



How to Grow Broad Beans

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Sow in autumn, pick before summer starts



How to Grow Broad Beans in the UK

Broad beans are sown in two windows in the UK: October to November for an overwintered crop that picks in late May, or February to April for a summer harvest six weeks or so later. Sow the big seeds 5cm deep and about 20cm apart in double rows, give the plants a simple string support as they rise past knee height, pinch out the growing tips once the first pods set, and pick from the bottom of the plant upwards. They are among the easiest and toughest vegetables in the whole British repertoire.

I have grown broad beans nearly every year of my twenty-odd in Oxfordshire, and the autumn sowing is one of my favourite small rituals of the gardening year: pushing seeds into cold November soil when everything else is shutting down, then finding a stocky row of seedlings grinning through the frost in January. Nothing else you sow feels quite so much like a bet on spring.

This guide covers both sowing windows, growing in the ground and in pots, the staking method that actually works, the blackfly trick that solves the crop's one real problem, and how to know when the pods are ready.

When to Sow Broad Beans in the UK

There are two honest answers, and which you choose shapes your whole crop. The autumn sowing, October to November, uses a hardy variety sown directly where it will crop, following on from what to sow in September as the beds clear. The seedlings sit through winter at ankle height, shrug off frost, and burst into growth in March, giving you pods in late May before blackfly season properly starts. The spring sowing, February under cover or March to April outside, is more flexible and suits colder or wetter gardens, cropping from June into July. If you have free-draining soil, sow in autumn; if your ground sits cold and wet all winter, sow in spring, because the one thing that kills overwintered beans is not frost but waterlogging.

Soil condition matters more than the calendar at both ends. The seed is big and forgiving, but it rots in saturated ground, so wait for soil that crumbles rather than smears. For the wider timing picture across the year, when to plant vegetables in the UK puts broad beans alongside everything else, and they earn their place in the vegetables that survive late frost as one of the true hardy crops.

Choosing a Variety: Aquadulce for Autumn, The Sutton for Pots
For autumn sowing, Aquadulce Claudia is the variety everyone recommends because it genuinely is the right answer: it has been the standard overwintering bean for more than a century, and hardier breeding has never really beaten it. For spring, Bunyards Exhibition and Masterpiece Green Longpod are reliable croppers, and Crimson Flowered is worth a row just for looks, with flowers pretty enough for the border.

For containers and small or windy gardens, The Sutton is the one to know: a dwarf variety around 30cm tall that needs no staking at all. Seed is cheap and keeps for a couple of years, so one packet of an autumn type and one of a spring type covers you properly.

How to Sow Broad Beans (Depth, Spacing and Rows)



Push each seed 5cm deep, about 20cm apart. Any way up, it does not care.

Sowing could not be simpler, which is why this is such a good crop for beginners and children. Push each seed 5cm deep, any way up, it does not care. Space seeds about 20cm apart in a double row, with the two rows 20cm apart and a wider path of 60cm before the next double row; the double-row layout lets the plants hold each other up and makes support far easier later. Sow a few spares at the row end to fill any gaps, because germination is good but mice occasionally tax an autumn sowing.

There is no need to start most broad beans in pots first, though a February sowing in deep modules under cover, planted out in March after hardening off, gets round both mice and wet soil in one move.

They are not fussy about soil, but like every legume they appreciate ground with some organic matter in it, and they will struggle in the same waterlogged corners everything struggles in.

Growing Broad Beans in Pots and Containers

Broad beans grow surprisingly well in containers, and for a patio or balcony they are one of the better crops to try. Choose The Sutton or another dwarf variety, use a pot at least 30cm deep and wide, and sow three to five seeds per large pot at the same 5cm depth. Water consistently, because pots dry faster than beds and dry spells at flowering time are the main reason container beans set few pods. A full-size variety can be grown in a very large tub with support, but the dwarf types crop nearly as heavily at a quarter of the height, which is the sensible trade. The general rules for container growing are in growing vegetables in pots.

Staking Broad Beans: The String Corral



Canes at the corners, string round the outside.
The row holds itself up.

Broad beans do not climb, so forget bean poles and netting. What a full-size variety needs is simply stopping from flopping, and the method that works is the string corral: a stout bamboo cane at each corner of the double row and every metre or so along the sides, with garden string run around the outside of the whole row at knee height and again at waist height as the plants grow. The plants lean on the strings and each other, and the row stands through summer storms that would flatten unsupported beans. Put the canes in when plants are 20cm tall, before they need it, because a flattened row can be propped back up but never looks right again. Dwarf varieties and most overwintered plants, which grow stockier, often need nothing at all.

Care Through the Season, and the Blackfly Trick



Nip out the top 8cm once the first pods set, and blackfly never get started.

For most of their life broad beans want nothing but water in dry spells, especially once flowering starts, since drought at flowering means poor pod set. The one job that matters is pinching out the tips. As soon as the first pods have set at the bottom of the plant, nip out the top 8cm of soft growth on every stem. That soft tip is exactly where blackfly colonies establish, and removing it before they arrive prevents the crop's only serious pest problem almost entirely. Do it in May on overwintered beans and June on spring-sown ones, and eat the tips, wilted in butter, as the first harvest of the year. If blackfly do beat you to it, a firm blast of water and encouraging ladybirds sorts most infestations, and the beginner principles apply here as everywhere: healthy, unstressed plants shrug off most trouble.

Chocolate spot, brown speckling on leaves in wet years, looks alarming and rarely matters on well-spaced plants with air moving through them, which is one more argument for the proper spacing above. Overwintered beans in a hard winter can look battered by February; leave them alone, because plants that look half dead in winter almost always grow away clean in March.

How Tall Do Broad Beans Grow?

Standard varieties reach 90cm to 1.2 metres, which is why the staking section exists, while dwarf types like The Sutton stay around 30cm. Autumn-sown plants generally finish shorter and sturdier than spring-sown ones, having grown slowly through cold weather, and they usually produce more stems from the base, which is where their heavier crop comes from.

When to Harvest Broad Beans



Thumbnail-sized, bright green, and picked from the bottom of the plant up.

Overwintered beans pick from late May, spring-sown from late June, and each plant crops over three or four weeks from the bottom of the stem upwards. There are really three harvests in one plant. Very young pods, finger-length, can be eaten whole like mangetout. The main crop is picked when the pods are plump and the beans inside are the size of a thumbnail, still bright green and tender; press the pod and you can feel them. Leave them much beyond that and the beans turn starchy and the scar on each bean darkens from white to black, which is the reliable sign you have waited too long, though big floury beans still make excellent soup. Pick regularly, because the plant stops making new pods if old ones are left to mature, and twist or cut pods off rather than tugging, since the stems pull out of the ground more easily than you would think.

When the plants finish, cut them off at ground level and leave the roots in the soil. The nitrogen nodules on the roots feed whatever you plant next, which makes broad beans the perfect crop to grow before hungry brassicas, and is one of those small pieces of garden housekeeping that costs nothing and quietly pays.

Frequently Asked Questions

When should I sow broad beans in the UK?

Either October to November for an overwintered crop using a hardy variety like Aquadulce Claudia, or February to April for a summer crop. Autumn sowing gives an earlier harvest and largely dodges blackfly, while spring sowing suits cold or wet gardens where seed would rot over winter.

Can you grow broad beans in pots?

Yes, and dwarf varieties make it easy. The Sutton grows to about 30cm, needs no support, and crops well in a pot at least 30cm deep with three to five plants. Water consistently, especially at flowering, because dry compost at that stage is the main cause of poor pod set in containers.

How do you support broad beans?

With canes and string rather than poles or netting, since broad beans do not climb. Put a cane at each corner of the row and run string around the outside at knee height, adding a second level at waist height as plants grow. The row leans on the strings and supports itself. Dwarf varieties need nothing.

Why do broad beans get blackfly and how do you stop it?

Blackfly colonise the soft growing tips, usually in late spring. Pinch out the top 8cm of each stem as soon as the first pods set and the problem largely never starts, because you remove the tissue they feed on. Autumn-sown beans crop early enough to miss the worst of blackfly season anyway.

When are broad beans ready to pick?

From late May for autumn-sown plants and late June for spring-sown, working up the stem from the bottom. Pick main-crop pods when they are plump and the beans inside are thumbnail-sized and bright green. If the scar on the bean has turned black, they are past their best for eating fresh but still fine for soup.

A Sensible Place to Start

If this is your first year with broad beans, keep it simple: one packet of Aquadulce Claudia sown 5cm deep in a double row this October or November, a string corral in April, tips pinched out in May, and pods on the table before your neighbours have planted their runner beans. They pair naturally with the rest of the bean family later in the season, covered in how to grow French beans and when to plant runner beans, and if a late cold snap threatens anything tender nearby, protecting vegetables from frost covers the fleece-and-cloche toolkit. The beans themselves will not need it.

How to Contact the Editor

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

info@yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

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

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

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

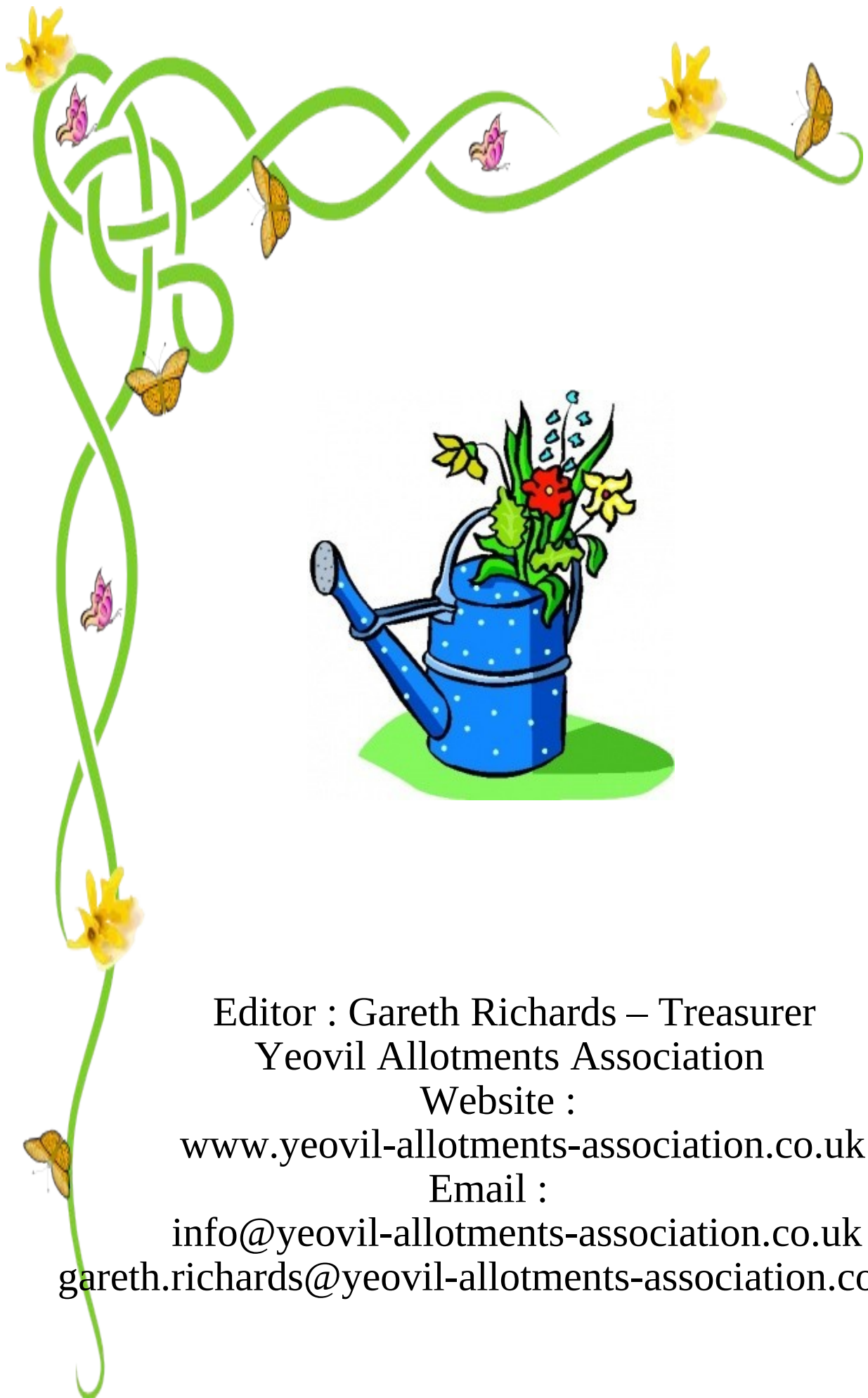
We also have our own website at :

www.yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

where you can find this magazine as well as a catalogue

Happy Allotmenting and best wishes,

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