



WHAT TO SOW IN MARCH

In March you can start to sow your seed and plan a sowing programme for the weeks ahead. Get beds ready for sowing and planting. Warm the soil and make 'stale seed beds' by covering them with clear plastic. The warmth and light will encourage any lurking weed seed to germinate. When you are ready to sow you can hook them out and give your plants a head start, or at least an equal playing field. Set yourself up with some fleece, a few plastic water bottles, a cold frame or a little polytunnel and you are ready to go.

Summer cabbage for June crops can be sown outside under fleece. Even earlier crops can be started off in a propagator set at 16°C/61°F. Cabbages like fertile well-drained soil and an open situation. They need continuous water through summer. They are easy to grow. Usually the only problem with them is that they are a sitting target for slugs and snails.

Varieties: crisp pointed types with a solid heart: 'Hispi' F1, 'Greyhound' F1, 'First of June' F1. All AGM.

Early carrots can be sown outside under cloches when the soil temperature has reached 7°C/46°F. Take a tip from the show bench to get straight roots. Make funnel shaped holes with an iron bar. Fill the holes economically with the perfect compost for the crop – a fertile, sandy mix for carrots – before sowing the seed.

Varieties: 'Amsterdam Forcing', the tried and tested first carrot of the year. 'Early Nantes'. Also new in are the multi coloured collections – great for kids. E.g. 'The Healthy Coloured Collection' by Thompson and Morgan.

Spinach beet or Swiss chard is not grown commercially as it has a short shelf life. Whereas true spinach has a delicate constitution, is inclined to suffer from mildew and be generally temperamental, spinach beet is reliable and easy to grow. It is ideal for the organic gardener. It makes good winter greens and is excellent for cut-and-come-again salad crops when young and tender. A bonus is sheer good looks. It comes from the glamorous side of the beet family. Red stemmed types are practically fluorescent when backlit. Though there is the choice of smooth or crinkly, white, crimson, yellow or purple stems and green, red or rainbow coloured leaves, the white stemmed ones with crumpled leaves are thought to be the tastiest. Seeds come in clusters. Soak them overnight and sow thinly in March or April 20cm/8ins apart outside for summer and autumn croppings. A second sowing in midsummer will give you crops through winter.

Colourful varieties: 'Bright lights' (a complete rainbow), 'Rhubarb Chard' (scarlet ribs and puckered purple leaves), 'Fordhook Chard' (white ribs, green leaves and very tasty).

Peas are believed to be the oldest cultivated vegetables in the world. They were found in the ruins of Troy. To get decent sized servings, however, be prepared to grow quite a few plants. There are peas for drying, petits pois, garden peas, mangetout and sugarsnap types.

The round seeded varieties are the best sort for March sowing and will be ready for harvesting in May or June. They like fertile, light, moisture-retentive soil, a good root run and plenty of moisture throughout their growing season. Make a little gully between rows to collect water. When sowing watch out for mice as they will remove the seeds without trace almost before you've turned your back.

A way round this is to sow peas in pieces of plastic guttering so they can be slid out into a prepared trench with minimum disturbance. Putting them out as little plants rather than seed seems to make them less attractive to mice and birds.

Varieties: 'Kelvenden Wonder', an old English favourite, 'Early Onward', sweet tasting, prolific pea.

Broad beans are another ancient vegetable. They were known to Neolithic man and were mentioned in the Bible. They were a staple food for rich and poor before the arrival of the potato. The broad bean's near cousin, the field bean, was grown as horse food, hence the expression 'full of beans'. The succulent 'Windsors' – so known as they were first grown at Windsor Castle by Dutch gardeners – can be sown this month. Soak the seeds overnight and sow 5cm/2ins deep and 20cm/8ins apart. Traditionally they are grown in a staggered double row. If you need to support them, run stakes along the row and tie them at the tops. Remove any suckers as they appear so you are left with a single stem. When there are four clusters of flowers at the top, cut them off. This will encourage the pods to form and discourage the black bean aphids.

Early yielding varieties: 'Witkiem Manita' and 'Witkiem Major'. 'Red Epicure' has red flowers and interesting reddish beans

Globe onions can be started off now. For speed and efficiency, buy sets. They will be guaranteed disease free and the heat treated ones will be bolt resistant. Space 15cm/6ins apart for average onions. Onions are adaptable and you can control their size by the spacing. If you want big onions space them further apart. If you want to grow from seed, which gives you more choice, sow them indoors at 10–16°C/50–61°F. The first sign of life you will see is a crook shaped shoot that will form a loop. Don't try to free it. Its purpose is to draw nourishment up from the seed and it will release itself when it is ready.

Varieties: 'Centurion' F1 (AGM) is a straw coloured, globe shaped onion. It's early maturing, a heavy cropper and stores well. 'Turbo' has the same attributes and is also slow to bolt.

Saladini. Get going on saladini and cut-and-come-again oriental vegetables. There are so many interesting assortments that it's a shame not to try out lots of different sorts. Sow a few seeds every two to three weeks. I grow these in a container of proprietary compost so that I can be certain that amongst the many unfamiliar leaves no weeds will go unnoticed into the salad bowl.

The leek is a five star allotment plant. It is particularly appreciated in the old mining towns of the north west of England where traditionally no self-respecting pub or working men's club would be without a pot leek competition. Leeks are easy to grow just so long as you get the soil right. It needs to be fertile, well drained, light, manured the autumn before, and on the alkaline side. Put on some lime if your soil is less than neutral pH7.

March is the time to sow the maincrop varieties. They need a minimum temperature of 7°C/46°F. I like to sow leeks in root trainers – loo rolls serve well. When you transplant them you can plant slightly deeper than before, thereby blanching them without further effort. Make a big hole for them with a dibber, or try the carrot trick by making an upside down cornet shape with an iron bar. Drop them in still in their biodegradable cardboard tubes. The old idea of trimming the roots is no longer recommended.

Varieties: ‘Bleu de Solaise’ (a regal looking leek with blue leaves), ‘King Richard’ (AGM), ‘Jolant’ (AGM).

Brussels sprouts for Christmas are sown now (believe it or not!) under cloches mounted on tiles to let in air. Keep them in the dark until they germinate. Then take the cloche off in the day and put it on again at night. When big enough to handle, thin out to 15cm/6ins apart. Late sprouts for the New Year can be sown in April without the weather worries.

Varieties: ‘Peter Gynt’ dwarf, and ‘Diablo’ (AGM) are clean round sprouts and came out top in trials.

It is a good idea to have a nursery bed for slow growing vegetables like sprouts that don’t mind being moved. It saves them taking up space when they are still tiny. You can move them over when it suits you to their permanent positions.

Don’t forget your **potatoes**. Dig in well rotted manure or compost. Don’t rush and plant them in cold soil. If you are in a warm microclimate they can go in in mid-March. Otherwise it is safer to wait until April. Easter is the traditional time. Plant in trenches or individual holes or grow them in a barrel. First earlies about 30cm/1ft apart, 45cm/18ins between rows. Give second earlies about 50% more space.

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