

Spring Sowing Seed Collection: Cultivation Notes



Welcome to The Garden Gate's spring sowing seed collection. We've put this collection together to accompany our spring term Grow Your Own course at Sawston Village College and we hope some of you will be able to join us there as we get our gardens and allotments off to a productive start to the new season. If you're not joining us, these cultivation notes give you all the information you need to grow along at home though, as well as some extra insights from the course material. You can also grow along with us online by following us on Facebook or Instagram, where we'd love to see how you get on too. Happy spring seed sowing from Ross & Sarah at The Garden Gate!

The Seeds

We have grown many different varieties of vegetable over the years and all of the varieties included in the collection have been carefully selected by us because we have found them to perform well, taste delicious and also demonstrate a particular topic discussed on the course.

Seed Saving

The seeds themselves are all open pollinated heirloom varieties which we encourage you to save your own seed from and to help you get started we've included our Quick Guide to Seed Saving, which covers the basics.

The Cultivation Notes

The cultivation notes that accompany the seeds have been put together based on the course material for our spring Grow Your Own course. We don't try to cover all the different sowing and growing options for each vegetable but instead show you what works for us in our garden and allotment in South Cambridgeshire.

A Note on Compost

Our sowing instructions call for a 'good quality peat-free compost', but what exactly does that mean? We look at soil and compost in depth on our courses but the key points are that a seed sowing compost should have a fine crumb structure that ensures good contact with the seeds and holds enough moisture to keep seeds and seedlings moist, while excess water is able to drain away after watering. If you are fortunate enough to have a suitably weed-free homemade compost, leaf mould or loam available then this can be used to make an excellent sowing mix that fits this description. When buying and using bagged compost, because the materials that go into peat-free compost are so variable, we find the best results are achieved by blending different types together. Our standard mix is 2 parts of a fibrous multipurpose compost such as New Horizon, 2 parts of a more granular, wood-based multipurpose such as SylvaGrow and 1 part of a loam-based seed sowing compost. We also recommend sieving your compost, which helps to blend them, break up lumps and create a nice open crumb structure, as well as remove any large pieces of wood or stones.

Other seed collections from The Garden Gate:

Seed Saving Seed Collection
Autumn Sowing Seed Collection
Prize-Winning Onions Seed Collection

Brought to you by the tutor of:

Grow Your Own: Organic Fruit & Vegetable Gardening
an 8 week evening course at Sawston Village College
Mondays 19:00 – 21:00. Spring Term 2025 / Autumn Term 2025

Seed Saving & Sowing

a Saturday workshop at Sawston Village College
10.00 – 16.00. Spring Term / Autumn Term 2025

For details visit sawstonvc.org/adult-learning or thegardengate.uk/courses

January

For us, January marks a turning point in the growing calendar where, after brief pause in December, seed sowing starts to pick up again. With low light levels and low temperatures it's not always easy but sowing those vegetables that can be sown now gives you a head start - the plants will be bigger and stronger when the time comes to plant them out, you can have the propagator or greenhouse space available again for the next batch of plants that need it and, importantly, those first green shoots germinating in the depths of winter sow a sense of optimism and excitement for the growing year ahead.

Broad Bean - Crimson Flour'd

Broad beans are a staple in our garden (and our freezer!) and there are several varieties we could have chosen here. Tasty and reliable, we settled on Crimson Flour'd for two extra reasons - firstly, the bright scarlet flowers are a beautiful example of the fact that vegetables can be just as at home in ornamental borders as they are on the allotment. Secondly, the backstory of this variety perfectly illustrates the rich cultural heritage contained in every seed that we sow, something that we look at on our Seed Saving & Sowing workshop. Well known in the 1700's, Crimson Flour'd was almost lost as a variety after having been out competed in the seed catalogues by the new longpod varieties of the 19th Century. By 1978, the variety was virtually extinct until a gardener in Kent recognised the importance of her family heirloom and donated her last few remaining seeds to the Heritage Seed Library.

Broad beans can be direct sown but we prefer to make spring sowings in modules to avoid the mice, birds and unpredictable weather that can affect outdoor sowings at this time of year.

1. From early January to mid-February fill module trays with cells measuring at least 2.5cm or small pots (8 to 10cm) with a good quality peat-free compost (see notes for tips)
2. Sow seed singly, up to 5cm deep if your module allows, on their side with the flat side facing up/down. Firm down, water and leave to germinate in an unheated greenhouse, polytunnel or coldframe. Trays should be kept moist but not wet and the seed should germinate in around 7 to 14 days
3. Grow on in a sheltered spot outdoors, bringing back under cover only if there is a hard frost or snow.
4. From late February, once soil temperatures are warming and above 5C, plant out into a well prepared bed, spacing plants around 16cm each way
5. Broad beans are generally undemanding to grow; keep the bed weeded and mulched and watch out for black bean aphids - if (or rather when!) they appear, pinching out the growing tip of the plant can help
6. Enjoy the attractive crimson-coloured flowers of this variety in June and harvest the pods from July

February

As we move into February our seed sowing options are increasing. The days are getting longer and soils are beginning to warm, especially if we have the benefit of a greenhouse or polytunnel which can be put to good use producing spring salads before the main summer crops need the space in a few months time.

Lettuce - All-The-Year-Round

Introduced in 1829, this reliable and delicious butterhead type remains a standard of seed catalogues, vegetable gardens and allotments for good reason. As with spring onions, we like to have a tray on hand throughout the spring to plant out around slower growing crops both in the outside beds and in the polytunnel. Re-sow every three weeks or so and you'll have a steady supply even through the summer when other lettuce varieties can struggle with the heat.

1. From early February fill seed trays or 2.5cm cell module trays with a good quality peat-free compost (see notes for tips)
2. Sow seed thinly in seed trays or 2 seeds per module. Cover lightly with more compost, firm down and water. For early sowing a propagator or heat mat can help with germination, but lettuce seed germinates poorly at temperatures above 20C so aim for a temperature of around 16C
3. Keep the trays moist but not wet and as soon as the seeds have germinated remove from heat. Grow on in an unheated greenhouse, polytunnel or coldframe
4. Seedlings sown in seed trays should be pricked out singly into modules once the first set of true leaves have developed. Seedlings sown in modules should be thinned to one plant per cell at the same time

5. When the roots have fully developed but not yet become congested, transplant plants into a well prepared bed, either outdoors or under cover. Plants should be spaced 25 to 30cm apart each way, with larger spacing producing larger heads. To assess whether the plants are ready for transplanting pop a couple of modules out and have a look, at the correct stage there will be healthy, bright white roots visible on all sides of the module and they won't have started to brown or circle round themselves
6. Lettuces need lots of moisture so keep them well-watered. They also dislike high temperatures so make sure to provide plenty of ventilation if growing under cover
7. The leaves can be picked as and when you want to use them over a period of time (cut and come again) but if you can resist, All-The-Year-Round really deserves to be enjoyed for its large, buttery heads with crisp hearts.

Pea (Mangetout) - Shiraz

At the risk of admitting allotment sacrilege, there was a time when we stopped growing peas, falling out with shelling, pea moth and the pheasant that stalks our allotment. We've since made up with homegrown peas through some outstanding heirloom varieties (Glory of Devon and Epicure are our picks, if you can find them) whose flavour more than compensates for the convenience of frozen petit pois. One thing we didn't stop growing though was mangetout and Shiraz has been a staple for us. British-bred in the early 2000s, the attractive bicoloured flowers develop into deep purple coloured flat pods that, like Crimson Flour'd beans, are as at home in the flower border as they are on the allotment. As with all purple vegetables, the colour is due to a high level of anthocyanin pigment which has healthy antioxidant properties.

1. From mid-February fill deep root module trays, 9cm pots or toilet roll tubes with a good quality peat-free compost (see notes for tips)
2. Sow seed singly in modules and tubes or up to 3 seeds in a 9cm pot, about 2cm deep (or the depth of the first knuckle on your finger is a good guide). Firm down, water and leave to germinate in an unheated greenhouse, polytunnel or coldframe. Trays should be kept moist but not wet and the seed should germinate in around 7 to 14 days
3. Grow on under cover until mid-March before moving them to a sheltered position outside to harden off
4. From late March, when the plants are about 20cm tall, plant out into a well prepared bed, spacing them about 8cm apart each way. Shiraz only grows to around 1m high but does require some support, have the framework in the ground before planting and tie them in when you plant
5. When the pods develop, pick them young for the best flavour and keep picking them regularly to encourage more to develop

March

Spring is truly upon us now and while it is still too early to sow many of the more tender summer crops, by the end of the month we like to have started off our tomatoes so that they are ready for planting out into the polytunnel and greenhouse in May.

Tomato - Carter's Golden Sunrise & Outdoor Girl

Golden Sunrise produces an excellent crop of tasty, medium sized, round fruit in a beautiful shade of sunshine yellow that livens up any salad bowl. An indeterminate variety, meaning it will keep growing up until the tip is pinched out, provide a suitable support and remove sideshoots regularly to focus the plant's energy on fruit production rather than foliage.

Introduced in 1959 to beat the British summer, Outdoor Girl is still doing the job admirably today. An early and reliable cropper producing medium sized, red salad tomatoes, Outdoor Girl is determinate and doesn't require pinching out or sideshooting, but should still be well supported, particularly if growing outdoors.

Tomato seed can be sown in seed trays but they can soon get leggy if not pricked out quickly. We find better results come from sowing in small modules and potting on into larger modules then into 9cm pots, but use what equipment you have and if using seed trays just make sure to prick out early.

1. From mid-March to mid-April fill seed trays, module trays or small pots (8 to 10cm) with a good quality peat-free compost (see notes for tips)
2. Sow seed thinly in trays or singly in module or pots, about 2cm deep. Firm down, water and place in a heated propagator or on a warm windowsill to germinate, which should take around a week at 20 - 24C

3. Keep the trays moist but not wet and as soon as the seeds have germinated remove from the propagator and make sure they get plenty of light to avoid legginess. Tomatoes are not hardy and must be grown on in a warm place, either a heated greenhouse or polytunnel or on a bright windowsill indoors. The temperature should ideally be around 16C but they will survive brief drops down to 5C as long as the plants are dry and under cover. Growing them 'hard', at as low a temperature as possible, will ensure they are well prepared for planting out - we set our heated greenhouse to 16C during the day and 10C at night, but it can often drop to as low as 5C on cold nights. If overnight temperatures below 7C are forecast we will cover the plants with fleece or a sheet of newspaper until the morning
4. Seedlings growing in seed trays should be pricked into 2.5cm cell modules or small pots as soon as possible, before the first set of true leaves has developed. Seedlings growing in modules should be potted on into successively larger modules and finally 9cm pots as the roots develop. To assess whether the plants are ready for potting on pop a couple of modules out and have a look, at the correct stage there will be healthy, bright white roots visible on all sides of the module and they won't have started to brown or circle round themselves. If the plants are becoming leggy plant them deeply when potting on and new roots will form from the buried stem
5. Tomatoes can be planted outside once all risk of frost has passed, usually late May or early June. Planting in a greenhouse or polytunnel can usually happen a few weeks earlier though as long as you are prepared to fleece them during any late cold snaps. Tomatoes require a fertile soil and the beds should have been well prepared with plenty of compost or well-rotted manure prior to planting. Space plants 45cm apart and plant them deeply so that the first set of true leaves are just above the soil level. This will encourage the development of new roots from the buried stem

April

So far we have mostly discussed sowing seed in trays, modules and pots and this is generally our preferred method (although there are always exceptions) as it allows us to plant out good, strong plants that will grow away quickly and avoid many of the pests and other problems that can affect seedlings sown direct outdoors in spring. Some vegetables however do not transplant very well at all and need to be sown directly into well-prepared beds, which, as we move into April are now generally warm enough for direct sowings to be successful.

Carrot - Mr James' Scarlet Intermediate

Carrots (and the closely related parsnip) are perfect examples of crops that need to be direct sown. We've tried many different varieties of carrot over the years and include here the maincrop variety Mr James' Scarlet Intermediate because it is our daughter's favourite, and you don't argue with the carrot boss.

1. In late February or early March begin to prepare your bed. Carrots require a deep, fine soil both for germination and to grow well and produce long, straight roots. Starting your bed preparation early will help it to be in top condition by sowing time. We fork over the bed and rake it to a fine tilth, then leave it for a week or two until the inevitable flush of weeds has started to grow. These are then hoed off and the process usually repeated. Don't apply fresh manure or compost before sowing as this will encourage the roots to fork, either work this in the year before or give the beds a good mulch once the seedlings have germinated
2. From mid-April to mid-May, make drills (long, shallow trenches) in your well-prepared bed using the corner of a hoe. Drills should be about 2cm deep (or as shallow as you can make them) and spaced 20cm apart. Carrot seed germinates poorly if the soil temperature is below 10C so beds can be warmed under a cloche or other cover for a week or two before sowing if necessary
3. Sow seed thinly in the drills to avoid having to thin the seedlings later, cover by filling the drill back in with the hoe then firm down with the back of a rake so that the seeds are in good contact with the soil. Carrot seed needs to stay moist once sown and good seed to soil contact is essential for this. Water in well and keep the soil moist but not waterlogged until the seeds have germinated, which can take a few weeks.
4. Once the plants are growing strongly, thin to around 5cm between plants and then keep them covered with a fine mesh (maximum 1.4mm) suitable for keeping out carrot root fly
5. Remove the cover periodically to weed and thin out the plants to around 3-5cm between plants, with wider spacing producing larger carrots

Radish - Scarlett Globe

Introduced in 1881, Scarlett Globe produces attractive and well-flavoured, crisp, round radishes with a white flesh and red skin. An early maturing variety suitable for forcing, it can be sown in modules from late February and grown on under cover for an early crop, or direct sown outdoors as follows:

1. From early March begin to prepare your bed, making sure it is well weeded and cultivated to a fine tilth suitable for seed sowing
2. From late March sow seed thinly in drills spaced 15cm apart, cover over with soil, firm down with the back of a rake and water in well. Keep the bed moist until the seeds have germinated, which should happen quickly, within a week
3. Early thinning is crucial to prevent the seedlings competing with each other and getting spindly, so thin as soon as you can to 2.5cm between plants
4. Keep the plants well-watered and protected from strong winds and flea beetle with a fine mesh cover and you can expect the first harvests in just 30 days or so from sowing
5. For a continuous supply of radishes through the summer, make repeat sowings every 10 to 14 days

May

Summer is on the horizon now and it's time to start thinking about starting the tender, summer vegetables so that they are ready for planting out once overnight temperatures are consistently hovering around 10C and all risk of frost has passed. For us this used to mean planting out in the first week of June but increasingly the last week of May is suitable. There's no benefit in rushing to it though; French beans, cucumbers and squashes all germinate quickly and if sown too early will not grow well in cool conditions. Better to wait and sow them when the temperatures are warming so that they grow away strongly without any check to their growth.

French Bean - Blue Lake

A prolific heirloom variety with tasty and stringless green pods which can be harvested young as French beans or left to mature so that the white beans can be dried and used as haricot beans.

1. From late April to late June fill module trays with cells measuring at least 2.5cm or small pots measuring 8 to 10cm with a good quality peat-free compost (see notes for tips)
2. Sow seed singly, about 2cm deep. Firm down, water and place in a heated propagator or on a warm windowsill to germinate, which should take around a week at 20 - 24C
3. Keep moist but not wet and as soon as the seeds have germinated remove from the propagator and make sure they get plenty of light to avoid legginess. French beans are not hardy and must be grown on in a warm place, ideally around 16C, either a greenhouse, polytunnel or on a bright windowsill indoors
4. Once all danger of frost has passed, usually the last week of May / first week of June, plant out into a well-prepared bed. Blue Lake is a climbing variety and requires support, have the framework in the ground before planting, tie the plants in when you plant them out and continue to tie them in as they grow, until well established
5. For an extra early crop, they can also be planted into a greenhouse or polytunnel from early June

Winter Squash - Uchiki Kuri

Winter squash is a store cupboard staple for us and a key crop that we grow to keep the family fed over the winter months. We've grown many different varieties over the years and find they can be rather hit and miss, but this one is our staple – a reliable and consistent cropper first named in 1933, it has a firm yellow/orange flesh that is excellent for roasting, mashing and soups. Each attractive, bright orange squash weighs around a kilo which is a useful size for the kitchen.

1. From late April to early June fill small pots measuring 8 to 10cm with a good quality peat-free compost (see notes for tips)
2. Sow seed singly about 2cm deep. Firm down, water and place in a heated propagator or on a warm windowsill to germinate, which should take around a week at 20 - 24C
3. Keep moist but not wet and as soon as the seeds have germinated remove from the propagator and make sure they get plenty of light to avoid legginess. Squash are not hardy and must be grown on in a warm place, ideally around 16C, either a greenhouse, polytunnel or on a bright windowsill indoors

4. Once all danger of frost has passed, usually the last week of May / first week of June, plant out into a well-prepared bed. Squash are heavy feeders and the bed should have been improved with well-rotted manure or compost
5. Keep the plants watered and protected from strong winds while they establish their roots
6. Once the fruits have ripened and turned orange, harvest them before the weather turns cooler and wet or frosty in October and cure them outside under shelter for a couple of weeks before storing for use over winter