

A YEAR ON THE PLOT

You won't find a garden notebook by my bedside, or shelves stuffed with gardening books. I'm one of those people who can hold information in my head, and that's where I keep my garden filing system. So how do I decide what to grow and where to grow it? After a year on the plot, I realized the best way to use the growing space and plan for the following year was to organize crops according to when they were harvested. I'm a true believer in cooking and eating seasonally, and that's why this book is organized by the time of year everything is most likely to be ready. Once I know this, I think backwards, working out when I need to sow seeds, grow on, and plant out each crop.

In mid-autumn, after I've brought in the last summer harvest and most crops are cleared away, I'm left with an almost-blank canvas. I'm not an artist, but I'd like to think I paint with plants as I start to plan next year's artwork, always with the crop-rotation plan (see p11) firmly etched in my mind.

ESSENTIAL TOOLS AND EQUIPMENT

Here's a look at a few of the tools that I use time and time again on the plot.

Sowing equipment

An electric heat mat, propagators, and coir pellets soaked in warm water are essential for crops started indoors early in the year,

while over in the potting shed my "tidy tray" stops the compost I scoop into trays and pots from spilling everywhere. I firm compost into containers with wooden tampers of different sizes, then sieve over a fine layer to achieve even germination of seeds. Large seeds, such as beans, peas, and sweetcorn, are sown into Rootainers – deep modules that encourage strong root systems.

Hardening off

Once the seedlings are potted on individually, using my trusted mini-dibber, they go into the cold frame. In this halfway house, they spend two weeks acclimatizing to conditions outdoors prior to planting out. I also have horticultural fleece on hand to cover seedlings in case of an unforeseen heavy frost.

Planting and harvesting

A traditional wooden-handled fork is ideal for prepping the soil, a shovel-spade for making planting holes, and a good, sturdy rake for creating a fine tilth (as well as earthing up potatoes). For weeding, nothing compares to my Hori-Hori knife, which I also use to make neat drills for quick sowing. Finally, when it comes to harvesting crops, I use secateurs and snips, cleaning and sharpening both after every use.

MONTHLY TASKS

The chart below doesn't contain every single monthly job I undertake on the plot, but it does include many key tasks. It is intended as an overview to give you a good idea of what to do when, over the course of a whole year.

	At home & in the greenhouse	Outdoor
Jan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sow aubergines, chillies, and peppers (home). Order seed potatoes. Sort out seed packets; remove any that are out of date. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prune the apple tree. Rake debris from around summer-fruiting raspberry canes. Force rhubarb for an early harvest.
Feb	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sow onions (greenhouse) and tomatoes (home). Chit potatoes on a warm, bright windowsill. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plant bare-root fruit tree or shrubs. Cut back autumn-fruiting raspberry canes.
Mar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sow peas in deep root Rootainers (greenhouse). Prick out lettuce. Clean and sanitize the greenhouse. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apply FBB and mulch around raspberry canes. Turn in green manure. Harvest the last parsnips (but leave some to flower).
Apr	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sow squash, courgettes, and French beans. Move tomato plants to the greenhouse. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plant out first early seed potatoes, and spring cabbages raised in the cold frame. Prepare nettle and comfrey teas.
May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sow cucumbers (greenhouse). Move aubergine, chilli, and pepper plants into the greenhouse. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plant out garlic, onion, and tomato plants. Incorporate compost and straw into bean growing area, and erect bean poles. Provide greenhouse shading.
Jun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Give weak seaweed feed to aubergines, chillies, and peppers. Pinch basil tips to encourage side shoots. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thin out beetroot rows. Keep on top of weeding duties. Earth up maincrop potatoes and harvest first earlies.
Jul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keep greenhouse doors and vents open. Harvest first aubergines to promote further fruits. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pin down strawberry runners to create new plants. Feed French beans with comfrey tea when in flower.
Aug	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feed aubergines and peppers when flowers appear. Wet the greenhouse floor to create humidity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Direct-sow winter radish. Protect corn with netting as cobs start to form. Harvest onions, then sow quick-growing green manure.
Sep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sow romaine lettuce and onions (cold frame). Water during early mornings to prevent mildew. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remove leaves around winter squash to aid ripening. Harvest last courgettes and maincrop potatoes.
Oct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sow early peas (greenhouse). Bring container-grown chard and mint under cover. Wash, sanitize, and store greenhouse pots. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Earth up leeks. Stake Brussels sprouts. Check netting on brassicas to keep out birds. Weed and tidy around turnips. Sow green manure.
Nov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plant garlic cloves in pots (greenhouse). Ventilate greenhouse on mild days. Clear yellowing and dead foliage to prevent disease. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sow chive seeds direct. Harvest parsley and cover with cloches. Gather fallen leaves from trees to make leafmould.
Dec	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Harvest fresh mint and romaine lettuce. Check stored produce; discard any that has spoiled. Pick up seed catalogues, make wish lists, and place orders to avoid disappointment in spring. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plant out bare-root raspberry canes. Harvest parsnips and Brussels sprouts. Enjoy the brief silence of the dormant plot before the gardening year begins again next month.