



Next year, why not plan ahead for winter with the best of seasonal vegetables? **Medwyn Williams**, ten times Chelsea gold-medal winner and Chairman of the National Vegetable Society, gives his personal selection

WINTER RELISH

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, Sunday lunch at home meant Brussels sprouts and parsnips. I hated the bitterness of the sprouts and the blandness of the parsnips (and, I'm afraid, the way my poor mother cooked them) with a passion. Fortunately plant breeders have done some excellent work on both sprouts and parsnips since my childhood. The flavour of the first-ever F₁ hybrid parsnip, 'Gladiator', remains superb, while today's hybrid Brussels sprouts, too, are far removed from older cultivars, with tighter, much sweeter 'buttons'.

True winter vegetables such as these have to be hardy to succeed in the UK's variable climate, but there are other crops that can give you fresh produce through the colder months. While they may not grow as quickly as summer crops, given water in dry, mild periods and not harvested when the ground is frozen, arguably winter vegetables require less looking after. It is about time we made more use of them. Why shop for expensive produce imported from foreign climes for our dinner tables, when we could be growing our own? ■

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CURLY KALE

I would never be without 'Nero di Toscana Precoce' kale (better known as Black Tuscan) with its attractive, dark green, deeply savoyed, strap-like leaves and its fantastic winter hardiness. Kale is an excellent source of vitamins in winter, particularly vitamin C.

I sow seed in trays in April, transplanting them into cells before planting out about 60cm (24in) apart, and heeling-in well. I believe kale can be the most productive of winter veg as you do not have to harvest the whole head: treat it like a salad-bowl lettuce, on a cut-and-come-again basis, simply removing a few lower leaves as and when you require them.

CABBAGES

I love cabbages, both red and green. The red we usually pickle and it will last us through to next year. Of winter cabbage I prefer the beautiful savoy cultivars for their looks and their taste. I have two to suggest. 'January King 3' is one of the hardiest cabbages you can grow, producing flat, solid heads tinged with red for harvesting from November to January. More modern 'Traviata' is a quality F₁ savoy to grow through winter with exceptionally dark green foliage.

With all brassicas check the pH of your soil: they thrive on alkaline soil. Aim for a pH of 6.5 to 7.0, adding lime if needed to reduce the risk of club root disease.

SPRING ONIONS

How about a spring or bunching onion that lasts through winter? 'Guardsman', as the name implies, grows bolt upright and is a really vigorous grower through the worst that winter can throw at it.

I broadcast-sow this one in a half-size seedtray in September and transplant into 40-cell trays to plant directly outdoors. You can plant it closely packed in rows only a few centimetres apart. Its vigour is such that I have seen it grow over winter to the size of a small leek. Obviously it is excellent in salads, but just as good in omelettes or as a milder alternative to bulb onions.

PARSNIPS

My parsnips are usually the remainder of those that I sow in the middle of February for display and the show benches. I grow them in a raised bed of sand. When I need them for the house they are usually so large that one is enough for the whole family.

For general sowing and growing in the ground I still recommend the same cultivars: 'Gladiator', which has an Award of Garden Merit (AGM; see pp28–29), or newer 'Picador' and 'Pinnacle', all F₁ hybrids and guaranteed to be full of flavour. Aim for a soil pH between 6.5 and 7.0 – this helps resistance to parsnip canker disease, which blackens and splits roots, leading to rotting.

LEEKs

No self-respecting Welshman's winter garden would be complete without leeks. For harvesting right through winter into next spring, there is no better vegetable to grow.

I much prefer leeks to onions; they are milder in flavour and superb in stews. The exhibition cultivars I grow tend not to be robust enough to last me through winter so I also grow hardier selections such as 'Toledo' and 'Longbow' – both have AGMs. 'Longbow' has long stems that can be ready in October from a summer sowing, but will stand in good condition right through winter to the following March.

TURNIPS

Perhaps a surprising choice, as turnips are usually considered a summer crop that can be lifted in 10 weeks from sowing, but a new F₁ hybrid selection called 'Armand' is extremely winter hardy, and tastes delicious. Turnips in my opinion are vastly underrated – they are both versatile and have superb flavour. Sow 'Armand' between the middle of July and the middle of August and you can harvest from December right through to February.

'Armand' has upright tops, allowing plenty of light to fall onto the shoulders, enhancing the purple colour. It is a perfect crop to follow new potatoes. Simply scatter 60g (2oz) of fish, blood and bone meal per yard run of the bed and open a shallow drill.

I have transplanted turnips from multicell trays with great success, fitting as many as 40 cells into a normal, full-sized seedtray. Sow three or four seeds into each cell of multipurpose compost and, when they germinate, thin down with scissors to one per cell. Leave until the tops are around 5cm (2in) tall when there will be sufficient roots within the cells to allow you to remove the whole plug and transplant directly outdoors.

BRUSSELS SPROUTS

I like to make two sowings of a cultivar of Brussels sprout that has yet to be named (currently called NIZ 16-4021), but modern hybrids such as 'Abacus' or 'Bosworth' are just as hardy and flavourful. I sow about 20 seeds around the middle of April; as soon as they have popped their heads through the compost, I make another sowing of 20 seeds. This extends my cropping season from November through to January, nicely covering the Christmas period.

Broadcast-sow on some fine seed compost and, when the seedling leaf is well extended, transplant deeply into cell trays to grow on, using a finely sieved multipurpose compost.

When they have filled the cells, plant out 75cm (30in) apart – or 90cm (36in) if you have the room. The secret to growing good sprouts is to plant them deep, right up to the base of the first proper leaf, then ensure that the soil is well compacted around the plant. As a base dressing for all my brassicas I give 100g per sq m (3oz per sq yd) of Vitax Q4 HN – the initials HN mean 'high nitrogen', which is important to brassicas, as you want plenty of leaf formation before winter.

Once they are growing away, give a high-nitrogen fertiliser such as dried blood: 5ml (a tea-spoon) is enough, scattered in a 15cm (6in) circle around the base of each plant and watered in well.

Vegetable-growing events:
 ● **RHS Garden Rosemoor, Devon:** three talks on vegetable garden basics begins on 20 Jan, 11am–1pm; then on 27 Jan and 3 Feb. Members £8, non-members £14 (per talk).
 ● **RHS Garden Hyde Hall, Essex** is running a Vegetables from Scratch workshop, 10 Mar, 11am–2pm. Members £13, non-members £19.
 ● **Pennard Plants, Somerset:** grow-your-own-food masterclasses, 16 and 28 Jan, 10 and 24 Feb, 10.30am–3pm. Members £21.95, non-members £26.95 per event (includes light lunch and refreshments). Call 0845 612 1253 to book; www.pennardplants.com