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## SPRING FORWARD

MID-SPRING: MARCH

*sowing seeds – seasonality – potatoes – daylight saving*



The biting cold of February is behind us. It's bright until 6.00pm now, which means there's time to get out and about in the garden even after a day's work. When the sun shines, you could be forgiven for thinking that it is already summer. You strip off layers of clothing – then the sun disappears behind the clouds and you quickly realise

that there is still no real heat in the air and you should really put your clothes back on (the neighbours are talking). Still, these fleeting occurrences of warmth are enough to encourage nature to begin a veritable frenzy of growing. The farmer who owns the land around our acre has some of his cows out in the fields again now after a long winter indoors – so when standing at the kitchen sink we can see them in the adjacent field and hear the crunching noise as they tear grass from the ground. It is wonderful to see them out again. There are rapidly fattening green buds on the trees and, elsewhere in the surrounding area, there are little lambs frolicking (as only lambs can) in the fields.

All of which hints at *growth*, which is just as well because March is considered the leanest month in the vegetable patch in terms of actual harvesting. In the two months since Christmas, we have been itching to get going on our plans for the growing year, but there's very little actual growing that you can do when nature just won't play ball. Almost immediately after Christmas, seed catalogues arrived uninvited (but terribly welcome) by post from various suppliers we have used over the years – every year we sit at the kitchen table on miserable winter evenings perusing the catalogues and we end up ordering more seeds than we need, forgetting that sage advice about only growing things we like to eat. At this time of the year, seed catalogues hold the promise of unlimited creativity – they are chock-full of potential food production successes and we are far enough removed from the sobering reality of last year's growing blunders for the mists of time to have worked their gentle magic. The year ahead is a clean slate, a blank canvas, crying out to be filled with stunning gardening triumphs. 'This year everything will be perfect!' we

enthusie, before once again spending our hard-earned cash on vegetables that we like the sound of but will never grow in a million years. Down at the bottom of our seed box are little reminders of the folly of our vernal enthusiasm: unused seed packets for vegetables with exotic names like okra, chicory witloof or scorzonera (also known as poor man's asparagus). What on earth were we thinking?

The dwindling larder probably explains why we are so keen (anxious even?) to get started on the growing year and in our eagerness we always start this process far too early. But nature stubbornly refuses to be rushed. It is really only now – in mid-spring – that it's worth starting to sow most seeds, but every year we try to get things going in January or early February (usually unsuccessfully).

I just love this time of year. In February and March the spare bedroom under the eaves in the house and a particularly sunny window sill in the study get converted into a temporary plant nursery. We take down the electric warming mat and dust it off. Rows and rows of little pots and seed-trays are filled with compost and little seeds are dropped in carefully. They are checked – with considerable excitement (and often much disappointment) – each day for signs of growth. Heating mats, while useful, cannot address the real issue at this time of the year: lack of light. It is longer hours of sunshine that our seeds need to encourage them to leave the comfort of the soil for the outside world, and sometimes I wonder whether the warming mat only serves to make the 'world out there' even less appealing for the little seeds. But eventually, after watching brown soil for days and days on end, a little bit of green appears and a shoot finally pushes itself out into the world. Is there anything in this world more darn hopeful than the sight of a germinated seed?

We get out our notes from last year and try to plan where and what we are going to grow in the season ahead. It feels good to be working on this after the grim emptiness of winter, but it's a complex task, nonetheless, for me at any rate. I suppose, like most men, I have a prehistoric, entirely limited, problem-solving type of brain that has a need to understand all facets of a subject before embarking on any project. For each vegetable that we are going to grow, I like to know when I need to sow, transplant and harvest it; where I am going to grow it, what soil it needs, how much water and light etc. Some vegetable gardeners have spent a lifetime working in the vegetable plot and still don't know all this, so you can only imagine how frustrating this is for me and ultimately how doomed to failure my quest is. Still, former IT nerd that I am, I spend a lot of time setting up an overly elaborate spreadsheet on my computer, outlining all the vegetables, fruit and herbs we grow and listing those key pieces of information for each one. Once I have gone through it and momentarily understood the magnitude of the job ahead, I am happy to leave it at that. It doesn't really bother me that I will rarely, if ever, return to the spreadsheet during the year. Once I map out my year's work in print I feel like it's half the battle – which, of course, it most emphatically is not. Mrs Kelly is not at all devoted to such 'time-wasting' matters, and prefers to get on with the actual growing. So I was amazed (and relieved) to discover that Anne Cullen, who helped me with the Grower's Calendars for this book, is equally strange about these things and likes to keep spreadsheets too – we pooled our resources and the result can be seen at the end of the book. I hope that you find it useful.

**SEED PACKETS**

**For years I have been buying seed packets and ripping them open across the top, such is my enthusiasm to get growing. Unfortunately, by doing so I invariably end up ripping right through the invaluable information on the back of the packet about when to sow and harvest the vegetables inside. So until seed producers realise that it would make more sense to have this information on the bottom of the packet, here's a little tip: to open your seed packet rip across the bottom of the packet, not the top! You still get at the seeds and you leave all that vital information intact!**

There is simply nothing in this world more satisfying than sowing seeds. In my opinion, it is the greatest way to soothe a furrowed brow or chase away worries and stresses. To spend a day outside, working your way methodically through a pile of seed packets and getting a whole raft of sowing done will leave you feeling immensely pleased with yourself and gratified at the thought that in days or weeks you will start to see little shoots emerging from the soil, and in weeks or months you will be tucking into home-grown vegetables. Sowing is, without question, my favourite part of the process of growing vegetables.

Nature has equipped seeds with all the potential they need to produce plants, so all we really need to do as growers is to create the conditions that they need in order to grow. When you *really* think about it, we are not growers at all, but facilitators. In our experience, sowing seeds in seed trays, modules or pots, then transplanting them outdoors when they are ready, is the most successful way of doing things. It is, no doubt, a slightly more expensive approach, since you have to buy potting compost, but, as far as I'm concerned, sowing

direct is just way too random. I am somewhat a control freak and I know if I sow seeds directly into a bed I might get an occasional seed germinating here and there, but rarely, if ever, do I get the 100 percent success I crave. I have this suspicion that when I sow seeds in the soil, I am merely providing a tasty snack for slugs, rabbits, mice and God knows what other little critters who regard our vegetable plot as their meal ticket. There are also some seeds that are absolutely tiny (take celery as an example) and when a seed is practically microscopic you would really need to have a bed raked to within an inch of its life to make sure that the seed doesn't fall down into a little crevice in the soil where it will most assuredly die from lack of light. Raking things to within an inch of their lives – well now, that just isn't really us.

As well as that, a common problem for novice growers is that we just aren't good at thinning out vegetables – we sow a row of seeds, forget to thin them out and then all the vegetables suffer because they are too cramped. Expert gardeners will sow a row of seeds outdoors, then, when the seeds start to progress, will implement an unmerciful cull, ruthlessly picking out the weakest seedlings to give the required space to the stronger ones. Sowing seeds in modules indoors eliminates the need for thinning out because you are transplanting the correct number of seedlings into the bed – there is no surplus to cull. Again, this suits us down to the ground. There *are* vegetables that don't really like being 'transplanted'. Root crops, like carrots and parsnips, for example, apparently do not like to be moved on like this, but we have grown both of these vegetables that way with considerable success and, conversely, we have sown both direct in the ground and not had a single germination. So I think that pretty much every vegetable will benefit from spending some time getting hardy

in a module or tray before going out into the big, bad world. The only thing that you have to be really careful with is to take care when transplanting – some vegetables suffer badly from having their roots disturbed. The only exception we make is for potatoes, which are grown from ‘seed potatoes’ saved from the previous year’s crop; onions, which we usually grow from ‘sets’ (basically, baby onions); and much larger seeds like courgettes, cucumbers and squashes – these take off really quickly, so we sow them outside.

It’s a good idea to check the seed packet (or in a book or online) for the temperature a particular seed requires for germination. The average for most vegetables is about 18°C, but some require higher than that (cucumber plants will appreciate temperatures between 20°C–30°C, for example) and some lower (lettuce will germinate in about three days at about 15°C). Some seeds at this time of the year will need even more heat than a sunny window sill can provide and you might need to invest in a heated propagation pad or mat (or make one yourself if you’re good with electrics and there’s no risk of blowing up your house). In my experience, though, you don’t need to be overly fussy, as there can be anything up to a ten-degree variation between the absolute maximum temperature a seed will germinate at and the recommended average – so don’t worry too much about it. I couldn’t tell you what temperature our study is, for example, which is where we get most of our seeds going – but there’s a corner window there that gets good sunshine pretty much all day and it has plenty of window-sill space. From February on, that corner of the house always looks a mess, with trays, pots and modules all competing for space. The vast majority of our seeds germinate here, while the ones that don’t need so much heat will go out to the tunnel, and the ones

that need more go on the warming mat in the spare bedroom. We don't mind our house becoming a makeshift nursery for the spring – nothing is more conducive to a happy disposition than having little pots of growing things around the place.

Seeds are simple creatures at heart. Apart from having a suitable ambient temperature, they just need access to the right amounts of moisture and light. You need to water them regularly and never let the compost dry out, but you don't want them saturated either. They also need to have access to natural sunlight. Some seeds – celery, for example – need light to germinate, though most seeds germinate without light, then need it to start developing. A common problem at this time of the year is that there is not enough natural daylight and the seedlings start to get 'leggy' because they are basically craning their necks to reach light that's not there. This is why it's almost always inadvisable to try and get seeds going too early in the year. Someone told me once that you should move seed trays around a lot on your window sill, particularly if you notice that the seedlings seem to be all reaching in one particular direction.

Sowing seeds is a cinch and basically requires one of three container types – a small pot into which you can put one or many seeds; a 'tray' in which you scatter seeds; or a 'module', which is basically a tray divided up into little individual compartments. The module is the one we use most. It's far easier to transplant from this because the roots of the seedlings are less likely to get damaged. To remove a seedling from a module, you can usually just squeeze the bottom of it gently and the seedling will pop out into your hand, with the roots and compost in one handy, ready-to-transplant package. Another benefit of modules is that the roots of the seedlings can't mix because

they each have their own private living quarters. If you scatter lettuce seeds onto a seed tray, for example, by the time the seedlings are ready to transplant into the soil, the root systems of the tiny plants are likely to be all intermingled, which makes the transplanting process a total nightmare, like being given a big ball of Christmas-tree lights to unravel. If you have just one or a couple of lettuce seeds in each compartment of a module tray, on the other hand, it's much easier to pop them out and put them in the soil. You can buy the professional seed modules trays (called propagation trays) that nurseries and commercial growers use from good garden centres and online retailers. In my opinion, it's worth spending a few bob on these as they will last for years, unlike the cheap, flimsy plastic ones that you will be throwing out after one season. These big commercial trays have up to 150 individual 'cells' in them, so two or three should be more than enough to cope with most of your seed sowing.

### **BIN RUMMAGING**

**Your recycling bin can often be a handy source of 'props' for vegetable growing, if you know what to look for. For example, cut clear plastic bottles in half and place over plants for very cheap and very effective 'cloches', which give protection to young plants. Redirect plastic fruit punnets to be used for covering seedlings to aid germination, or, indeed, as seed trays. Wash out your pots of yoghurt after use and they can be used as pots for sowing seeds, while the plastic tray that the pots of yoghurt came in are also very handy for keeping seedling pots together. Cut the big 2 litre plastic milk cartons in half and stick them (top down) in the soil beside your plants, forming a kind of funnel, so that when you are watering, the water goes direct to the roots. Use old gutters for seed sowing, old egg cartons for chitting potatoes, and an old kitchen colander as a dinky hanging basket. The sky's the limit.**

Whether it's a tray, module or pot, fill it up with compost and firm it in well with your hand or a small flat stone. If the compost is too loose, the seed will probably slip downwards after you water it and it may well be far too deep in the soil to germinate. You should always water the compost *before* you sow the seeds – as mentioned before, some seeds are so tiny you could actually wash them away if you water them after putting them in the soil. Depending on the instructions on the seed packet, you may need to just rest the seed on the surface of the compost or stick it further down into it. Celeriac seeds, for example, are just sprinkled on the surface, carrot seed is sown down about 1cm, while a pea seed is pushed down about 5cm. We usually put a covering of very fine compost (which we sift using a soil sieve to get a really fine texture) on top of the seeds. Some seeds you will be able to handle individually, like beetroot, for example, while others are so small you just have to sprinkle them as carefully as possible, trying not to get clumps of seed in an individual module. Some people use vermiculite to cover the compost – this is an almost clear granular compound that allows light through to the seeds while retaining loads of moisture to help them germinate. We use it sometimes, when we have a bag handy. Sometimes we cover the modules with a covering of clear plastic – either cling film or old fruit punnets – which prevents the moisture from evaporating off the surface of the compost. But this comes with a caveat – sometimes the consistent moisture seems to cause a mould or fungus on the compost. So keep an eye on it – if it's too wet-looking, take it off. And always remove the cling film when the seeds have germinated.