will ensure the nitrogen-containing swollen roots are left below ground level to feed the next crop.

Harvesting

You can start to pick the pods when they are around 5-10cm (2-4in) long and cooking them whole.

To harvest them for shelling, pick when the beans begin to show through the sides of the pod and before they get too big. The scar on the picked bean should still be white or green and not become discoloured/brown. Pick them by giving the pod a sharp, downward twist.

Flowering season(s)	Spring, Summer
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer
Sunlight	Full sun
Soil type	Chalky, Clay, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Alkaline
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Up to 1.2m (4ft)
Ultimate spread	Up to 45cm (18in)
Time to ultimate height	4 months

Slugs and snails - treatment and control

Slugs and snails are the most common garden plant pests. They are present in large numbers and can quickly eat and destroy a wide range of plants. Garden snails and slugs eat vegetables and ornamental plants, especially seedlings and those with young and soft leaves.

There's probably no need to tell you what they look like. Their silvery trails will tell you where they came from – and where they went to – after lurching on seedlings and leaves of numerous garden plants. They especially like vegetables and hostas. Here are a few interesting, even amazing, slug and snail facts that will give you some clues as to just what you're up against!

Slug and snail symptoms and damage

Slugs and snails feed with a rasping tongue which causes irregular holes in leaves and sometimes in stems and flowers. Silvery slime trails are often present. Some underground-dwelling slugs make small, round holes in the skin of potato tubers, root crops such as carrots or tulip bulbs.



Where do slugs live?

Many of the most damaging slugs spend most of their time living in the soil. On average, 200 slugs live in a cubic metre of soil. That means in an average-sized garden there can be up to 15,000 slugs! Slugs and snails love mild and damp weather, but slugs will still be active in the winter if the temperature stays above 5°C (40°F).

How long do slugs live?

It takes about a year for slugs to mature into adult garden slugs which live for about two years.

How long do garden snails live?

Newly-hatched snails have fragile shells and take about two years to mature and generally live for up to five years.

Although there are numerous types of slugs, they don't all eat and damage plants. Some are carnivorous and even eat other slugs! As for snails, the most damaging species is the brown garden snail (*Helix aspersa*). The smaller banded species (*Cepaea*) are less voracious.

Slug and snail control

So, how to get rid of slugs and snails? And how can you stop slugs eating plants? Every gardener has their own favourite slug and snail control or deterrent. Here are some to try, ranging from cultural and biological controls to chemical treatment.



Grit, coffee grounds, coal fire ash or crushed eggshells. Slugs and snails don't like clambering over sharp or rough surfaces so create a slug and snail barrier by laying a thick layer of these substances around susceptible plants. If you're using eggshells,

bake them on a low heat in the oven first as this will make them sharper and the slugs and snails won't want to crawl over them.

- **Hand removal.** Pick up slugs and snails whenever you see them. It's a good idea to check underneath favourite hiding places like loose slabs or bricks or under flower pots.
- **Beer traps.** Half fill a jam jar with beer. Sink it into the soil, with its rim approximately 1cm (0.5in) above the soil surface (to prevent predators of slugs, like beetles, from falling in). The aroma never fails to attract slugs and in seeking its source the pests simply fall in and drown.
- **Biological snail or slug control.** Slug species which live underground can be treated with minute parasitic worms called nematodes (*Phasmarhabditis hermaphrodita*). In spring and autumn, when the temperature is above 5°C (40°F), water them onto moist, well-drained soil. The nematode penetrates the slug and releases bacteria which kills the slug. They are available from many mail order biological control suppliers and are effective in getting rid of slugs for at least six weeks.
- **Slug pellets.** An effective way to protect your plants from slug and snail damage is to use [slug pellets](#) containing ferric phosphate. During mild, damp weather, scatter the slug pellets thinly on the soil around vulnerable plants. If you are a parent or pet owner, we recommend that you keep slug pellets out of the reach of children and pets: both when you store them and when you use them. Do not pile up the pellets under bricks or half grapefruit skins.

How to prevent slugs and snails?

No garden will ever be free of slugs and snails and the best approach is to protect vulnerable plants as far as possible. If you come across a slug or a snail pick it up and dispose of it but don't throw it over the fence – they have a 'homing' instinct and will come back! Some gardeners pop slugs into the [compost heap](#) – because they feed on decaying plant material they can be used as part of the composting process.

Here are a few ideas to try to prevent slugs and snails on plants:

1. **Dead and rotting plant material.** By clearing this up you remove food and shelter for slugs and snails.
2. **Do not dig.** Adopt a 'no dig' policy. By digging in the autumn you leave the soil rough and cloddy while the slugs are still active which allows those species that hibernate to move deep into the soil. If you have to dig, dig in the winter while the soil is cold and the slugs are less active. This helps to kill some slugs, and exposes them to predators such as birds.
3. **Beneficial creatures.** Several animals and birds eat slugs and snails, so encourage these creatures into your garden. Frogs, toads and newts are all partial to slugs and snails and can be attracted to your garden by building a wildlife pond. Birds like song thrushes are particularly fond of garden snails and like to nest in tall hedges. Blackbirds also feed on snails – by putting bird food containing sunflower seeds and mealworms on a ground feeder tray you will find that blackbirds will start to visit your garden and eat any snails they can find. Hedgehogs, slow-worms and ground beetles also feed on slugs and snails.
4. **Natural slug bait.** Be prepared to sacrifice a crop of something that slugs and snails love to eat, such as brassica or lettuce. Hoe some of this off while the plants are small, leave the hoeings on the soil and get ready to collect and dispose of them.
5. **Potatoes.** As soon as the tubers have matured, lift and store them and don't leave them in the ground. Avoid growing cultivars like 'Maris Piper' and 'Cara' which are susceptible to underground slugs, and grow 'Pentland Ivory' or 'Charlotte' instead.
6. **Hostas and dahlias.** Grow ornamental plants like these in containers such as rough wooden tubs or terracotta pots, out of the reach of slugs.
7. **Grow plants that slugs don't like.** Slugs tend to avoid herbaceous plants with tough, hairy leaves or spiny leaves or flowerheads. Examples include spurges (*Euphorbia species*), bear's breeches (*Acanthus mollis*), elephant's ears (*Bergenia*) and mullein (*Verbascum species*).

8. **Stop slugs coming into the house** by sealing any potential entrance points and placing a strip of copper tape on the floor by the door as a barrier.

What vegetables to harvest in May

May is a great time for reaping the rewards of your vegetable garden. Just like in April, you'll continue to see all the hard work paying off, with the following vegetables ready to harvest in May:

- Asparagus
- Spring cabbage
- Artichokes

How to grow salad leaves

Bags of salad leaves are quite expensive to buy and have a fairly short lifespan in the fridge. Grow your own and you can pick exactly how much you want and need. By growing a range of different types and sowing at different times of year, you can have fresh salad leaves available nearly all year round. Many salads leaves are grown as 'cut-and-come-again' crops, which you can harvest over a long time.

Salad leaf varieties

There are lots of different salad leaves available. Here are some of the best and most popular ones. Many seed suppliers sell them as salad leaf mixes, with different types, colours and flavours.

- Chinese cabbage:** Often sold as Chinese leaves, it is fast growing and can be ready for cutting in as little as 6 weeks.
- Corn salad or lamb's lettuce:** Hardy, making it the perfect choice for winter and early spring salads. It forms small rosettes of bright green, succulent leaves.
- Endive:** Usually blanched to reduce its bitter content.
- Land cress or American cress:** A tasty watercress substitute, ready to eat in 7 to 8 weeks.
- Rocket:** An easy to grow, fast-maturing salad. Late summer sowings will continue cropping into the winter if the plants are protected by cloches.
- Winter purslane:** An attractive winter salad also known as claytonia or miner's lettuce.
- Oriental vegetables:** There are numerous ways of using these, from adding to salads, stews and soup, for stir-fries and as a lightly steamed vegetable. They include Chinese mustard greens, chopsuey greens, Japanese mustard spinach (komatsuna), mibuna and mizuna and texel greens.



What you'll need to start growing salad leaves

Get your salad leaves off to a good start with these growing essentials:

- Garden fork and spade
- Trowel
- Well-rotted **farmyard manure**
- General purpose fertilizer
- Salad leaf seeds

For container sowing:

- A suitable container, such as a windowbox or pot
- Multipurpose compost**
- Balanced liquid plant food

How to grow salad leaves

Cultivation

Most salad leaves prefer an open, sunny position, although they will tolerate light shade. During hot, sunny summers, they may do better in light shade.

Before sowing, improve the soil with some organic matter to improve water holding and add a dressing of **a general granular plant food**.

Most salad leaves can also be grown in small pots, window boxes, growing bags or planters. Grow some in containers on the windowsill to have them ready at your finger tips - and at times when it may be too cold outside.

Sowing salad leaves

Sow in short rows every fortnight or so, enough for your needs, to have a continuous crop. Sow seeds thinly 13mm (0.5in) deep, cover with soil and water in well.

How to care for salad leaves

Keep the soil moist at all times, but without overwatering. If the soil dries out the plants may bolt (go to seed prematurely) and lose their strong flavours.

If necessary, thin out seedlings when they're about 2.5cm (1in) high. The thinnings can be used in the kitchen.

To encourage fast growth that is tender and full of flavour, feed plants every 3 weeks with **a balanced liquid feed**.

Harvesting salad leaves

Harvest leaves as and when needed once the plants are about 7.5-10cm (3-4in) high. You can either pick individual leaves from the outside of the plants or harvest over the whole plant using scissors.

It is best to cut in the morning, when the plants will be at their freshest.

Common salad pests and diseases

Grey mould/botrytis mould

Grey mould is a fungal disease that appears as pale discoloured patches on salad leaves, turning to a grey fuzzy growth. It is more common in wet weather.

- Remove any affected plants promptly.
- Space plants well when planting to allow good air circulation.
- There are no chemical controls available for grey mould.

Slugs and snails

Slugs and snails feed on young lettuce seedlings, and can be identified by the slime trails that they leave, as well as the damage they do.

- Check plants at night and remove slugs and snails by hand.
- Covering the soil around plants with crushed eggshells or grit may have some effect.
- Scatter environmentally-friendly **slug pellets** if other methods are insufficient.

Lettuce root aphid

Lettuce root **aphids** feed on the roots of lettuce plants, causing plants to suddenly wilt and die. It is more common in dry conditions.

- Water regularly especially during dry periods.
- Grow lettuce under insect-proof mesh.
- Pull up and destroy affected plants.

Key features of salad leaves

Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter
Sunlight	Partial shade, Full sun
Soil type	Clay, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Neutral
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Up to 30cm (12in)
Ultimate spread	Up to 15cm (6in)
Time to ultimate height	4-10 weeks

How To Grow and Plant Garlic With Our Simple Steps

Garlic is the base of so many delicious dishes, and growing garlic (*Allium sativum*) at home is now very popular. It's an easy vegetable to grow – just plant a garlic clove into the soil, wait a few months and you'll be rewarded with a bulb of up to a dozen or more cloves ready to use in the kitchen.

Hardneck and softneck garlic

Garlic bulbs are divided into hardneck and softneck varieties. Hardneck garlics produce a flowerspike, essentially a long stem growing up from the bulb and bearing a flowerhead. Softneck garlics don't produce flowerspikes, so the 'neck' of these bulbs stays soft and flexible.

Hardneck bulbs are hardier than softnecks, so are a good choice for areas with cold winters. The bulbs often have stronger, more complex flavours than softneck garlics. On the downside, the bulbs don't store as well as softnecks do.

Softneck garlics are best grown in mild areas. The bulbs tend to have a mild flavour and can be stored for several months. Garlic bulbs sold in supermarkets are usually softneck varieties.

Hardneck garlic varieties to grow

- Garlic 'Early Purple Wight' – a robust variety, ready to harvest in early summer
- Garlic 'Sprint' – fast-growing, with large pink cloves

Softneck garlic varieties to grow

- Garlic 'Arno' – medium-flavoured pink cloves
- Garlic 'Marco' – white-skinned, with a strong flavour
- Garlic 'Germidour' – large white bulbs, mild flavour

How to grow garlic



Begin by splitting the bulb carefully into individual clove segments, and then gently push each clove into the soil, so the tip is just below the soil surface, with the clove facing end-up and the flatter basal plate facing down. Allow a gap of 15cm (6in) between each clove and 20-30cm (8-12in) between each row of cloves.

Garlic growing equipment list

To grow garlic in your garden you will need:

- 1.Spade
- 2.Fork
- 3.Garlic bulbs
- 4.Supply of well-rotted farmyard manure or other soil improver such as **Levington Organic Blend Farmyard Manure**

5. General-purpose **fertiliser**

6. Horticultural fleece or cloches

How to plant garlic

Garlic does best in a fertile, well-drained soil in full sun. The bulbs need a period of cold weather in order to grow, so the best time to plant garlic is in autumn, although there are some varieties that have been bred for spring planting.

1. Before planting garlic, prepare the soil by digging in plenty of compost or well-rotted farmyard manure. If your soil is very heavy clay, add grit, or plant bulbs in containers instead.

2. Remove any weeds and stones.

3. Apply a general-purpose fertiliser in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions, and rake in.

4. Break the garlic bulbs into individual cloves.

5. Plant the cloves 15cm (6in) apart and 2.5cm (1in) deep, with tips just below the surface and pointing upwards. Space rows 30cm apart.

6. Water after planting, to help settle the soil around the cloves.

7. Cover the area with horticultural fleece or cloches to stop birds pulling up the seedlings as they appear. Once the plants grow larger, they are less attractive to birds and the protection can be removed.

Growing garlic in containers

Garlic will grow happily in containers outdoors, and this is a good option in gardens where the soil is very heavy and wet.

1. Choose a container at least 30cm in diameter and 20cm deep, with good drainage holes.
2. Fill with a good quality multipurpose compost and add a slow-release fertiliser.
3. Plant the cloves 10-15cm (4-6in) apart and 2.5cm (1in) deep, with tips just below the surface and pointing upwards. Don't plant bulbs right up against the edge of the container – leave space for them to swell as they grow.
4. Water regularly to keep the compost moist.

Caring for garlic

Once planted, garlic doesn't need much looking after. Just follow these simple steps for a good crop:

- Keep beds weed-free. Remove weeds by hand to avoid damaging the bulbs with a hoe.
- Water during long dry periods.
- Stop watering once the leaves start turning yellow and the bulbs start to swell.
- On hardneck bulbs, pick any flowerscapes before they flower, to keep the plant's energy focused on developing the bulb. The flowerscapes are edible and very tasty!

Harvesting garlic



While garlic is growing, you can harvest a leaf now and then to add to salads, but don't take too many at a time from any one plant.

Flowerscapes should be picked before the flowers develop. The scapes have a mild garlic flavour and can be cooked or chopped up and added raw to salads.

The garlic bulbs themselves should be ready to harvest from early summer. To know when to harvest garlic, look at the plants' leaves – when they turn yellow, the garlic is ready to be harvested.

To harvest garlic, use a garden fork to gently lift the bulbs.

How to store garlic

- Before storing garlic, lay the bulbs outside in the sun on a rack, or inside in a well-ventilated shed, to allow them to dry out. This will take two to three weeks.
- Once the skins are dry and papery, the bulbs are ready to be stored. Remove any damaged or bruised bulbs.
- Store garlic bulbs in a string bag in a cool, dry, dark place.

Common garlic diseases

Although garlic is easy to grow, there are a few diseases that can cause problems.

White rot

White rot is a fungal disease that rots garlic bulbs and causes leaves to turn yellow and die. Unfortunately, there's no treatment available for this. Burn all affected plants and don't plant garlic or **other allium bulbs** in that soil for at least eight years.

Leek rust

Leek rust, another fungal disease, causes orange blotches on leaves. Mild cases will not necessarily affect the crop but remove any affected leaves as soon as you see them and burn or dispose of them (but not on a compost heap). Leek rust is more common in long periods of wet weather, and on overcrowded plants. Avoid planting garlic or other alliums in affected soil for at least three years.

Key features of garlic

Flowering season(s)	Spring, Summer
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn
Sunlight	Full shade, Partial shade, Full sun
Soil type	Chalky, Clay, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Neutral
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Up to 45cm (18in)
Ultimate spread	Up to 10cm (4in)
Time to ultimate height	6 months

Asparagus is a long-term crop, usually providing up to 20 years of delicious spears if you plant well and care for the plants while they're growing. Asparagus is a great vegetable plot luxury - just steam and serve with melting butter.

How to grow asparagus

Cultivation

Asparagus grows best in a warm, sunny position. although it will tolerate light, dappled shade. It needs a well-drained soil improved with lots of bulky organic matter, such as compost or well-rotted manure.

Asparagus varieties

The best asparagus varieties are all-male F1 varieties. They are more vigorous than the older, open-pollinated varieties.

- Backlim (F1)
- Connover's Colossal
- Gijnlim (F1)
- Jersey Knight (F1)
- Lucullus (F1)
- Pacific Purple (F1)

Planting asparagus

As this is a long-term crop, prepare the soil well before planting in March or April. Dig and fork over the soil, removing stones and all perennial weed roots, and add lots of organic matter - such as well-rotted manure or compost for example. For best results, and especially on heavy soils, dig a trench 30cm (12in) wide and 20cm (8in) deep. Work in some well-

rotted manure into the soil at the bottom of the trench, then add some of the excavated soil to make a 7.5-10cm (3-4in) high ridge down the centre of the trench.



Place the crowns on top, carefully spreading out the roots, spacing them 30-45cm (12-18in) apart. Carefully cover the crowns with 5-7.5cm (2-3in) of soil, leaving the tips of the stems just visible. Gradually fill in the rest of the trench as the plants grow through the soil.

If planting container-grown plants, plant with the top of the rootball 7.5cm (3in) below soil level.

If you are going to grow lots, leave 45-60cm (18-24in) between rows and stagger the placement of the plants within the rows.

Water in well and mulch the soil with 5cm (2in) of well-rotted manure.

How to care for asparagus

It is important to keep asparagus beds weed free. This is best done by hand as the shallow roots can be damaged when hoeing.

Add a 5-7.5cm (2-3in) thick mulch annually in spring to reduce weed growth, keep the plants and soil fed and help retain soil moisture. Apply a general granular feed in early spring and repeat once harvesting has finished.

Allow the foliage to turn yellow in autumn before cutting it down to 2.5cm (1in) above the soil surface.

Harvesting

It's important to allow the plants to build up their strength, so it is best not to harvest any spears for the first 2 years. In the third year, stop cutting after 6. From then on, you can crop normally as and when the spears are produced.

The best way to harvest is to cut each spear with a sharp knife 2.5cm (1in) below the soil surface when they are 15-20cm (6-8in) long.

Pests

Asparagus may be susceptible to asparagus beetle.

Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn
Sunlight	Full sun
Soil type	Clay, Loamy
Soil pH	Neutral
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Eventually up to 1.2m (4ft)
Ultimate spread	Up to 30cm (1ft)
Time to ultimate height	9 months

Cabbages are an important vegetable to grow at home, especially for winter and spring when few other fresh greens are available. By choosing different varieties you can be cutting cabbages all year round. Lightly steamed they are delicious and can even be eaten raw in coleslaw and salads.

How to grow cabbages

Cultivation

Cabbages prefer to be grown in an open, sunny position, but they will also crop well in a semi-shaded position. They need a fertile, deep soil, that is preferably alkaline, with lots of added bulky organic matter. If your soil is acidic, add **garden lime** before sowing or planting out. Savoys are a type of winter cabbage.

Cabbage varieties

Although the majority of cabbages are green, there are also red/purple varieties, such as Kalibos, Red Drumhead and Ruby perfection. They also come in shapes other than round – pointed and open and flat.

Cabbages are divided into when they are ready for cropping. The following are all good varieties:

- Spring:** Duncan, Offenham 1 – Myatt's Offenham Compacta, Pixie
- Summer/Autumn:** Derby Day, Greyhound, Hispi, Spitfire
- Autumn/Winter:** Celtic, Huzaro, January King 3, Kilaton
- Savoy:** Endeavour, Tundra, Wintessa



Sowing cabbages

For best results, sow seeds very thinly in a separate seed bed in a shallow drill about 13mm (½in) deep. Cover with soil and water in well. Actual sowing times depend on which types you are growing:

- Spring cabbage:** Sow in July/August. Transplant into cropping positions from September to November.
- Summer cabbage:** Sow from late February/early March (under cloches or similar covers, or indoors with gentle heat) until early May. Transplant in May/June. The later sowings will crop into autumn.
- Winter cabbages:** Sow from April to early June. Transplant in late June/July. The earliest sowings will start cropping in autumn.

How to care for cabbages

When the young plants have 5 or 6 leaves, carefully lift and transplant them to their final growing position. Improve the soil first with **a general granular plant feed**. Firm the soil around each plant afterwards and water in well.

Space compact varieties 30cm (1ft) apart, larger varieties up to 45cm (18in) apart. Plant spring cabbages just 10cm (4in) apart in rows 30cm (1ft) apart, then thin out to 30cm (1ft) apart in late February/March and use the thinnings as delicious, tasty spring greens.

Water plants well in dry weather and cover the soil with a mulch to conserve soil moisture. Occasional feeds with **a liquid feed** through summer will improve the crop.

Harvesting

Cabbages are harvested by cutting through the stem with a sharp knife just above ground level once they've developed a good sized head as and when they're needed.

For an extra bonus crop of spring and summer cabbages, don't dig up the roots after harvesting, but cut a 13mm (½in) deep cross in the stump.

Feed with [a liquid plant food](#) and you'll be rewarded with several small cabbages in about 5 weeks.

Flowering season(s)	Spring
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter
Sunlight	Partial shade, Full sun
Soil type	Chalky, Clay, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Alkaline
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Up to 30cm (12in)
Ultimate spread	Up to 30cm (12in)
Time to ultimate height	4 months

Although they are both called artichokes, Jerusalem and globe artichokes are completely different – both in how they grow and how they're used in the kitchen. But both are perennial plants, easy to grow – and delicious to eat.

The globe artichoke is a variety of thistle, a large, architectural perennial that looks great when grown in flower beds and borders. The edible parts are the fleshy lower portions of the bracts of the unopened flower buds and their base, known as the 'heart'. Once the flower buds open, the flowers look beautiful and very attractive, but are inedible. The plants have very ornamental, large, silvery-green/glaucous-green leaves. The Jerusalem artichoke is a species of [sunflower](#), grown for its edible tubers. These are a real winter treat, although an acquired taste for some. You can roast them, make them into chips and fry them, and they make a hearty soup. They are easy to grow, even in poor soils. In the

summer, they produce lots of reasonably small sunflower-like flowers. As the plants grow tall (up to 3m/10ft), they can be used as a living screen.

How to grow artichokes

Cultivating artichokes

Globe artichokes

Globe artichokes prefer an open position in full sun. They need a reasonably fertile, well-drained soil. They are fairly drought resistant once established.

Jerusalem artichokes

Jerusalem artichokes will thrive in sunny or shady positions. They will grow well in even poor soil, but produce larger yields if the soil is well prepared with lots of added bulky organic matter first.

Varieties of artichokes

Globe artichokes

- **Gros Vert de Laon:** Produces the largest hearts.
- **Green Globe:** Large green heads. May need winter protection.
- **Purple de Provence Purple:** flower buds, early cropping.
- **Purple Sicilian:** Small, deep purple flower buds.

Jerusalem artichokes

- **Common:** Very knobbly tubers.

- **Fuseau:** A smooth-skinned variety, that is easy to peel.
- **Gerrard:** Colourful red skin, white flesh with a smoky flavour.



Sowing globe artichokes

For best results when growing artichokes from seed, sow in March and April in pots or trays of moist **seed sowing compost** at a temperature of 15-20°C (65-70°F).

Transplant seedlings when large enough to handle into 7.5-10cm (3-4in) pots and grow on in a warm, light position. Harden off by growing on in cooler conditions for 10-15 days before planting out after all risk of frost, 60-90cm (2-3ft) apart.

You can also direct sow globe artichoke seed outdoors from March to April when the soil has warmed up. Sow in a well-prepared seedbed, placing 2-3 seeds at stations 30cm (12in)

apart. When large enough to handle, thin out the seedlings to 1 per station and then finally 60cm (2ft) apart.

Planting artichokes

Globe artichokes

Plant out young plants, preferably in spring, 60-90cm (2-3ft) apart.

Dig over the planting area, incorporating lots of organic matter – such as compost or planting compost, especially if the soil is heavy clay or light, well-drained sandy soil. Dig a good sized hole big enough to easily accommodate the rootball.

Place the rootball in the planting hole and adjust the planting depth so that the crown of leaves is at soil level.

Mix in more organic matter with the excavated soil and fill in the planting hole. Apply a general granular plant food over the soil around the plants and water in well.

Then add a 5-7.5cm (2-3in) thick mulch of organic matter over the soil around the plants.

Jerusalem artichokes

Plant small tubers in March or April in well-prepared soil, 10-15cm (4-6in) deep and 30cm (1ft) apart with rows 90cm (3ft) apart. Large tubers can be cut into sections, providing each

one has 2 or 3 buds. Apply a little general granular plant food over the soil.

Tubers can also be grown in large pots filled with a good potting compost.

How to care for artichokes

Globe artichokes

Although reasonably drought resistant, you may need to water during prolonged periods of dry weather, especially when the flower buds are forming.

Feeding with a general granular plant food each spring will increase yields.

Keep plants weed-free and mulch with well-rotted manure or compost in spring. In cold areas, you may need to cover plants with a mulch of straw, compost or similar in late autumn to protect them from cold winter weather.

Divide plants every 3 to 4 years to keep the plants young, vigorous and cropping well.

Jerusalem artichokes

Jerusalem artichokes are easy to grow. Once planted and growing well, they rarely need any supplementary watering or feeding. Only water during periods of severe drought.

Weeding shouldn't be necessary, as plants produce a dense, weed-suppressing canopy of foliage.

In exposed areas, when the stems reach 30cm (12in) high, pile up earth around them to a depth of 15cm (6in) to make the plants more stable.

When the foliage starts to turn yellow in autumn, cut down the stems to 7.5cm (3in) above ground level.

Harvesting artichokes

Globe artichokes

Cut off the flower buds, ideally when they reach the size of a golf ball, with a pair of secateurs, before they open and start to flower. After harvesting the main head, secondary usually smaller heads appear on sideshoots, which can be harvested later.

Jerusalem artichokes

Harvest as needed from October/November to February, carefully lifting the tubers with a garden fork. They will survive all but the harshest winters, so can be left in the ground, although slugs and waterlogging can be a problem.

The roots store well, providing a valuable food source throughout winter.

Some people leave the tubers in the ground, just harvesting as needed, and allowing the remainder to grow on to crop the following year. Their quality does degrade unless the plants are dug up and replanted in fertile soil.

Flowering season(s)	Summer
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn
Sunlight	Full sun
Soil type	Chalky, Clay, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Neutral
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained, Poorly drained
Ultimate height	Globe artichoke: up to 1.5m (5ft); Jerusalem artichoke: up to 3m (10ft)
Ultimate spread	Globe artichoke: up to 1.2m (4ft); Jerusalem artichoke: up to 60cm (2ft)
Time to ultimate height	5-6 months

Fruit

If you're wondering what fruit to plant in May then the answer is berries, berries, berries! Otherwise, May is all about keeping your fruit trees healthy and free of pests who tend to be rife at this time of year.

What fruit to plant in May

Generally speaking, it's the soft fruits that are likely to be ready to plant in May. Remember to water them regularly throughout their first year to ensure they get established and bear fruit for years to come.

Before planting, consider enriching your soil with a peat-free, naturally derived compost specially formulated for fruit. This will provide the

optimum structure for strong root growth, controlling water availability and keeping your plants fed for up to six weeks.

Any of the following will take particularly well to your garden in May:

- Blueberries
- Raspberries
- Blackberries
- Strawberries
- Gooseberries

These fruit trees and bushes can all be planted in May:

The Ultimate Guide To Grow, Plant and Care for Strawberries

Who doesn't love strawberries? If you're a strawberry fan, the many varieties of 'Fragaria × ananassa' are easy to grow at home, allowing you to enjoy the perks of harvesting ripe fruits in your own garden. What all strawberry growers will soon realise - you'll be having the juicy fruit with everything, as just one plant can be a prolific cropper.

Understanding the different types of strawberry

Strawberries are either summer-bearing or everbearing. Summer-bearing strawberries tend to grow bigger fruits and produce one larger harvest over a two-week period in the summer. The exact timing depends on the cultivar. These larger harvests are ideal if you plan to make jam

with your strawberries, as you will require a glut of fruit in order to do this.

Everbearing plants, also called perpetual strawberries, produce fruit all season, but in smaller numbers and more sporadically. This type of strawberry is ideal to snack on fairly regularly, or for small harvests to enjoy at breakfast for example.

It's also worth mentioning the alpine, or wild strawberry, *Fragaria vesca*. Technically an everbearing strawberry, it also does well in gardens. The fruits are small and a bit dry but with an intense flavour. They spread easily and make excellent groundcover, which is another perk as the dainty leaves are ornamental.

Strawberry varieties

Strawberries come in a range of different shapes, sizes, flavours and cropping times. The main summer-fruiting varieties are divided into early, mid, and late-season types. There are also perpetual or everbearing varieties that can fruit more-or-less continuously from July to September.

Some of the best varieties include:

- Early summer fruiting Emily, Honeoye
- Midseason Cambridge Favourite, Hapil, Pegasus
- Late season Rhapsody, Symphony
- Perpetual fruiting Aromel, Bolero

Your local garden centre will probably have a selection of different varieties, so you can pick n' mix your plants for a long cropping period.

Make sure you pick strawberry plants with plenty of healthy green leaves, that are fairly compact and not too leggy.



When to plant strawberries

Strawberries are available as bare-root runners, that are best planted in the spring or as young plug and potted plants.

You can plant strawberries at any time of the year, as long as the soil is workable and not waterlogged or frozen. However, mid-spring or early autumn are the ideal times to plant strawberries for an effective and bountiful harvest.

How to plant strawberries

So, you love the taste of strawberries. You're ready to have them with everything, but your big question is: how to grow them? The great news is that strawberries are simple and straightforward to grow. You do need

to make sure you follow some basic guidelines, however. Here's how to do it.

Examine your strawberry plants

The first step is to examine your strawberry plants prior to planting. Check them for signs of **pests and disease** and remove any damaged leaves with clean tools. If your new plants are on the small side, you may choose to remove any early flowers or immature fruits. This will encourage the plant to put its energy into producing fresh growth, giving it a better chance of producing higher yields in the summer.

Choosing where to grow strawberries

When left to their own devices, strawberries may become very invasive, which is why many gardeners prefer to grow them in containers. Traditional strawberry planters are specialised containers that allow multiple plants to be grown in a small amount of space. Strawberries grow well in most containers and hanging baskets, as long as drainage holes are present. Try a multipurpose compost as a growing medium and space the strawberries about 20cm (8in) apart.

When planting strawberries, try a sunny location as they fruit well in full sun. They will tolerate part-shade, although fruit yields may be smaller. Strawberries like fertile but well-drained soil. If you are planting them directly in the ground or a raised bed, it's worth incorporating some manure or general fertiliser into the soil before planting. Space the plants 30-45cm (12-18in) apart, in rows 60-90cm (24-36in) apart

Planting strawberries

Using a trowel, dig a planting hole twice as large as the plant's root ball. Make sure the plant's crown, where the leaves meet the roots, is level or ever so slightly proud of the compost surface. Planting strawberries too deep can lead to rot, and planting too high will dry the roots out. Backfill around the plant's roots and firm down the soil with your hands.

The final stage is optional but certainly helpful. Add a thin layer of straw to the surface of the soil and around the strawberry plants. If straw isn't available, you can use horticultural grit. This acts as a barrier between the developing fruit and the soil. Fruits resting against the soil surface are vulnerable to rot if the soil is wet, as well as nibbles from hungry insects.

When to harvest strawberries

You are likely to know when to harvest your strawberries as the fruits will have darkened in colour and look juicy. Try to harvest as soon as they are ripe, as this is when they taste their best. Remember to be as gentle as possible when harvesting as this prevents bruising the fruit. If you can, remove the stalk and stem from the plant too.

How to care for strawberry plants

Caring for strawberry plants requires some light maintenance to keep them healthy and productive. The first tip is to water regularly, especially if the plants are growing in a container or raised bed. When watering, aim the flow near the base of the plant, rather than overhead, as the leaves of strawberries can be susceptible to mould when wet.

Regular feeding is also important when growing strawberries, as they are hungry plants. Most gardeners like to use a high-potassium liquid feed every two weeks, such as [**Miracle-Gro Performance Organics Fruit & Veg feed**](#). This kind of feed encourages flowering; and more flowers means more fruit. Tomato feed will also do the job well.

It's worth remembering that strawberry plants eventually lose their vigour and usually need replacing every three to four years. In the second or third year, you may decide to propagate baby plants from the runners your strawberries produce. These are the long creeping shoots that snake along the soil and produce daughter plantlets nearby.

However, in the first year, it's beneficial to remove runners as and when you see them. Cut them off where they meet the mother plant. This

encourages your strawberry plants to put more energy into flowering and fruiting.

Common strawberry plant pests and diseases

Grey mould/botrytis mould

Grey mould is a fungal disease that appears as powdery grey mould at the strawberry stalk, gradually covering the whole fruit, which then rots. Strawberries affected by grey mould should not be eaten.

- Remove any dead leaves or flowers.
- Remove any affected fruit promptly.
- Space strawberry plants well when planting to allow good air circulation.
- There are no chemical controls available for grey mould.

Powdery mildew

Powdery mildew is a fungal disease that appears as a white powdery deposit on strawberry leaves, stunting growth and causing leaves to shrivel. Drought-stressed plants are more susceptible to this disease.

- Dig organic material into the soil before planting to improve soil water retention.
- Space strawberry plants when planting to ensure good air circulation.
- Remove any affected growth promptly.
- Water regularly in dry periods.

Frost damage

Late frosts can damage strawberry flowers, blackening the centres. Damaged flowers will not develop into fruits.

- Avoid planting strawberry plants in frost pockets.
- Protect plants from late frosts by covering them with horticultural fleece at night during cold snaps.

Verticillium wilt

Verticillium wilt is a soil-borne fungus. It causes the leaves of strawberry plants to turn brown and wilt, and eventually the whole plant will die.

- Avoid planting strawberries in ground that has been used in the past three years for tomatoes, peppers or potatoes or other strawberries.
- There is no chemical control for verticillium wilt.

Slugs and snails

Slugs and snails will eat ripe strawberries, and can be identified by the slime trails that they leave, as well as the damage they do.

- Check plants at night and remove slugs and snails by hand.
- Covering the soil around plants with crushed eggshells or grit may have some effect.
- Scatter environmentally-friendly [slug pellets](#) if other methods are not sufficient.

How to grow raspberries

What could be better than a bowl of sweet, freshly-picked raspberries in summer? These delicious fruits are easy to grow in a sunny garden, and if you're short on space you can even grow raspberries in a pot. Enjoy them fresh in summer and autumn, and freeze them for use in winter pies and tarts.

Varieties of raspberry

Raspberries (*Rubus idaeus*) are divided into summer-fruiting and autumn-fruiting types. Autumn-fruiting varieties are a good choice for novice gardeners, as they are less prone to raspberry beetle (a pest that

eats the fruit) and are also easier to prune than summer-fruiting types. Here are some of the most popular varieties:

Summer-fruiting raspberries

- ‘Malling Promise’ – vigorous plant with abundant big sweet berries
- ‘Glen Moy’ – heavy crops on almost spine-free canes
- ‘Glen Ample’ – lots of big, succulent raspberries
- ‘Glen Fyne’ – one of the best varieties for flavour

Autumn-fruiting raspberries

- ‘Autumn Bliss’ – compact, ideal for containers
- ‘Autumn Treasure’ – large sweet fruit on spine-free canes
- ‘Fall Gold’ – Large yellow fruits with exceptional flavour

What you’ll need to grow raspberries

- Secateurs
- Gloves
- Raspberry plants

For planting raspberries in the ground:

- Garden fork
- Garden spade
- Soil conditioner or well-rotted [farmyard manure](#)
- Slow-release fertilizer e.g. [fish blood and bone](#)

For summer-fruiting raspberries:

- Wooden posts 2.4m (8ft) long
- Wire

For growing raspberries in containers:

- 60cm (2ft) diameter container
- Soil-based compost
- High-potash feed

How to grow raspberries

Raspberries do best in a soil that is moist but well-drained and slightly acidic. If your soil is alkaline, you will have more success growing raspberries in pots rather than in the ground.



Plant raspberry canes in autumn or winter in a sunny, sheltered spot, about 50cm (20in) apart, in rows spaced 1.5-2m (5-6ft) apart.

1. Before planting, dig the soil over to clear it of weeds and stones, and dig in plenty of soil conditioner or well-rotted farmyard manure to improve the soil structure.
2. Provide a support framework for summer-fruiting raspberries (autumn-fruiting raspberries are generally self-supporting), To make the support framework, knock sturdy 2.4m (8in) high posts into the ground at the end of each row and stretch 3 rows of heavy-gauge wires between the posts, spaced about 60cm (2ft) apart.

3. Dig a trench 45cm (18in) wide and 20-25cm (8-10in) deep and cover the base with a good layer of organic matter, such as compost or well-rotted farmyard manure.

4. Plant the canes, allowing 45cm (18in) between each cane. Add a handful of slow-release fertilizer such as fish, blood and bone when planting each cane.

5. Backfill the trench with soil mixed with organic matter. Gently firm in around the roots and water in well.

6. Cut the canes down to 25cm (10in) above ground level, to encourage them to produce plenty of fruit-bearing shoots.

Growing raspberries in pots

1. Choose a large container, at least 60cm (2ft) in diameter.

2. Fill the container with a soil-based compost such as John Innes no 3.

3. Plant up to six raspberry canes per pot, spaced equally around the edge of the pot.

How to care for raspberries

Tie the canes of summer-fruiting raspberries to the wires with soft twine as they grow.

Water plants in dry periods, and water container-grown plants regularly to prevent the compost from drying out. Feed container-grown plants fortnightly with a high potash feed like Tomorite once the fruits start to develop.

Keep the plants clear of weeds. If using a hoe, take care not to damage the roots just below the surface of the soil.

How to prune raspberries

Prune summer-fruiting raspberries after the last fruit has been picked. Cut down all the dark brown canes that produced fruit to ground level. New canes that grew in the current year will fruit in the following year; retain the strongest 6-7 new canes for next year's crop.

To prune autumn-fruiting raspberries, cut all canes back to ground level in February.

Common raspberry pests and diseases

Raspberry cane blight

Raspberry cane blight is one of the most serious raspberry diseases. It is a fungal disease that causes canes to die back, turning dark brown and breaking easily.

- Remove and destroy any affected stems, cutting back below soil level.
- Water plants regularly and mulch to reduce drought stress, which can make plants more prone to infection.

Raspberry beetle

Raspberry beetle affects mainly summer-fruiting raspberries as well as some early-flowering autumn varieties. Adult beetles lay eggs on the flowers and the larvae burrow into the developing fruits and eat them. Affected fruits develop dry patches around their stalk, and white maggots will be found inside the fruit.

- Plant autumn-fruiting varieties, which are less affected.

- Encourage natural predators like birds, hedgehogs and ground beetles.
- Pyrethrin sprays should not be used when plants are in flower to avoid harming pollinators, so are not practical against raspberry beetle.

Key features of raspberries

Flowering season(s)	Spring, Summer
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn
Sunlight	Full sun
Soil type	Clay, Loamy
Soil pH	Neutral
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Up to 1.8m (6ft)
Ultimate spread	Up to 30cm (1ft)
Time to ultimate height	1 year

How to grow blueberries

Eaten fresh, baked in muffins or as the star attraction in jams or desserts, blueberries (*Vaccinium corymbosu*) are always delicious. They're also rich in vitamin C and antioxidants, so it's no wonder they've been hailed as a superfood. It's easy to grow your own blueberry bushes at home in your garden. Read on to find out more about growing blueberries.

What are the best blueberries to grow?

Blueberry bushes can grow to around 1.5m (5ft) tall and wide, but there are also compact varieties reaching just 60cm (2ft) tall that are perfect for growing in containers.

All blueberries produce a better harvest if there is at least one blueberry bush of a different variety nearby, to allow cross-pollination. Most are able to self-pollinate to some extent, however. If you only have space for one blueberry bush, choose one listed as being self-pollinating. Here are a few names to look for:

- Blueberry 'Top hat' – a self-pollinating, dwarf variety with good flavour.
- Blueberry 'Bluegold' – a self-pollinating, dwarf variety, good for containers.
- Blueberry 'Northblue' – a self-pollinating, compact variety, good for containers.
- Blueberry 'Patriot' – a vigorous, very hardy variety producing a high yield of tasty berries.
- Blueberry 'Duke' AGM – ready to harvest early, so good for northern areas with short growing seasons.
- Blueberry 'Nelson', a late season, self-pollinating variety, producing large fruits.

Essential blueberry planting equipment list

To plant blueberries in your garden, you will need...

For planting in soil

- 1.Spade

2. Soil pH test kit

3. Leafmould, composted pine needles or other acidic compost

For container planting

1. Container at least 30cm in diameter

2. Hand trowel

3. Ericaceous soil or compost such as [Miracle-Gro Premium Ericaceous compost](#)

Your guide to planting blueberries

So, when to plant blueberries? The best time to plant blueberry bushes is from late autumn to early spring, in a sheltered position. They produce their best crops in full sun but will cope with some shade.

It's essential to give blueberries the right soil conditions. They will only grow well in acidic soils with a pH of 5.5 or lower. This is a measure of the soil's acidity; soils with a pH below 7 are acidic, and those with a pH above 7 are alkaline.

You can test your soil's pH level with a pH test kit – these are readily available and easy to use. If your soil is only slightly acidic, you can lower the pH by adding sulphur chips. This needs to be done at least a month before planting to allow time for it to take effect. However, the simplest solution to not having the right soil for blueberries is to grow them in a container, where you can control the type of soil used.

How to plant blueberries

1. Before planting blueberries in the ground, dig in lots of acidic organic matter, like leaf mould or composted pine needles, to

improve the soil structure and drainage. Don't use farmyard manure or mushroom compost, as these are too alkaline.

2.Space plants 1.5m apart.

3.After planting, mulch around the base of the plants with pine needles or wood chippings.

4.When planting blueberries in containers, choose a container at least 30cm (12in) in diameter, with good drainage holes. Use ericaceous soil or compost.

Caring for blueberries

Feed container-grown blueberries monthly with a liquid feed designed for ericaceous plants. As far as possible, use rainwater when watering, as tap water will make the soil more alkaline, especially if you live in a hard water area.

If using ericaceous compost in containers, repot your plants every year to refresh the compost. Once the roots start growing through the pot's drainage holes, repot into a larger container.

Don't overfeed blueberries grown in the ground, as this will reduce the harvest. Instead, mulch the bushes annually with ericaceous compost, and give them a high nitrogen feed like sulphate of ammonia in late winter.

How to prune blueberries

Make sure you don't prune blueberry bushes until they are at least two years old, then prune annually in late winter or early spring, following these steps:

1.Remove any crossing or damaged stems.

2.Remove any low branches that trail on the ground.

3. Cut one in every four old stems to the base of the plant. This promotes new growth which will bear more fruit.

4. Remove all twiggy growth on the ends of last year's fruit-bearing stems, cutting back to a strong upward-facing bud or shoot lower down the stem.

Harvesting blueberries

Blueberries start to ripen from mid-summer onwards. It's easy to tell when to harvest blueberries, as the fruits turn a dusty blue colour. Leave the berries on the plant for a day or two after ripening to allow them to develop their flavour, and then pick them.

Ripe blueberries should come away easily from the stalks. Fruits ripen at different times on the same bush, so keep checking the bushes and pick the berries as they ripen.



Understanding any potential blueberry problems

Birds

The biggest challenge when growing blueberries is stopping the birds getting to the berries before you do.

- Cover the bushes with horticultural fleece or mesh, but only do this once the berries have started to develop or you'll stop bees and other insects getting to the flowers to pollinate them.

Powdery mildew

Blueberries can be affected by **powdery mildew**, a fungal disease that looks like a white powdery deposit on leaves that can reduce the plant's vigour. It is often a sign of drought stress, so to reduce the risk:

- water regularly.
- Powdery mildew is less of a problem for plants grown in cooler areas.

Frost

In very cold areas, blueberries may need winter protection.

- Cover the bushes with fleece to protect the buds from late frosts in spring or move pot-grown plants indoors.

Key features of blueberries

Flowering season(s)	Spring
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn
Sunlight	Partial shade, Full sun
Soil type	Clay, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Acid loving/ericaceous
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Up to 1.8m (6ft)
Ultimate spread	Up to 1.5m (5ft)
Time to ultimate height	5-7 years

Blackberries are sometimes overlooked for growing at home – but they shouldn't be, as they are easy to grow and produce lots of luscious, tasty and juicy fruit with very little work and care.

Of course, if you don't want to grow them yourself, you can always go pick them blackberries the wild - but there are lots of great varieties for home growing, which produce good yields of tasty, sweet fruit usually much bigger and sweeter than those of the wild ones found growing in hedgerows and other places.

If you don't like the thought of having to deal with the sharp thorns, there are thornless varieties, such as Oregon Thornless. This is also very

decorative, with deeply cut leaves that turn a rich red colour in autumn.

As well as blackberries, there are also several hybrid and related berries, including loganberries, tayberries, boysenberries and Japanese wineberry.

How to grow blackberries

Cultivation

Blackberries will grow in partial shade as well as full sun. Because they flower late in spring, they can be grown in frosty areas, where other fruit won't grow particularly well. They need a good, moisture-retentive but well-drained soil with lots of added well-rotted organic matter, such as well-rotted manure, compost or soil conditioner, to hold moisture and nutrients.

Blackberries and hybrid berries are all self-fertile, so you only need to grow one plant and don't need to worry about cross-pollination. They are vigorous plants, so need to be given plenty of room. Allow around 3m (10ft) between plants.

Blackberry varieties

There are several great varieties to grow, which produce large yields of excellent fruit:

- Fantasia Produces large blackberries with an excellent flavour, similar to the subtle flavour of the wild blackberry.
- Loch Ness Thornless and produce lots of large, well-flavoured berries from late summer until the first autumn frosts.

- Oregon Thornless Thornless stems and attractive foliage as well as good taste.
- Reuben Produces lots of very large, very sweet fruit.
- Silvan Prolific crops of large fruit.

- **Planting blackberries**

- Container-grown blackberries can be planted at any time of year, but autumn to spring are the best times.
- Dig a hole 60x60cm (2x2ft) and 30cm (12in) deep. Add a layer of organic matter – such as compost or well-rotted manure – to the base of the hole and fork it in.
- Place the roots in the planting hole and adjust the planting depth so that it is planted at the same depth as it was originally growing and the top of the roots are level with the soil surface.
- Mix in more organic matter with the excavated soil and fill in the planting hole.
- Water in well, apply **a granular general feed** over the soil around the tree and add a 5-7.5cm (2-3in) deep mulch of well-rotted garden compost or bark chippings around the root area.



How to care for blackberries

Water well during the first year whenever the weather is dry. In subsequent years, watering when the fruit is swelling may be needed if there are prolonged periods of dry weather.

Mulching around the plants in late spring will help to conserve soil moisture and keep down weeds.

For maximum crops, feed in early March with **a general controlled-release feed**.

Support and training

Blackberries need a good support system for the stems. Knock in sturdy 7.5cm (3in) 2.4m (8ft) high posts into the ground and stretch heavy-gauge wires horizontally between the posts at around 75cm (30in) 1.2m (4ft) and 1.5m (5ft) above ground level. Tie the stems to the wires as they grow with soft twine.

Alternatively, they can be trained along wires attached to a fence or even a shed. There are several ways of training the stems. As they fruit on stems produced the previous year, the easiest method is the one-way rope system. The new, current year's stems are trained out and tied in on one side of the plant, while the stems produced the previous year, and which will carry the fruit, trained out on the other side.

Pruning

As soon as you finish harvesting, simply cut back the fruited stems down to ground level. Make sure you don't cut out the new/current year's stems as these will produce next year's fruit.

Harvesting

The fruit is ready for picking from mid-summer onwards. Pick it when it has developed a good colour and before it becomes too soft. With thorny varieties, it pays to wear gloves when picking!

Flowering season(s)	Spring
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn
Sunlight	Partial shade, Full sun
Soil type	Chalky, Clay, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Neutral
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Up to 2.4m (8ft)
Ultimate spread	Up to 2.4m (8ft)
Time to ultimate height	1-2 years

Forget the hard, green bullets you often buy in shops for cooking with, dessert gooseberries have rich, sweet, and juicy flavours. Gooseberries are easy to grow and can often be pretty much left to their own devices.

But a little care and attention and some annual pruning will produce bumper crops of tasty fruit.

How to grow gooseberries

Cultivation

Gooseberries aren't too fussy about situation. They love a sunny position, but will also grow and fruit very well in shade and other awkward positions in the garden. They will also tolerate a more exposed position than most other soft fruit.

They need a moist, but free-draining soil that doesn't become waterlogged in winter. It will pay dividends to improve the structure of all soils by adding lots of organic matter, such as [compost](#) or [soil improver](#). This is particularly the case with clay soils, where it will improve drainage, and on light sandy soils, where it will increase its moisture-holding capacity.

Gooseberry varieties

Gooseberries are divided into cooking and dessert varieties, although most are dual purpose and all taste sweeter when left to fully ripen on the plant. The fruit is also available in four different colours – green, red, white and yellow. The following are all good dessert varieties, except Careless, which needs cooking.

Fruit colour	Good varieties
Green	Careless, Invicta
Red	Pax, Rokula, Whinham's Industry
White	Langley Gage
Yellow	Bedford Yellow, Golden Drop, Leveller

Invicta and Rokula have some resistance to American gooseberry mildew disease.



Planting gooseberries

Plant bare-root gooseberry bushes in winter. November or December are best, although it can be done right up to the end of February, whenever the soil isn't frozen solid or

waterlogged. Container-grown bushes can be planted at just about any time of year.

Gooseberry bushes should be planted around 1.5m apart (5ft). They fruit on older wood and on the base of young wood, and can even be trained into cordons and fans against walls or fences if space is tight.

Dig a hole 60x60cm (2x2ft) and 30cm (1ft) deep. Add a layer of organic matter into the base of the hole and dig in. Place the roots of the gooseberry bush in the planting hole at the same depth as they were originally growing, so that the old soil mark is at soil level.

Now mix in more soil improver to the soil and fill in the planting hole. Add **a general granular plant food** and water in well. Finally, add a 5cm (2in) deep mulch of well rotted garden compost, bark or other bulky organic material around the root area.

Container growing

Gooseberries grow and crop perfectly well in a large pot or other container. You will need a pot of at least 30-38cm (12-15in) in diameter, filled with **a good quality potting compost**. Obviously, plants in containers will need regular watering and feeding throughout the growing season to ensure good results and a large crop

How to care for gooseberries

Water the newly planted bushes during the first year if the weather is dry. In subsequent years, watering when the fruit is swelling may be needed if the soil is not already moist.

For maximum crops, feed each year in March with [a suitable granular plant food](#), and top up the mulch to retain soil moisture at the roots.

Prune your gooseberry bush annually between late autumn and late winter, cutting back new growth to two buds and main shoots (leaders) by one-third. Pruning new growth to 5 leaves in summer will also encourage a bigger crop the following year.

Covering plants with netting will protect the fruit from birds and may also help prevent damage from gooseberry sawfly caterpillars.

Harvesting

A few weeks before they are ripe, remove alternate fruit and use them for cooking. Leave the remaining fruit to ripen on the plant, but don't leave them until they become too soft. The fruit tastes delicious straight from the bush, but it can also be frozen. You can expect a yield of about 5kg (11lb) from each gooseberry bush.

Flowering season(s)	Spring
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer
Sunlight	Partial shade, Full sun
Soil type	Chalky, Clay, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Neutral
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Up to 1.8m (6ft)
Ultimate spread	Up to 1.5m (5ft)
Time to ultimate height	5-10 years

Growing Fruit in May

May is all about protecting your plants from those pesky garden pests, as the fruit will be just starting to appear on trees and bushes. Strawberries can be protected from birds with netting, and you should check gooseberry bushes for sawfly and caterpillars.

While protecting your fruit from unwanted pests, it's important to ensure that pollinators are still able to get to the plants. So, if you do use netting, make sure it's not too fine. Birds out, bees in!

Soft fruit bushes like blackcurrants, gooseberries and summer-fruiting raspberries will be flowering and starting to develop fruits this month but resist picking them as it will be too early. Just keep an eye on the progress while the plants are in flower.

May is also a good opportunity to enrich your soil with a naturally derived liquid plant feed. This will provide tastier, more abundant produce once harvesting season comes around.

Caterpillars

What are caterpillars?

Caterpillars are the larvae stage in the life cycle of butterflies and moths. Because many caterpillars eat leaves, some species are serious plant pests – one of the most common garden caterpillars, that of the cabbage white butterfly, for instance, can devastate brassica crops.

Caterpillar identification UK

There are numerous types of caterpillars in the UK. With many different sizes, colours and textures, garden **caterpillar identification** can be tricky.

- **Yellow/green striped caterpillars with black markings** are the larvae of large cabbage white butterflies which lay clusters of yellow eggs on the undersides of brassica leaves. The eggs hatch into 5cm long caterpillars.
- **Pale green caterpillars covered in short, velvety hairs** are the larvae of small cabbage white butterflies.
- **Yellow/green or brown/green caterpillars with smooth bodies** are the larvae of another brassica pest, the Cabbage moth. Their eggs are white and spherical.
- **Green caterpillar with distinctive black stripes the length of their bodies.** This is becoming more common in our gardens. It's the **box tree caterpillar**, sometimes called simply the box caterpillar.
- **Black and orange striped caterpillars** are the larvae of the red and black Cinnabar moth. They are dangerous caterpillars for birds because they build up their poison by feeding on their favourite food, ragwort. Their bright colours warn predators that they're poisonous. Cinnabar moths can be seen flying during the day and night and are often mistaken for butterflies.

- **Black caterpillars covered in long black and ginger hairs** are often called 'woolly bears'. The larvae of the garden tiger moth, they feed on stinging nettles, dock leaves and many garden plants. The adult moth has brown and white patterned wings in front with bright red and black spotted hindwings.



Caterpillar damage

Most caterpillars are active in spring and summer. Large cabbage white butterfly caterpillars eat holes in the leaves of **cabbages**. The caterpillars of the small cabbage white butterfly and the cabbage moth tend to feed at the heart of cabbages. Box tree caterpillars produce webbing over their feeding area and can strip a box plant of all its leaves.

Caterpillar control

So, how to get rid of caterpillars? Here are a few different ways to get rid of caterpillars eating plants, ranging from cultural and biological to chemical.

- Check susceptible plants like cabbages and box (Buxus sempervirens) regularly from early summer to early autumn and take action as soon as you see the caterpillars.
- Pick eggs and caterpillars off the leaves (they often feed at night so a torch might come in handy) and remove them to a site where any damage will be less harmful.
- Use a biological control consisting of a mixture of pathogenic nematodes, including *Steinernema carpocapsae*. The nematodes enter the caterpillars' bodies to infect them with a bacterial disease. Spray the product directly onto the caterpillars during damp weather at least three times to control the population.
- If none of these methods work, then the answer is to spray with a contact and **systemic insecticide**. For best results, spray at the first sign of infestation and re-apply when necessary.

Before you treat caterpillars on fruit and vegetables, always check that the insecticide is approved for use on edible crops. To protect bees and pollinating insects do not apply to plants when in flower. Do not use where bees are actively foraging. Do not apply when flowering weeds are present.

How to prevent caterpillars

- Hedgehogs and birds** such as bluetits, great tits, blackbirds and robins eat caterpillars, so try to attract these creatures into your garden by providing food and nest boxes.

- Protect brassica crops like cabbages and sprouts with **fine netting or horticultural fleece** to prevent adult butterflies and moths from laying eggs on the crop. Make sure the netting does not touch the plants because the adults can lay eggs through it.

What fruit to harvest in May

If you've been following along with the rest of our monthly gardening guides, you don't need to be told that rhubarb is not a fruit. Since it's often treated as a fruit in the kitchen, we're including it here, and you'll be pleased to know that you can pick rhubarb throughout May and into June, but remember to leave at least half of the stems on each plant. You should stop at the end of June to give plants time to build up their strength for next year.

You simply can't beat a delicious rhubarb crumble made with your very own sweet, tart rhubarb stems.

Rhubarb (*Rheum x hybridum*) is a hardy perennial that keeps on coming back for years, giving you a fresh harvest of juicy stems every spring. Here's our simple guide to growing rhubarb.

Equipment list for growing rhubarb

To grow delicious rhubarb, you will need:

- 1.Rhubarb crowns.
- 2.A spade.
- 3.A supply of compost or well-rotted farmyard manure such as **Miracle-Gro Premium All Purpose Compost**.
- 4.A balanced garden fertiliser.

Rhubarb varieties



There are many different varieties of rhubarb available, but some stand out from the crowd. Here are a few of our favourite types of rhubarb:

- Rhubarb 'Hawkes Champagne' AGM: a compact, high-yielding variety, producing bright red stems with a sweet taste.
- Rhubarb 'Timperley Early' AGM: bred especially for indoor forcing, this variety also grows well unforced, producing an early harvest of pink stems streaked with green.
- Rhubarb 'Victoria': one of the oldest varieties but still popular, producing a heavy crop of pink-tinged green stems with a good balance of sweetness and acidity.
- Rhubarb 'Glaskin's Perpetual': a late-cropping variety producing large, juicy pink- and green-streaked stems with a sweet flavour.

Where to grow rhubarb

A sunny site is best for growing rhubarb, although it can cope with some shade. Rhubarb needs a soil that is both fertile and free-draining, as the crowns will rot if left to sit in cold, wet soil. To improve the soil's structure and fertility, dig in lots of **compost** or well-rotted farmyard manure a few weeks before planting.

How to grow rhubarb

Rhubarb is usually grown from crowns. These are young plants, between one to two years old, that look like bundles of tuberous roots, topped by a few buds.

The best time to plant rhubarb is in late autumn or early winter when the plant is dormant, although it can also be planted in early spring. Make sure you do the following:

1. Clear the area of all weeds and stones.
2. Plant the rhubarb crowns 1m (3ft) apart with 1.2m (4ft) between rows.
3. Plant the crowns with their buds just below the surface of the soil.

Caring for rhubarb

Once established, rhubarb will largely take care of itself, but for the best harvest, follow these tips:

- In spring, cover the plants with fleece to protect the new stems from sudden cold snaps. If the stems are caught by frost, they are likely to blacken and wilt, but the plants themselves will survive and produce more stems.
- Feed the plants with a **balanced fertiliser** in spring.
- Water regularly in dry spells.

- Deadhead any flowers as soon as they appear, to focus all the plants' energy into producing stems and leaves.
- Once the foliage has died back in autumn, cut off all old leaves and compost them. Provided the soil is well-drained, the plants will not be harmed by cold winter weather. In fact, the crowns need a period of temperatures below 3°C (37°F) to stimulate new growth in spring.
- Mulch around the plants in autumn with a thick layer of organic compost or well-rotted farmyard manure. Take care not to bury the crowns when mulching, or they may rot.
- Rhubarb plants need to be divided every five to six years to rejuvenate them. In winter, when the plants are dormant, dig up any crowns that need to be divided. Using the sharp edge of a spade, cut the crowns into three or four separate segments, making sure each segment has at least one bud. Replant each segment as a new plant.

Forcing rhubarb

Forcing rhubarb is a technique used by gardeners for many years as a way of getting an early rhubarb harvest. Discovered by accident at the Chelsea Physic Gardens in the early 19th century, the forcing process simply involves excluding all light from the plants. This stimulates them to grow, producing pale, tender stems with a delicate flavour that can be harvested around two to three weeks before the normal crop.

In mid to late winter, select the crowns you wish to force and cover them with straw, then place large containers over these crowns to block out all light. You can buy purpose-made rhubarb forcing pots, but an upturned bucket or dustbin works equally well. When the stems reach the tip of the container, they are ready to harvest.

Forcing rhubarb weakens the plant, so only force established plants, and don't force the same plant two years running.

Rhubarb problems to look out for

Rhubarb is generally trouble-free, but in wet soil it can suffer from crown rot. This causes the crowns to turn brown and soften, and the rot may spread to stems and leaves. Dig up all affected plants as soon as possible and destroy them.

Harvesting rhubarb

Harvesting rhubarb does require a little patience, but the results are well worth it. To give new plants a chance to establish themselves well, don't harvest any rhubarb at all in the first year after planting. In the second year, you can harvest a few stems from each plant, but make sure to leave at least three or four strong stems on the plant.

In the following years, you can harvest up to half of the stems on each plant.

When to pick rhubarb

Harvest from mid-spring when the stems have a good colour and the leaves are fully unfurled. Don't cut the stems to harvest them, just hold them at the base and pull firmly to detach them from the crown.

Stop harvesting rhubarb after mid-June to give the plants a chance to build up their reserves again for next year's crop.

Note: Never eat rhubarb leaves, as they are toxic. Cut them off the harvested stems and either throw them away or compost them.

Plant rhubarb in your garden this autumn and you'll be enjoying delicious tarts and crumbles for years to come!



FAQs

When is the best time to pick rhubarb?

In the UK, the best time to pick rhubarb is from April to June when stalks are around 30-40 cm long. Avoid harvesting in the first year to let the plant establish

Can I grow rhubarb in a pot?

Yes, rhubarb can be grown in pots! Use a large, deep container with rich, well-draining soil and place it in a sunny spot for best results.

What herbs and spices to plant in May

As the weather warms up in May, it's time to start thinking about sowing tender herbs like basil and coriander. Whether you're growing herbs inside or outside, you have options for each.

When preparing the soil to receive your herbs, it's always a good idea to enrich it with a peat-free compost. This will help support your plants during their early life, controlling water availability and encouraging strong root growth.

All hardy herbs and spices can be planted in May, including:

- Thyme
- Rosemary
- Sage
- Parsley
- Chives
- Mint (in pots)

Plant seedlings of the following

How to grow basil

No kitchen should be without a basil plant. Cultivated in herb gardens for centuries, it's one of the easiest herbs to grow from seed and it makes a delicious addition to so many dishes. Grow sweet basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) for tasty Italian cooking, or Thai and

lemon basil (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*, *Ocimum x citriodorum*) for exciting Asian dishes.

Types of basil to grow

As well as the popular sweet basil, there's a whole range of other basil varieties available. Here are a few of the most popular:

- Basil 'Sweet Green' – traditional sweet basil, ideal for Italian dishes.
- Basil 'Genovese' – stronger flavour and aroma than sweet basil.
- Basil 'Christmas' – a cross between Genovese and Thai basil. The leaves have a fruity, mulled-wine scent. Also good as an ornamental plant, with purple flowers.
- Basil 'Crimson King' – a very ornamental purple-leaved basil. The leaves have a clove flavour.
- Basil 'Siam Queen' – a Thai basil with liquorice-flavoured leaves, purple-red stems and violet flowers
- Basil 'Mrs Burn's Lemon' – delicious lemon-flavoured leaves.
- Basil 'Lettuce Leaf' – crinkled leaves with a mild flavour, good in salads

Essential equipment to grow basil

You will need the following equipment to grow basil at home:

1. Basil seeds
2. Pots
3. **Multipurpose compost**
4. Propagator or clear plastic bags

Where to grow basil

When growing basil, choose a sunny, sheltered spot with well-drained soil. Planting basil in raised beds improves drainage and gives some protection against slugs and snails. You'll also find that basil is ideal for pots, even growing happily indoors on a sunny windowsill.

How to sow basil

You can sow basil indoors from late February onwards.

1. Fill pots with multipurpose compost and firm down.
2. Sprinkle seed thinly over the top of the compost. Basil seeds germinate easily, so don't sow many more than you need.
3. Cover the seeds with a light layer of compost.
4. To avoid disturbing the seeds, stand the pots in a tray filled with water so that the compost can soak up water from below.
5. Place the pots in a propagator at a temperature of 15-25°C (59-77°F). Alternatively, place a clear plastic bag over each pot and place the pots somewhere warm with bright indirect light until the seeds germinate.
6. Water regularly but lightly.
7. Once the seeds have germinated, take them out of the propagator, or remove the plastic bags and let the seedlings grow on until they have developed at least two true leaves (these are the second pair of leaves to appear).
8. Hold each seedling by a leaf (never hold the stems, as these are easily damaged) and ease it out of the compost, using a pencil or something similar to help. Repot each seedling into its own individual pot.
9. Wait until all danger of frost is past before moving basil outside. Harden plants off for two weeks first by placing the pots outside during the day and moving them back inside at night.

Caring for basil

Basil hates sitting with its roots in cold, wet soil. Water in the morning so that the soil can dry out during the day. Avoid splashing the leaves when watering, to reduce the risk of powdery mildew, a fungal disease.

If you are growing basil primarily for use in the kitchen, pinch off any flowers that appear, as the leaves will develop a bitter taste once the plant has flowered.

Aphids can be a problem, especially on indoor plants. Wipe them off by hand before infestations get too big. Leaving the plants outside for a few days to allow natural predators like ladybirds to eat the aphids can reduce the problem.

Slugs and snails love basil and can devour entire plants, There are various ways to protect plants, including copper tape around pots, crushed egg shells, beer traps and sawdust, but physically checking the plants with a torch last thing at night is often the most effective solution.

Harvesting basil

You can harvest basil throughout summer, and regular harvesting will encourage the plant to produce more leaves.

If you just need a few leaves, pick individual leaves that join the stem just below a new pair of leaves. This means that for every leaf you pick, the plant produces two more. When harvesting basil in quantities, always leave two or three sideshoots below the point where you cut, to encourage the plant to grow bushy.

In mid- to late summer, cut the whole plant back by a third to encourage a final flush of leaves.

Basil won't survive outside once the temperature drops below 5°C (41°F). For a supply of basil leaves into late autumn, move container-grown plants to a sunny indoor spot.

Storing basil leaves

It can be difficult to keep basil plants growing indoors in low winter light levels, but you can freeze or dry basil leaves to give you a supply of basil through winter.

- To freeze basil leaves, remove all leaf stalks and wash the leaves. Blanch the leaves in boiling water for a couple of seconds, then drain and rinse in iced water. Pat the leaves dry and place in an airtight container in a freezer.
- To dry basil leaves in an oven, turn it on to its lowest heat, then place the basil leaves on a baking tray and leave them in the oven for two to four hours until they crumble when bent.
- To air-dry basil, cut leafy shoots with long stems, tie them in bunches and hang the bunches somewhere cool and well ventilated, in bright but indirect light. Air-drying basil takes about a month.

Common pest or disease problems of basil plants

Black spots on basil leaves

Black spots on basil leaves can be caused by bacteria from the soil being splashed onto the leaves of the plant.

- Avoid splashing the leaves when watering.

Powdery mildew

Powdery mildew is a fungal disease that appears as a white powdery deposit or white spots on basil leaves, stunting growth and causing leaves to shrivel. Drought-stressed plants are more susceptible to this disease.

- Dig organic material into the soil before planting to improve soil water retention.
- Space plants when planting to ensure good air circulation.
- Remove any affected leaves promptly.
- Water regularly in dry periods.

Fusarium wilt

Fusarium wilt is a soil-borne fungal disease that causes basil leaves to turn yellow and wilt. The plant becomes unable to take up water and dies.

- There are no chemical controls available.
- Avoid planting basil in soil where basil plants have been previously affected by fusarium wilt.

Slugs and snails

Slugs and snails love basil and will strip plants bare. They can be identified by the slime trails that they leave, as well as the damage they do.

- Check plants at night and remove slugs and snails by hand.
- Covering the soil around plants with crushed eggshells or grit may have some effect.
- Scatter environmentally friendly **slug pellets** if other methods are not sufficient.

Glasshouse whitefly

Glasshouse **whitefly** suck plant sap and excrete a sticky substance called 'honeydew' which covers leaves and encourages the growth of sooty mould, stunting plant growth. They can also transmit viruses.

- A parasitoid wasp can be used as a biological control.
- Keep gardens clear of weeds which can harbour whitefly.
- Use **pesticide sprays** suitable for use on edible plants.

Glasshouse red spider mite

Glasshouse red spider mite is a sap-sucking mite. Severe infestations cause plants to drop leaves and eventually die. Symptoms include a fine webbing covering leaves and stems, and mottled leaves with tiny mites and eggs on their undersides.

- Ensure good ventilation in greenhouses.

- Mist plants to raise the humidity levels, or damp down greenhouse floors.
- A predatory mite can be used as a biological control.
- Use **pesticide sprays** suitable for use on edible plants.

Key features of basil

Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter
Sunlight	Full sun
Soil type	Chalky, Clay, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Neutral
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Up to 50cm (20in)
Ultimate spread	Up to 30cm (1ft)
Time to ultimate height	6 months

How to grow and care for coriander

Coriander has recently become a very popular herb to grow at home. Grown mainly for its green leaves which are sometimes known as Cilantro and also its spicy seeds, this herb is a must in salads and as a fragrant green addition to Indian, Thai and Chinese curries. The seeds are a vital ingredient of curry powder.

Coriander varieties

Coriander is usually available as the species (*Coriandrum sativum*), although the variety Calypso has good bolting resistance and can be cut back and allowed to regrow several times. The variety Confetti has fern-like foliage.



What you'll need to start growing coriander

Growing coriander requires very little equipment. Here's what you'll need:

- Coriander seeds
- A suitable pot with drainage holes
- Multipurpose **compost**
- Balanced **liquid feed**

Cultivating coriander

Outdoors, coriander prefers a cool position and light shade and very well-drained soil.

Coriander is most commonly grown in a pot - either in a little shade on the patio or on a windowsill that doesn't receive direct, burning sunlight in summer and which doesn't get too hot.

Sowing coriander

Sow coriander seeds directly in well-prepared moist soil outside at monthly intervals from March to August for a continuous supply of leaves.

You can also grow it in 15-30cm (6-12in) pots, sowing a few seeds in each and germinating indoors with gentle warmth. Sow every 6-8 weeks to have a constant supply of fresh leaves throughout the year.

Young plants are usually available from garden centres in summer. Plant these out or pot them up into slightly larger pots.

How to care for coriander

When sowing outdoors, thin seedlings or young plants to 5-7.5cm (2-3in) apart. If you specifically want to grow it for its seeds, grow at 20-25cm (8-10in) apart.

Keep the soil or compost moist as it tends to run to seed if allowed to dry out, but take care not to overwater as too much water can lead to rotting - especially in autumn and winter.

Give plants a light liquid feed of **a general feed** every couple of weeks during late spring and summer. This will help ensure plants go on producing a constant supply of leaves. Don't use high potassium feeds as these will encourage premature flowering.

If plants become stressed they will run to seed quickly and leaves start to lose their flavour once flowering begins. This is fine if you want to harvest seeds; otherwise discard the plants.

Harvesting coriander

Start harvesting the leaves when they are bright green and young and the plants are 10-15cm (4-6in) tall.

You can treat coriander plants as a cut-and-come-again crop. Otherwise, allow them to run to seed and allow the seeds to develop on the plant and harvest them before they are shed.

Common problems, pests and diseases in coriander

Slugs and snails

Slugs and snails will feed on young coriander seedlings. They can be identified by the slime trails that they leave, as well as the damage they do.

- Check plants at night and remove slugs and snails by hand.
- Strulch is a good deterrent to snails.
- Covering the soil around plants with crushed eggshells or grit may have some effect.
- Scatter environmentally-friendly **slug pellets** if other methods are insufficient.

Aphids

Aphids are sap-sucking insects which can quickly infest young plants, stunting growth.

- Wipe off small colonies of aphids on coriander with a damp cloth.
- Encourage natural predators like ladybirds and hoverflies.

- **Pesticide sprays** are available for aphids.

Bolting

Bolting occurs when coriander plants produce flowers and set seed early. As they are annuals, the plants will die once they have set seed. Bolting can be triggered by stress, such as sudden dry periods.

- Plant bolt-resistant cultivars.
- Water regularly.
- Sow new seeds every few weeks to ensure a constant supply of leaves.

Key features of coriander

Flowering season(s)	Summer
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter
Sunlight	Partial shade, Full sun
Soil type	Chalky, Clay, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Neutral
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Up to 50cm (20in)
Ultimate spread	Up to 30cm (1ft)
Time to ultimate height	6 months

How to grow peppermint

Peppermint, or *Mentha × piperita*, is super easy to grow. It's an incredibly useful plant in the kitchen, with the aromatic leaves giving a refreshing flavour to food and drinks. The flowers attract beneficial wildlife to the garden, and peppermint plants are rumoured to deter mice, rats and mosquitos! Follow our peppermint growing guide to find out how to grow peppermint in your garden.

Types of peppermint plant to grow

Peppermint is a cross between two other species of mint - spearmint and watermint. It's grown worldwide but originates from Europe and the Middle East.

It's also a perennial plant, growing to about 90cm (36") tall. Peppermint has distinctive smooth, square shaped stems, with dark green pointed leaves and dark leaf veins. The delicate lilac-purple coloured flowers will appear throughout the summer months, and will teem with bees, butterflies, overflies and lacewings in the sun.

There are some stunning cultivars of peppermint to try:

- Mentha × piperita 'Black peppermint' plant. Very dark leaves with a purple tinge and a strong flavour.
- Mentha × piperita 'Candy mint'. Slightly reddish stems.
- Mentha × piperita 'Chocolate Mint'. The leaves and stems when rubbed between the fingers smell like a popular chocolate mint sweet.
- Mentha × piperita 'Citrata'. Lots of different varieties, including basil, grapefruit, lemon and orange.
- Mentha × piperita 'Crispa'. Wrinkley leaves.
- Mentha × piperita 'Lavender Mint'. Lavender scented leaves.
- Mentha × piperita 'Lime Mint'. Lime aroma and flavour.
- Mentha × piperita 'Variegata'. Usual green leaves with a lighter pattern.

Peppermint will benefit from being cut frequently, so choose a cultivar which you think you will use a lot in the kitchen. Of course, you can just add prunings to the compost heap, but it's great to make use of the

pungent foliage if you can! Don't be shy when harvesting - cut stems to within 3cm (1") of the ground, ideally just above a pair of leaves.

Add peppermint leaves to drinks, salads, peas and new potatoes. They can also be used to make flavoured ice cubes, by simply removing a few leaves from the stem, and immersing them in water in an ice cube tray - allow to freeze and then pop a cube or two into a glass of freshly poured lemonade. Peppermint leaves also make a wonderful tea, great for digestion.

What you'll need to grow peppermint plants

Peppermint has a much stronger flavour than spearmint. So, what's the difference between spearmint and peppermint plants? Spearmint, also known as common mint and garden mint, is related to peppermint. However, peppermint is distinguished by its typically purple-brown stems, and leaves which are much thinner than those of spearmint.

And can you grow peppermint outdoors? Yes, of course. Peppermint can be quickly and easily propagated from a piece of another plant. Simply remove the plant from the container, or dig up a clump from the border, and use a sharp spade to divide the clump into smaller sections.

Part-fill a freestanding container with **Levington® Multi Purpose Compost**. Alternatively, cut away the bottom of a container, and place it into the soil, deep enough to keep the rim of the container above soil level, and part-fill with **compost**. This will stop the roots from spreading, which they will do very quickly if allowed, crowding out other plants. Replant the clumps in the container, backfill with soil, and water well until established.

Peppermint plants are best planted out in the spring, ready to put on new growth which can be harvested throughout the summer and

autumn. They can also be grown on a windowsill in a small pot, all year round.

Where to plant and place your peppermint plants

Because peppermint grows from rampant roots, give careful thought to how you will restrict its growth. The fleshy roots can grow very thickly and re-grow from short pieces, so don't allow it to get out of control. It's not difficult to dig out if it does spread, but better to prevent the problem, as by the time it has taken over, other plants may have suffered.

As with other herbs grown for culinary use, keep them within easy reach of the kitchen door. Make sure that the soil is moisture retentive, enriching with **Levington® Multi Purpose Compost** if needed.

Peppermint is hardy and can withstand repeated frosts, so don't worry about providing winter protection. It also isn't fussy when it comes to sunlight, so is a good plant for a tricky location where there's a lot of shade or poorly drained soil.

Caring and nurturing your peppermint plants

Peppermint is fine in full shade, or with full sun, or anywhere in-between. It's a very versatile plant and should be planted out into soil which has been enriched with a **general multipurpose compost**. This will help the plant to retain moisture. Make sure you water peppermint plants well in hot weather, as they do prefer damp conditions.

Cut back the entire plant to ground level in the autumn, and then mulch the surface to provide protection and food to the plant. Choose a mulch that will provide the peppermint with nitrogen, such as **Levington® Composted Bark**, which will encourage strong green growth.

Prune during the growing season if needed to maintain shape and dig out any roots which have spread.



Common pests and diseases with peppermint plants

Peppermint is a resilient plant, and it will withstand attacks from a lot of pests and diseases. There are just a few worrying problems to look out for.

Why is my peppermint plant wilting?

Verticillium wilt can cause a peppermint plant to suddenly collapse, especially in hot weather. This is a fungal disease characterised by dark markings on (and in) the stem, as well as yellowing lower leaves. Remove and destroy any affected material, and ensure the peppermint plant receives adequate watering and a feed in the autumn.

What are the pretty metallic green insects on my peppermint plant?

Unfortunately, these beautiful bugs are the destructive Mint leaf beetle. This pest will create holes in the leaves as they chew on the foliage. The

leaves then don't look attractive. However, peppermint is so vigorous that it will usually survive a nibble. If you're worried, remove by hand and destroy.

What are the orangey-yellow patches on my peppermint?

Rust can cause patches of orangey-yellow to appear on the plant. Dig up and destroy affected plants, and don't propagate a new plant from another which has signs of rust.

Frequently asked questions about peppermint plants

Are peppermint plants perennials?

Yes, peppermint plants will come back year after year.

Can you eat peppermint leaves?

Absolutely, yes! They are reputed to aid digestion and are great paired with potatoes and peas. They add a different flavour dimension to salads and drinks and can be made into a refreshing tea by just adding a few leaves to a cup of boiling water.

Key features of peppermint plants

Botanical Name	Mentha × piperita
Plant Type	Herbaceous perennial
Native Location	Middle East and Europe
Family	<i>Lamiaceae</i>
Light Exposure	Full sun to shade
Soil pH	Acid, Neutral, Alkaline.
Flower Time	June to September
Flower Colour	Lilac

How to grow borage

Borage, or 'starflower', is an easy-to-grow herb with edible flowers and leaves. Originally hailing from the Mediterranean, borage is now a mainstay of British gardens, seeding itself and growing freely once established. It looks most at home in a traditional cottage garden, and is fabulous for attracting bees and other pollinators.

Types of borage to grow

All cultivars of *Borago* spp. have visibly hairy stems and leaves. The star-shaped flowers are usually blue-purple and made up of five pointed petals. Think those flowers look familiar? That's because borage is closely related to the forget-me-not (*Myosotis* spp.), another popular cottage garden plant.

Let's look at the different types to try out:

- Common Borage (*Borago officinalis*). Also known as tailwort and talewort. By far the most prolific variety of borage, the flowers are a deep blue colour.
- Creeping Borage (*Borago pygmaea*). Also known as pygmy borage, this perennial low-growing variety is much shorter than annual cultivars, reaching just 30cm (1') tall. The tiny light blue flowers have a notably pleasant fragrance.
- Variegated Borage (*Borago officinalis* 'Variegata'). A blue flower with an attractive white mottling on the edges of the green foliage.
- White Borage (*Borago officinalis* 'Alba'). A white-flowered cultivar, not seen very often and great alongside other white flowers.



What you'll need to grow borage

- Borage seeds.
- Watering can.
- Trowel.
- Premium All Purpose Continuous Release Plant Food**.

When to plant borage

Sow seeds directly in the soil from late April onwards, once the risk of frost has passed. Alternatively seeds can be sown in March, under cover, and then pricked out to larger containers before being planted out.

Where to plant borage

Borage will typically reach about 60cm (24") high, although it can reach 1m (3'), so is perfect for the middle of a border. It gets quite bushy, so make sure it isn't so close to other smaller plants that it crowds them out. Choose a sunny location with well drained soil.

Although borage is most suited to growing in the ground, it can also be grown in a container. This allows plants to be moved around the garden. Fill the container with an all purpose compost such as **Peat Free Premium All Purpose Compost**, and sow seeds directly.

How to sow borage

Borage is an annual and is easy to grow from seed. Make a shallow hole or trench no more than 2cm (1") deep. Then use a watering can to fill the hole with water and allow it to drain away. Sow seeds in the bottom of the hole or trench and lightly cover over with soil. Allow at least 30cm (1') between seeds.

What to plant with borage

Borage is the perfect companion plant to most homegrown edibles. It attracts pollinators, particularly honeybees, which will then head to nearby fruit and vegetables and pollinate them too. It should be planted near to but not amongst low growing vegetables, as it can shade them. Taller vegetables, such as climbing beans and sweetcorn, will benefit from borage being planted alongside them once they are big enough - the shade of the borage leaves will protect the soil from strong sun, helping to retain moisture in the soil.

Any plants prone to aphid infestations will enjoy having borage nearby, as it can draw attention from them and acts as a sacrificial plant. Just make sure the Borage is not planted directly next to your crops. Broad beans and runner beans are good candidates for this. Fruit trees and grape vines also benefit from having a pollinator-attracting plant nearby. Apple, pear and plum trees planted with borage around the main stem work well.

Caring and nurturing your borage

- Light:** Provide with lots of direct sunlight if possible, although it will tolerate a little shade.
- Soil:** This should be free-draining and light.
- Temperature:** Borage is a hardy annual and will die back in frosts.
- Watering:** Water regularly in very hot weather, although do not allow the plant to sit in overly moist conditions.
- Feeding:** Borage will benefit in early summer from [Organics All Purpose Granular Plant Food](#).
- Pruning:** Leave dead flower-heads on the plant if you want it to seed across the garden for next season. If you do not want self-

- seeded borage popping up of its own accord, prune faded flower-heads throughout the flowering season. Remove pruned borage leaves to the compost heap, where its high nitrogen content will work as an accelerant to assist the breakdown of material. Cut back *Borago pygmaea* in the autumn simply to tidy it up. Always wear gloves when handling borage plants, as the hairy foliage and stems can irritate sensitive skin.

- Repotting:** Borage plants do not like to be disturbed and have long root runs so are best grown again from seed each year.

Common pests and diseases with borage

Pests and diseases rarely bother borage - and when they do, plants are usually strong enough to be able to fend off the problem.

What are the small black aphids on my borage?

Blackfly is a common pest, smothering new growth in particular, and sucking sap from plants. Borage will withstand an attack of blackfly, and in fact it can be a useful sacrificial plant as the blackfly will head to it rather than to other more delicate plants. Encourage predators, such as ladybirds, and [read our useful article](#) for more information about how to handle an attack of blackfly.

What is the furry white coating on the leaves of my borage?

Powdery mildew is a fungal disease which can easily spread from other plants. It is usually a problem where there is poor airflow between plants. Prune or remove entirely any plants which are congested, and if problems persist, [check out our guide to tackling powdery mildew](#).

What are the spiky caterpillars on my borage plant?

The woolly bear caterpillar is known to enjoy residing on low level foliage of borage. Tolerate them as they will predate unwanted pests, and **encourage hedgehogs and birds to the garden.**

Frequently asked questions about borage

How is 'borage' pronounced?

Don't be tempted to elongate the 'a' in 'borage'. It's pronounced "Bor-ridge", rhyming with "porridge".

How can I use borage?

Borage flowers look pretty used to decorate cakes, or frozen into ice cubes or an ice bowl for a fruity summer punch. The leaves are great added to a traditional glass of Pimms, adding a light and refreshing cucumber taste. Commercially it is used to make borage oil, which is used in herbal medicine.

Is borage good for wildlife?

Yes! Bees and butterflies love it.

Is borage invasive?

Borage will seed itself freely around your garden, but it's easy to remove by hand, wearing gloves.

Is borage the same as comfrey?

Borago officinalis and *Symphythum officinale* are different plants, but are related to each other. Both are leafy green herbs that have lots of uses in the garden.

Is borage a perennial?

With one notable exception, *Borago pygmaea*, borage is an annual. However its tendency to produce and spread lots of seeds means that it is likely to appear year after year.

Key features of borage

Botanical Name	<i>Borago officinalis</i>
Plant Type	Herb
Family	Boraginaceae
Light Exposure	Full sun
Soil pH	Neutral
Flowering Time	June - September
Flower Colour	Blue, pink or white

Thyme has many uses in cooking and elsewhere in the kitchen. It is perfect in many poultry, meat and fish dishes, as well as casseroles and stews, and a main ingredient of Italian dishes and bouquet garnish.

Thyme is a highly ornamental and colourful herb that deserves its place in the garden – let alone for its culinary uses. The aromatic foliage fills the garden with scent on a sunny day. Many are low-growing, creeping plants that are perfect for ground cover. The colourful flowers not only look great, but will also attract beneficial insects.

How to grow thyme

Cultivating thyme

Thyme needs a warm, sunny position. The more sun it receives, the stronger the flavours. It is fairly drought tolerant and needs a well-drained, preferably alkaline, soil. It will grow well in fairly poor, even stony, soil.

As plants will die in overly wet soils, and if your soil is heavy, poorly draining clay, thyme is perfect for growing in containers of [John Innes No 2 compost](#).

Thyme varieties

There are several species and many varieties to choose from. The following are some of the most popular and commonly available:

- **Thymus vulgaris:** Common thyme is the most popular for culinary use. Green leaves and mauve flowers
- **Thymus pulegioides (T. citriodorus):** Lemon thyme has large, lemon-scented leaves and lilac pink flowers
- **Thymus pulegioides Archer's Gold:** Lemon thyme with golden leaves and pink flowers
- **Thymus Golden King:** Lemon thyme with golden-edged leaves and lilac pink flowers
- **Thymus Red Carpet:** Dark green leaves and magenta-red flowers

- **Thymus serpyllum Pink Chintz:** Early flowering, salmon-pink flowers in spring
- **Thymus Silver Posie:** Silvery-white variegated leaves and pale pink flowers



Planting thyme

Plant small plants in very well-drained soil, with added **compost and/or grit to improve drainage.**

Although plants are fairly drought tolerant when established, they need watering in until well established.

Add a mulch of horticultural grit or gravel around plants to prevent moisture sitting at the base of the plant.

Suggested planting locations and garden types

Flower borders and beds, patios, containers, city and courtyard gardens, cottage and informal gardens, ground cover.

How to care for thyme

Thyme will rarely need watering apart from during very prolonged periods of dry or drought conditions in summer. Ensure plants in pots are not allowed to completely dry out.

Thyme doesn't like rich soil, but will benefit from a light feeding of a **high potash plant food** in spring.

Give plants **a liquid feed** during summer to improve growth, flavour and flowering.

Cut back thyme after flowering with secateurs or shears to keep them compact and to promote fresh, new growth.

Thyme is rarely troubled by any pests or diseases. Soft growth, promoted by rich soils or overfeeding with high nitrogen plant foods, may encourage aphids.

Harvesting thyme

Thyme can be picked all year round, but the flavour is strongest during summer.

Cut off small sprigs with scissors for immediate use as needed. Take care to avoid spoiling the overall shape of the plant.

It is best to cut larger quantities for drying or freezing before the plants flower.

Thyme growing conditions

Flowering season(s)	Spring, Summer
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter
Sunlight	Full sun
Soil type	Chalky, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Neutral
Soil moisture	Well-drained
Ultimate height	Up to 30cm (12in) depending on variety
Ultimate spread	Up to 60cm (2ft) depending on variety
Time to ultimate height	3-4 years

Rosemary is an ornamental evergreen shrub with attractive, aromatic, deep green leaves and blue flowers in spring and early summer. Although it is usually thought of as a herb for use in the kitchen, it is a colourful and attractive garden plant in its own right.

Rosemary looks great in beds and borders and in Mediterranean planting schemes. It makes a perfect container plant for a sunny patio.

Rosemary can also be used to create informal hedges, and there's even a low growing, sprawling variety that is good for ground cover

- *Rosmarinus officinalis* 'Prostratus Group'.

How to grow rosemary

Cultivating rosemary

Rosemary is easy to grow and look after. It grows well in relatively poor, well-drained soil and a sunny position. The sunnier the site, the stronger the scent from the foliage.

The best time to cut stems for use in the kitchen is in early afternoon, when their flavour will be its strongest.

Rosemary varieties

Although most varieties produce blue flowers, there are those with white flowers, such as 'Lady in White', and those with pink flowers, such as 'Majorca Pink'.



Suggested planting locations and garden types for rosemary

Flower borders and beds, patios, containers, city and courtyard gardens, hedges.

How to care for rosemary

Rosemary is fairly drought tolerant, but like all other drought-tolerant plants, needs watering until established.

Although reasonably hardy, plants may suffer in severe winters and in cold, exposed gardens.

Avoid feeding with high-nitrogen feeds, which encourages soft growth that is more susceptible to cold damage, so use balanced and high potash ones instead. The latter will encourage flowering and stronger growth.

How to prune rosemary

It's a good idea to **prune** newly planted rosemary plants to encourage strong, bushy growth.

Established rosemary plants need little in the way of regular pruning, apart from removing wayward or overly long shoots. But cutting back plants by around one-third will help prevent plants growing too tall. Prune immediately after flowering.

Rosemary does not readily re-shoot from old wood, so never prune old, brown, leafless stems - otherwise the plant will die. Old, neglected plants are best replaced with new ones.

Common rosemary pests and problems

Rosemary may be susceptible to the following pests and diseases: Rosemary beetle, Root rot.

Flowering season(s)	Spring, Summer
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter
Sunlight	Full sun
Soil type	Chalky, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Neutral
Soil moisture	Well-drained
Ultimate height	1.5m (5ft)
Ultimate spread	90cm (3ft)
Time to ultimate height	6-10 years

Sage is a very popular shrub, mainly grown for its leaves, which are strongly scented. These are used as a herb in cooking to flavour many meat and vegetable dishes. Where would sage and onion stuffing be without the sage? The leaves are also used to make teas and tisanes.

Sage also produces masses of purple-blue flowers in summer that, along with the attractive grey-green foliage, make it a very ornamental evergreen/semi-evergreen shrub for beds, borders and pots.

How to grow sage

Cultivating sage

Sage prefers a warm, sheltered position in full sun, but will also grow well in light or dappled sage, although the flavour isn't as strong. It needs a relatively fertile, moist, well-drained soil.

Sage varieties

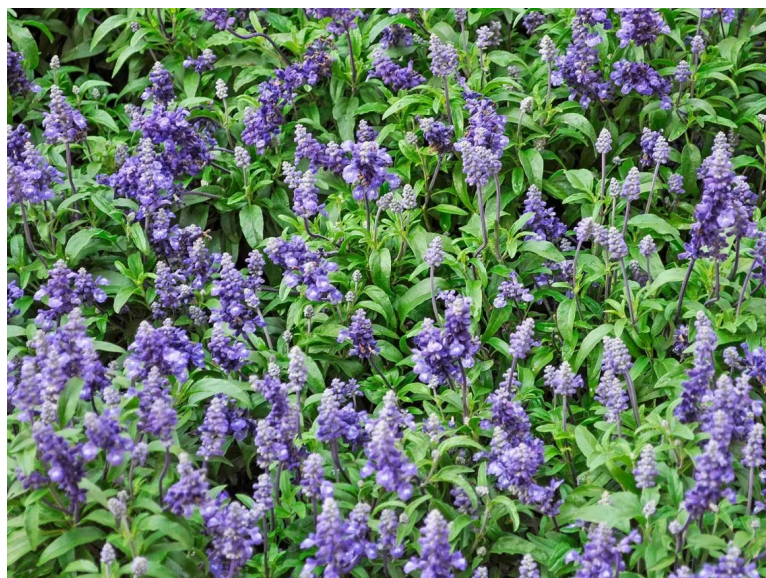
The straight species, *Salvia officinalis*, is the one commonly grown as a herb. It is ornamental and attractive in its own right, thanks to its grey-green leaves and purple-blue flowers, but there are also some more ornamental varieties too. The foliage of these can be used in cooking, but it tends not to be as strong a flavour as the species.

Icterina Green and yellow variegated leaves.

Purpurascens Purple young foliage and stems, becoming grey-green as they age.

Tricolor Pink, white and green variegated leaves. Not as hardy as the common sage.

Broad-leaved sage Larger leaves and stronger flavour, making it an excellent culinary sage.



Planting sage

Planting is best done in spring or summer.

Dig a good sized planting hole, big enough to easily accommodate the rootball. Add a layer of organic matter – such as **compost or planting compost** – to the base of the hole and fork it in.

Place the rootball in the planting hole and adjust the planting depth so that it is planted at the same depth as it was originally growing (except hardy fuchsias) and the top of the roots are level with the soil surface.

Mix in more organic matter with the excavated soil and fill in the planting hole. Water in well, apply **a granular general feed** over the soil around the tree and add a 5-7.5cm (2-3in) deep mulch of well-rotted garden compost or bark chippings around the root area.

Where to plant sage

Plant sage in flower borders and beds, patios, **containers**, city and courtyard gardens, cottage and informal gardens.

How to care for sage

Sage is easy to grow and look after. It is fairly drought tolerant, but like all other drought-resisting plants needs watering until well established. Plants may also need watering during prolonged dry periods, but always avoid overwatering.

Avoid feeding with high-nitrogen feeds, which encourages soft growth, so **use high potash ones** instead, which encourage flowering, better flavours and strong, hardy growth.

You can care for sage plants by covering them with horticultural fleece in winter to protect the leaves from the worst of the weather and help keep them in good condition for picking. Protection with fleece may be a good idea in very cold and exposed areas.

Pruning sage

Plants can tend to become leggy in time, so it is important to prune them annually to keep them bushy and full of flowers. Pruning after flowering helps to maintain a better, bushier shape and encourages plenty of new growth.

Sage does not shoot readily from old wood, so never prune old, brown, leafless stems – otherwise the plant will probably die. Old, neglected plants are best replaced. Annual pruning should help prevent this happening.

Harvesting sage

Leaves can be picked at any time, generally the younger leaves have the best flavour. Excess harvests can be dried or frozen. Freezing is the best option using leaves picked in mid-summer.

Sage flower petals look and taste great in salads.

Sage growing condition

Flowering season(s)	Summer
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter
Sunlight	Partial shade, Full sun
Soil type	Chalky, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Neutral
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Up to 1.2m (4ft) depending on variety
Ultimate spread	Up to 1.4m (4ft)
Time to ultimate height	5-7 years

Parsley is a very commonly grown herb, used mainly as a garnish and to make delicious parsley sauce. But it is also an excellent ingredient for flavouring savoury dishes, making flavoured butter and stuffings and is very rich in vitamin C.

The more usual curly-leaved parsley looks good when used as a garnish, but flat-leaved parsley (pictured above) has a better, stronger taste and is a better choice for cooking.

How to grow parsley

Cultivating parsley

For the main summer crop, you can grow parsley in either a partially shaded position or full sun. An overwintering crop will need a protected site in full sun.

Parsley needs a fertile, moist, but well-drained soil.

Parsley varieties

Parsley is available as the common curly-leaved parsley, but don't forget flat-leaved, French parsley.

Common parsley: Bravour, Champion Moss Curled, Envy

French parsley: Festival 68, Italian

There is also Hamburg parsley, which is grown as a root vegetable.



Sowing parsley

Parsley seeds are very slow to germinate, taking up to one month, especially in very wet, cold soils. So make sure the soil is warm and even pre-warmed by covering with cloches for very early sowings.

Sow seed thinly outdoors from March to July in well-prepared soil in drills 30cm (12in) apart and thin out the young plants to 10-15cm (4-6in) apart.

Seeds can also be sown indoors from August to March in cell or plug trays filled with [seed sowing compost](#) at a temperature of 18-21°C (65-70°F). Lightly cover the seed with more compost and keep moist. Grow on the seedlings in cooler conditions of around 10°C (50°F) and plant outside when the last frosts are over, after hardening off – gradually acclimatising them to outdoor conditions – for 10-14 days.

Planting parsley

You can also buy young parsley plants from garden centres, which can be planted outside anytime from spring to late summer.

Dig over the planting area, incorporating some organic matter – such as compost or leaf mould – if the soil is heavy clay. Dig a good sized hole big enough to easily accommodate the root ball.

Place the root ball in the planting hole and adjust the planting depth so that the crown of leaves is at soil level.

Mix in more organic matter with the excavated soil and fill in the planting hole. Apply [a general granular plant food](#) over the soil around the plants and water in well.

Or grow plants indoors on a brightly lit windowsill to have fresh leaves readily to hand.

How to care for parsley

Keep the soil moist by watering parsley regularly during prolonged dry periods; dry soils can cause the plants to 'bolt' (going to seed prematurely).

Parsley is a hungry plant, so use a general granular plant feed in the soil before sowing or planting out and feed with a liquid plant food throughout summer.

Should plants start to flower and go to seed, remove the flower heads immediately. This usually signifies the plant is getting past its best and you should grow some more to replace it.

Parsley is a hardy biennial and can carry on into autumn to provide small pickings over winter. Cover plants with a cloche to give protection from cold and so provide pickings for longer. Parsley is in the same family as carrots and is subject to carrot root fly attack, so cover early sowings with a cloche or horticultural fleece to protect plants against the female laying eggs in the soil.

Harvesting parsley

Don't start harvesting the plants until there are at least 8 to 10 leaves. Then pick regularly to encourage a continual supply of leaves. Cut single leaves or bunches of leaves, starting low down on the stems.

Although fresh leaves have the best flavour, any excess can be frozen or dried in a microwave.

Dig up Hamburg parsley roots when they're large enough to use. They should be ready to harvest 3 to 4 months after

sowing. The roots can be left in the ground in winter and dug up when needed. The leaves can also be used as any other type of parsley.

Parsley growing conditions

Flowering season(s)	Summer
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter
Sunlight	Partial shade, Full sun
Soil type	Clay, Loamy
Soil pH	Neutral
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Up to 20cm (8in)
Ultimate spread	Up to 15cm (6in)
Time to ultimate height	3-4 months

Chives are a low maintenance, easy to grow perennial herb, grown for their onion-scented tasting leaves. These are a delicious addition to salads, and can be added to many other savoury dishes.

Their taste is milder than onions, so they are the perfect choice for soups and savoury dishes – where their more subtle flavour is needed. Although mainly grown for their leaves, chive plants also produce highly attractive pinky-purple flowers. These are also edible and are an attractive salad garnish. They also attract bees and butterflies.

Because chives are compact, they are ideal for edging paths and borders, as well as growing in mixed borders, vegetable gardens, herb gardens and in containers.

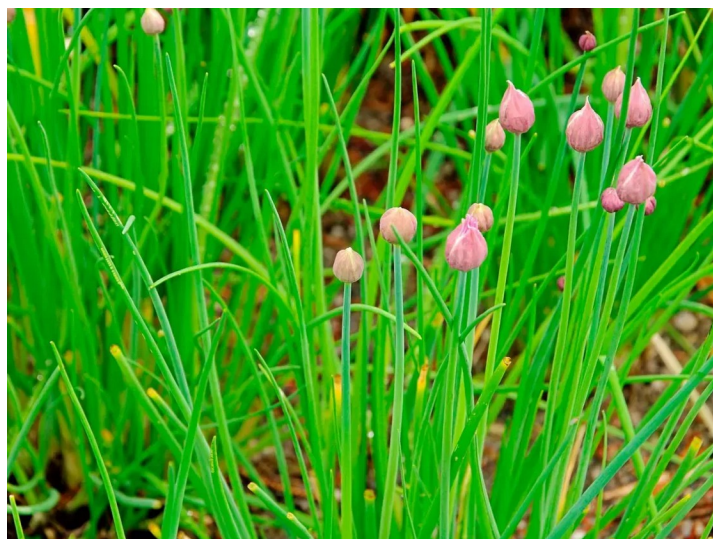
How to grow chives

Cultivation

Chives will grow perfectly well in a position in full sun or in partial shade. They grow best in a fertile, moist but well-drained soil. Dig in plenty of organic matter – such as [garden compost](#), [well-rotted manure](#) or other [soil improver](#) – especially in very well-drained sandy soils to hold moisture. Add grit or sharp sand to heavy clay soils to improve drainage if needed.

Chives varieties

The usual chives grown as a herb, is the straight species, *Allium schoenoprasum*. You may also find Staro and Fine Leaved, which have a milder flavour, and Forescate, with a slight garlic flavour and pale pink flowers.



Sowing chives

You can sow chives seeds thinly outdoors in spring where you want them to grow. Prepare the soil well with added compost or other soil improver and rake to a fine tilth before sowing. Thin out the young plants to 23-30cm (9-12in) apart when large enough to handle.

Chives can be sown indoors from March to June in pots or cell or plug trays filled with seed sowing compost at a temperature of 18-21C (65-70F). Lightly cover the seed with more compost and keep moist. When seedlings are large enough to handle, transplant into 7.5-10cm (3-4in) pots in bunches of 4-6 seedlings per pot. Grow on the seedlings in cooler conditions of around 10C (50F) and plant outside when the last frosts are over, after hardening off – gradually acclimatising them to outdoor conditions – for 10-14 days.

Planting chives

You can buy young chive plants from garden centres, which can be planted outside any time of year.

Dig over the planting area, incorporating some organic matter – such as compost or leafmould if the soil is heavy clay. Dig a good sized hole big enough to easily accommodate the rootball.

Place the rootball in the planting hole and adjust the planting depth so that the crown of leaves is at soil level.

Mix in more organic matter with the excavated soil and fill in the planting hole. Apply [**u a general granular plant food**](#) over the soil around the plants and water in well.

Or grow them indoors on a brightly lit windowsill to have fresh leaves readily to hand.

How to care for chives

Chives are very easy to look after and need minimal maintenance.

Keep the soil moist by watering regularly during prolonged dry periods in summer.

Feed with [**u a general granular plant food**](#) each spring.

Plants may become congested over time and need rejuvenating every 3 to 5 years. Carefully lift, divide the plant into smaller portions and replant in well-prepared soil in spring.

To keep the plants productive and with the best-flavoured leaves, remove flowers as they form or cut them when young for brightening up salads.

When chives die back in late autumn, clear away all dead leaves and any other debris.

Harvesting chives

Harvest leaves as needed with scissors, cutting them back close to the base of the plant. The more regularly they're cut, the more new leaves they will produce.

Chives are best used fresh, as soon as they are cut. They can be frozen by cutting them up and packing into ice cube trays with water.

Flowering season(s)	Summer
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn
Sunlight	Partial shade, Full sun
Soil type	Chalky, Clay, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Neutral
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	40cm (16in)
Ultimate spread	30cm (12in)
Time to ultimate height	6-9 months

Remember that it's important to grow mint in pots. Otherwise, it can spread vigorously via underground runners, quickly becoming a nuisance in your garden.

The following herbs can be planted indoors, in a windowsill or a greenhouse:

- Basil
- Coriander
- Lemon balm

Growing herbs and spices in May

With the arrival of warmer and dryer weather in May, make sure you are watering your herbs regularly. Coriander, dill, basil and wild rocket in particular will be quick to bolt in dry soil or even if they're overcrowded, so keep an eye on how moist your soil is and thin your herbs out if you

need to. A suitable organic plant food can also help ensure your herbs and spices have all the nutrients they need for optimal growth.

How to grow basil

No kitchen should be without a basil plant. Cultivated in herb gardens for centuries, it's one of the easiest herbs to grow from seed and it makes a delicious addition to so many dishes. Grow sweet basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) for tasty Italian cooking, or Thai and lemon basil (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*, *Ocimum x citriodorum*) for exciting Asian dishes.

Types of basil to grow

As well as the popular sweet basil, there's a whole range of other basil varieties available. Here are a few of the most popular:

- Basil 'Sweet Green' – traditional sweet basil, ideal for Italian dishes.
- Basil 'Genovese' – stronger flavour and aroma than sweet basil.
- Basil 'Christmas' – a cross between Genovese and Thai basil. The leaves have a fruity, mulled-wine scent. Also good as an ornamental plant, with purple flowers.
- Basil 'Crimson King' – a very ornamental purple-leaved basil. The leaves have a clove flavour.
- Basil 'Siam Queen' – a Thai basil with liquorice-flavoured leaves, purple-red stems and violet flowers
- Basil 'Mrs Burn's Lemon' – delicious lemon-flavoured leaves.
- Basil 'Lettuce Leaf' – crinkled leaves with a mild flavour, good in salads

Essential equipment to grow basil

You will need the following equipment to grow basil at home:

1. Basil seeds
2. Pots
3. **Multipurpose compost**
4. Propagator or clear plastic bags

Where to grow basil

When growing basil, choose a sunny, sheltered spot with well-drained soil. Planting basil in raised beds improves drainage and gives some protection against slugs and snails. You'll also find that basil is ideal for pots, even growing happily indoors on a sunny windowsill.

How to sow basil

You can sow basil indoors from late February onwards.

1. Fill pots with multipurpose compost and firm down.
2. Sprinkle seed thinly over the top of the compost. Basil seeds germinate easily, so don't sow many more than you need.
3. Cover the seeds with a light layer of compost.
4. To avoid disturbing the seeds, stand the pots in a tray filled with water so that the compost can soak up water from below.
5. Place the pots in a propagator at a temperature of 15-25°C (59-77°F). Alternatively, place a clear plastic bag over each pot and place the pots somewhere warm with bright indirect light until the seeds germinate.
6. Water regularly but lightly.

7. Once the seeds have germinated, take them out of the propagator, or remove the plastic bags and let the seedlings grow on until they have developed at least two true leaves (these are the second pair of leaves to appear).

8. Hold each seedling by a leaf (never hold the stems, as these are easily damaged) and ease it out of the compost, using a pencil or something similar to help. Repot each seedling into its own individual pot.

9. Wait until all danger of frost is past before moving basil outside. Harden plants off for two weeks first by placing the pots outside during the day and moving them back inside at night.

Caring for basil

Basil hates sitting with its roots in cold, wet soil. Water in the morning so that the soil can dry out during the day. Avoid splashing the leaves when watering, to reduce the risk of powdery mildew, a fungal disease.

If you are growing basil primarily for use in the kitchen, pinch off any flowers that appear, as the leaves will develop a bitter taste once the plant has flowered.

Aphids can be a problem, especially on indoor plants. Wipe them off by hand before infestations get too big. Leaving the plants outside for a few days to allow natural predators like ladybirds to eat the aphids can reduce the problem.

Slugs and snails love basil and can devour entire plants. There are various ways to protect plants, including copper tape around pots, crushed egg shells, beer traps and sawdust, but physically checking the plants with a torch last thing at night is often the most effective solution.

Harvesting basil

You can harvest basil throughout summer, and regular harvesting will encourage the plant to produce more leaves.

If you just need a few leaves, pick individual leaves that join the stem just below a new pair of leaves. This means that for every leaf you pick, the plant produces two more. When harvesting basil in quantities, always leave two or three sideshoots below the point where you cut, to encourage the plant to grow bushy.

In mid- to late summer, cut the whole plant back by a third to encourage a final flush of leaves.

Basil won't survive outside once the temperature drops below 5°C (41°F). For a supply of basil leaves into late autumn, move container-grown plants to a sunny indoor spot.

Storing basil leaves

It can be difficult to keep basil plants growing indoors in low winter light levels, but you can freeze or dry basil leaves to give you a supply of basil through winter.

- To freeze basil leaves, remove all leaf stalks and wash the leaves. Blanch the leaves in boiling water for a couple of seconds, then drain and rinse in iced water. Pat the leaves dry and place in an airtight container in a freezer.
- To dry basil leaves in an oven, turn it on to its lowest heat, then place the basil leaves on a baking tray and leave them in the oven for two to four hours until they crumble when bent.
- To air-dry basil, cut leafy shoots with long stems, tie them in bunches and hang the bunches somewhere cool and well

ventilated, in bright but indirect light. Air-drying basil takes about a month.

Common pest or disease problems of basil plants

Black spots on basil leaves

Black spots on basil leaves can be caused by bacteria from the soil being splashed onto the leaves of the plant.

- Avoid splashing the leaves when watering.

Powdery mildew

Powdery mildew is a fungal disease that appears as a white powdery deposit or white spots on basil leaves, stunting growth and causing leaves to shrivel. Drought-stressed plants are more susceptible to this disease.

- Dig organic material into the soil before planting to improve soil water retention.
- Space plants when planting to ensure good air circulation.
- Remove any affected leaves promptly.
- Water regularly in dry periods.

Fusarium wilt

Fusarium wilt is a soil-borne fungal disease that causes basil leaves to turn yellow and wilt. The plant becomes unable to take up water and dies.

- There are no chemical controls available.
- Avoid planting basil in soil where basil plants have been previously affected by fusarium wilt.

Slugs and snails

Slugs and snails love basil and will strip plants bare. They can be identified by the slime trails that they leave, as well as the damage they do.

- Check plants at night and remove slugs and snails by hand.
- Covering the soil around plants with crushed eggshells or grit may have some effect.
- Scatter environmentally friendly **slug pellets** if other methods are not sufficient.

Glasshouse whitefly

Glasshouse **whitefly** suck plant sap and excrete a sticky substance called 'honeydew' which covers leaves and encourages the growth of sooty mould, stunting plant growth. They can also transmit viruses.

- A parasitoid wasp can be used as a biological control.
- Keep gardens clear of weeds which can harbour whitefly.
- Use **pesticide sprays** suitable for use on edible plants.

Glasshouse red spider mite

Glasshouse red spider mite is a sap-sucking mite. Severe infestations cause plants to drop leaves and eventually die. Symptoms include a fine webbing covering leaves and stems, and mottled leaves with tiny mites and eggs on their undersides.

- Ensure good ventilation in greenhouses.
- Mist plants to raise the humidity levels, or damp down greenhouse floors.
- A predatory mite can be used as a biological control.

- Use **pesticide sprays** suitable for use on edible plants.

Key features of basil

Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter
Sunlight	Full sun
Soil type	Chalky, Clay, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Neutral
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Up to 50cm (20in)
Ultimate spread	Up to 30cm (1ft)
Time to ultimate height	6 months

How to grow and care for coriander

Coriander has recently become a very popular herb to grow at home. Grown mainly for its green leaves which are sometimes known as Cilantro and also its spicy seeds, this herb is a must in salads and as a fragrant green addition to Indian, Thai and Chinese curries. The seeds are a vital ingredient of curry powder.

Coriander varieties

Coriander is usually available as the species (*Coriandrum sativum*), although the variety Calypso has good bolting resistance and can be cut back and allowed to regrow several times. The variety Confetti has fern-like foliage.



What you'll need to start growing coriander

Growing coriander requires very little equipment. Here's what you'll need:

- Coriander seeds
- A suitable pot with drainage holes
- Multipurpose **compost**
- Balanced **liquid feed**

Cultivating coriander

Outdoors, coriander prefers a cool position and light shade and very well-drained soil.

Coriander is most commonly grown in a pot - either in a little shade on the patio or on a windowsill that doesn't receive direct, burning sunlight in summer and which doesn't get too hot.

Sowing coriander

Sow coriander seeds directly in well-prepared moist soil outside at monthly intervals from March to August for a continuous supply of leaves.

You can also grow it in 15-30cm (6-12in) pots, sowing a few seeds in each and germinating indoors with gentle warmth. Sow every 6-8 weeks to have a constant supply of fresh leaves throughout the year.

Young plants are usually available from garden centres in summer. Plant these out or pot them up into slightly larger pots.

How to care for coriander

When sowing outdoors, thin seedlings or young plants to 5-7.5cm (2-3in) apart. If you specifically want to grow it for its seeds, grow at 20-25cm (8-10in) apart.

Keep the soil or compost moist as it tends to run to seed if allowed to dry out, but take care not to overwater as too much water can lead to rotting - especially in autumn and winter.

Give plants a light liquid feed of [a general feed](#) every couple of weeks during late spring and summer. This will help ensure plants go on producing a constant supply of leaves. Don't use high potassium feeds as these will encourage premature flowering.

If plants become stressed they will run to seed quickly and leaves start to lose their flavour once flowering begins. This is fine if you want to harvest seeds; otherwise discard the plants.

Harvesting coriander

Start harvesting the leaves when they are bright green and young and the plants are 10-15cm (4-6in) tall.

You can treat coriander plants as a cut-and-come-again crop. Otherwise, allow them to run to seed and allow the seeds to develop on the plant and harvest them before they are shed.

Common problems, pests and diseases in coriander

Slugs and snails

Slugs and snails will feed on young coriander seedlings. They can be identified by the slime trails that they leave, as well as the damage they do.

- Check plants at night and remove slugs and snails by hand.
- Strulch is a good deterrent to snails.
- Covering the soil around plants with crushed eggshells or grit may have some effect.
- Scatter environmentally-friendly **slug pellets** if other methods are insufficient.

Aphids

Aphids are sap-sucking insects which can quickly infest young plants, stunting growth.

- Wipe off small colonies of aphids on coriander with a damp cloth.
- Encourage natural predators like ladybirds and hoverflies.
- **Pesticide sprays** are available for aphids.

Bolting

Bolting occurs when coriander plants produce flowers and set seed early. As they are annuals, the plants will die once they have set seed. Bolting can be triggered by stress, such as sudden dry periods.

- Plant bolt-resistant cultivars.
- Water regularly.

- Sow new seeds every few weeks to ensure a constant supply of leaves.

Key features of coriander

Flowering season(s)	Summer
Foliage season(s)	Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter
Sunlight	Partial shade, Full sun
Soil type	Chalky, Clay, Loamy, Sandy
Soil pH	Neutral
Soil moisture	Moist but well-drained
Ultimate height	Up to 50cm (20in)
Ultimate spread	Up to 30cm (1ft)
Time to ultimate height	6 months

How to grow and care for salad rocket

Salad rocket, like its name, is a fast-growing salad leaf, perfect for adding a peppery spiciness to your salads. It will give a crop for most of the year, and if allowed to, will seed freely providing new plants for the next season too. This is a tough plant that needs little care, and a great way to easily grow some healthy food. Here we run through how to grow rocket and offer some handy rocket growing tips.

Types of salad rocket to grow

Salad rocket (*Eruca vesicaria*) is also known as 'Arugula' in many other parts of the world but is slightly different from Wild rocket. It is, however, grown and harvested in the same way.

The main difference is that salad rocket is an annual, with creamy-white flowers and softer leaves, and wild rocket is a perennial, has yellow flowers and a much spicier flavour.

Salad rocket is rich in potassium, vitamins A, B C and K. The leaves are the most commonly eaten part of the plant but you can also eat rocket flowers. Younger leaves and flowers are best eaten fresh, whereas older parts of the plant are better blanched or popped in a stir fry.

Varieties of salad rocket:

- ‘Sky Rocket’ - a very fast grower, providing a crop quickly
- ‘Letizia’ - slow to flower and set seed, giving a longer growing season than many others
- ‘Esmee’ - very attractive lobed leaves, looks lovely in pots
- ‘Wasabi’ - a wild rocket variety with a particularly peppery flavour



What you'll need to grow salad rocket

It's super easy to grow rocket from seed. It is fairly tough and can cope with poor soil, although you will get a more tender leaf if you can provide fertile soil and try to keep the soil moist in dry weather.

Sow rocket seeds from April through to September, and expect to harvest it from March (from autumn sowings), all the way through to December.

To grow rocket directly in the soil you will need:

- A trowel or hoe
- Watering can with fine rose
- Rocket seed

1.Create a shallow drill in the soil, no more than 1cm deep, using the trowel or hoe.

2.Water the drill, and then place 2 seeds 6cm (2") apart, along the length of it. If sowing more than one row, allow 15cm (6") between the rows.

3.Cover the seeds with soil, and water again using the fine rose on your watering can.

4.Water every day until seedlings germinate.

Salad rocket can also be grown in containers from seed using a peat-free multi-purpose compost and sowing closer together. Don't allow the containers to dry out as this will encourage the plants to bolt (set seed).

When to plant salad rocket

Sow from spring through to late summer and then cover with fleece or a cloche when it gets cold to continue harvesting rocket in the autumn.

Rocket can be grown indoors, although can go to seed very quickly with too much heat or sunlight.

Allow some plants to flower and develop seedpods, which you can then leave to sow themselves, or collect and dry out to sow again next season.

Where to plant and place your salad rocket

Rocket is a low growing plant which rarely reaches 1m (3') in height. It can become quite spindly towards the top when it gets to this height, and is best grown towards the front of a patch, where it is easy to harvest.

Although rocket likes warmth if it gets too much sunshine and too hot it will go to seed very quickly. It's often better to sow rocket after the summer solstice to lessen the chance of bolting.

Rocket is related to other Brassicas, such as cauliflowers, cabbage and broccoli. For that reason, it's best to sow salad rocket in a place where these plants haven't grown recently. This stops unwanted pests and diseases from building up in the soil.

Caring and nurturing your salad rocket

To keep the plant producing fresh, young green growth, feed weekly with **Miracle-Gro® Performance Organics Fruit & Veg Concentrated Liquid Plant Food**. Water well during dry spells as it has a tendency to bolt when the weather is hot and dry.

Rocket does not need to be pruned, but keep cutting the young leaves so that they repeatedly come again. This will be just four to six weeks after sowing, when it can start to be harvested. Pick the outer leaves first and you should find new leaves appearing. Pick them fresh, as they do not store well, and more mature leaves can taste bitter and be much tougher.

Frequently asked questions about salad rocket

Is rocket safe to eat?

Yes, rocket is delicious eaten raw in salads, on top of pizzas and added to pasta dishes. It does have a peppery flavour that some people may need to get used to.

Is rocket easy to grow from seed?

Rocket is super easy to grow from seed. It copes with any soil but does prefer a bit of sun. The best part is that if it's grown from seed when the outside temperature is warm then you can pick just four to six weeks from sowing.

Can rocket be grown as a perennial?

Wild rocket is a perennial plant. Salad rocket is an annual but can be treated as a perennial by simply leaving it to self-seed from year to year.

Common pests and diseases of salad rocket

Rocket is largely unaffected by pests and diseases, but you can run into a few problems...

Why are my rocket leaves covered in tiny holes?

Flea beetles love munching on rocket leaves, making it look unattractive. Cover with fine netting or horticultural mesh from the moment they are sown. Encourage natural predators such as ladybirds and ground beetles, or spray with **BugClear™ Fruit & Veg**. However, tolerate it where possible - although it doesn't look nice, the leaves are still edible.

Key features of salad rocket

Botanical Name	<i>Eruca vesicaria</i>
Plant Type	Annual
Family	Brassicaceae
Light Exposure	Full sun - partial shade
Soil pH	Any
Flowering Time	Summer
Flower Colour	Creamy-white

What herbs and spices to harvest in May

Hardy herbs like rosemary, thyme and sage can be harvested all year round, and regular harvesting from spring to autumn will encourage them to produce fresh new growth, ideal for cooking.



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