

Home Grown

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The winter months of January and February can be a bleak time in the veg garden and if you started the new year with the good intentions of growing some of your own, a quick look out the window at the frosty ground and gloomy skies, will have all but the most determined making a hasty retreat to the sofa. Luckily the sofa can play a part in your kitchen garden success as it's the perfect place to plan your campaign for delicious home grown grub and think about what is actually worth growing.

Think about going for higher value crops like squashes, strawberries, raspberries etc as delicious organic crops like carrots and onions are readily available throughout the year. Before you get the garden catalogues out remember to assess your plot: where is it; how much sun does it get; what is the soil like; how much space do you have and how much time will you have to work your plot are all vital questions to resolve well before you begin. Don't be put off if you have little space or the only available spot is a bit shady. Something will grow in most places. Salad leaves will thrive in some shade as will spinach, beetroot and woodland fruits like raspberries, gooseberries and even rhubarb will be more than comfortable in a spot with some tree cover. If very pushed for space try container gardening. Many varieties of fruit and veg can be grown in containers. Dobies have a good range of suitable and affordable containers starting at £14.95 for 3, which can be bought online at www.dobies.co.uk or local firm Hillier Garden Centres in Chichester, Horsham and Eastbourne also stock some basic patio veg planters at £14.99 for a pack of three.. Their on-line shop can be found at www.hillier.co.uk

There are also plenty of even cheaper options for container horticulture. Old buckets and even dustbins will serve admirably as potato pots, with a few added drainage holes. Pop up laundry bins are also more than adequate.

More important even than position is your soil and the addition of good garden compost is a must. If you haven't got your own compost bin yet make this your first job. Place it on bare earth and position it in such a way that access for material in and out is easy. You can build your own, there are many guides, books and internet sites to help you with this job (try www.organicgardening.co.uk) or get one from your local council. Both West and East Sussex offer a range of composting options at heavily subsidised prices, as well as a wealth of information on what to do and what not to do to get the best from your waste. Ready to use garden compost can be purchased from most of your local Household Waste Recycling sites in West Sussex, made from the green waste collected from around the county, at £10.00 for 3 bags or £4.00 for one 40 litre bag.

A greenhouse is of course a great boon for the veg gardener, many crops benefit from an early start under cover. If you haven't the space or cash for such an investment there are lots of affordable and portable options. Cloches will protect young crops and cold frames and mini greenhouses can be purchased for less than £25.00.

What can I do right now?

After digging over and preparing your plot you can start with buying seed potatoes of early cropping varieties. When you get them home place them in cardboard egg cartons or similar containers and put in a cool dry place. After a few weeks they will have 'chitted' and hopefully these shoots should be at least 3cm long. This is the sign they are ready to plant out. Maincrop varieties do not need chitting. Many budget gardeners have some success with just using a few leftover potatoes from the supermarket. Broad beans can be sown directly into the soil on suitable days, as can sprouting broccoli varieties, cabbages, onions, garlic, Jerusalem artichokes, and under glass peas and lettuce. Visit www.the-gardening-calender.co.uk for a detailed guide to what you can do when.

It is worth considering joining a local horticultural group. You will get masses of advice plus the bonus of being able to swap surplus plants and maybe even produce later on in the year. Just search for your local group on the internet. If you happen to live in Brighton or Hove join the Brighton and Hove organic Gardening Group, who have regular meetings and are very supportive of anyone delving into the joys and mysteries of growing your own. Visit their website at www.bhogg.org.uk

A few good sites to visit are www.growfruitandveg.co.uk - A magazine site with a good forum plus www.the-gardeners-calender.co.uk for a wealth of good advice. And don't forget to put your tips, advice and questions on our very own forum to share your experiences with your own local community.

If you fancy doing a course try West Sussex Adult and Community Learning who run courses on Gardening Organic Veg for Beginners or Warnborough College run a self study course on Vegetable growing. Also Varndean College run

Organic Gardening courses.

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