

Ready, steady, grow

There are many vegetables that can be sown and planted in February, ensuring a valuable head start

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Late winter always seems to drag its heels, but with spring just weeks away it is possible for gardeners to get a range of edible crops off to a flying start now. Sowing seeds in February can bring forward significantly the first harvests of fast-growing spring and early-summer vegetables, such as salads and broad beans. It also lengthens the season for crops that are normally slow to mature, such as parsnips, celeriac and chillies, producing larger, tastier harvests. Early planting outdoors can be a gamble, the odds of success getting longer the further north you garden. Cold, wet soil is inhospitable to seeds, and sowings made in poor conditions are unlikely to grow. Tough vegetables, such as broad beans and garlic, stir



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vegetables

Maximise your vegetable harvest (above) and extend the growing season by starting some crops in February.

into life in chilly February soil, but others need protection to do well. Within the cover of cloches, cold frames or an unheated glasshouse you can sow a wider range of crops. This is a simple way to achieve early pickings of quick-growing salad leaves and to get ahead with root crops from radishes to parsnips. Heated glasshouses, propagators and sunny windowsills provide frost-free conditions which you

can use to start tender and slow-maturing crops, such as chillies and leeks. **More from the RHS** The four RHS Gardens are holding a Grow Your Own weekend (24-25 March) to mark the start of the vegetable-growing season. www.rhs.org.uk/growyourown **The RHS Summer Fruit and Vegetable Competition** is at RHS Flower Show Tatton Park, Cheshire, July 2012; www.rhs.org.uk/tattonpark

SOWING OUTDOORS

Only the hardiest vegetables grow unprotected this early in the year and it is essential to choose suitable cultivars. Never plant when soil is frozen or waterlogged; wait for relatively mild, dry weather. To help warm soil, cover it with plastic or cloches a week or so before planting.



Broad beans: 'Superaguadulce' and 'Aquadulce Claudia'.
Garlic: 'Solent Wight', and others recommended for spring planting. **Plant garlic as early as possible** because it requires exposure to cold for the bulb to split into separate cloves. Plant cloves about 5cm (2in) deep once soil is workable.



Peas: 'Douce Provence' and 'Feltham First' are suited to early sowing. **Peas should only be sown outdoors during late winter in mild areas.** For a head start prior to planting out, sow double rows in lengths of guttering and keep in the glasshouse.
Jerusalem artichokes: 'Fuseau' tubers can be planted in warmer areas.



If soil is workable, some crops can be planted in February.

STARTING UNDER COVER

Given some shelter from chilly February conditions, you can sow a tempting spread of vegetables. Sow vegetable seed directly into soil warmed below cloches or low tunnels, or make use of any space in the glasshouse or cold frame to raise young plants in modules, ready for hardening off and planting out once spring arrives.

Keeping an eye on the weather Be wary, however, as cold conditions can still bite under cover, preventing germination or causing young plants to bolt, so wait for good weather; provide additional insulation such as fleece or bubble plastic if a hard frost is forecast. Choose cultivars bred for their cold tolerance and resistance to bolting.



Beetroot: look for bolt-resistant cultivars such as 'Boltardy' and 'Bikores'.



Carrots: 'Yukon' and 'Nairobi'.
Germination is slow in cold conditions, so warm soil before planting. Early sowings usually avoid the worst carrot-fly damage.



Lettuce: 'Salad Bowl' or butterhead cultivars such as 'Merveille des Quatre Saisons'.



Parsnips: 'Avonresister' and 'Arrow'.
Slow to germinate at the best of times. Only sow early in mild areas and favourable weather.



Cut-and-come-again salad leaves: mizuna, pak choi, salad rocket and komatsuna.



Radishes: 'Saxa' and 'Marabelle'.
These small-leaved selections perform well from February sowings and make a great early spring crop sown in frames or in glasshouse beds.



A cold frame gives invaluable protection for young vegetable plants in early spring.



Get ahead in February by sowing in a glasshouse, ready for planting out in late spring or summer.

STARTING WITH HEAT

Tender crops are often germinated early in heat, but some hardy autumn staples can also be kick-started in late winter. A heated propagator in a cold glasshouse or on a sunny windowsill is ideal.

Keeping an eye on the weather Germinate vegetable seeds on windowsills in a propagator or keep pots and trays covered with a clear plastic bag to retain heat and moisture. Do not shut them behind curtains against a cold window at night. Germinating vegetable seeds in heat is straightforward: the challenge is to ensure that there is space to keep rapidly growing young plants frost-free until it is mild enough to plant them out in late spring and early summer. This is most easily provided in a heated glasshouse or conservatory.



Leeks: early cultivars such as 'Pancho' and 'King Richard'.



Cabbages: 'Derby Day' and 'Hispi'.
Sow summer cabbages at about 18°C (64°F), move to a cool, frost-free spot after germination and plant out mid-spring.



Brussels sprouts: 'Peer Gynt' and 'Trafalgar'.



Celeriac: 'Monarch' and 'Prinz'.
Sow in deep modules in a heated propagator and harden young plants off carefully to prevent bolting, before planting out in late spring.



Chillies: 'Aurora' and Habanero Group.
Chillies germinate at about 21°C (70°F) and thrive in heat. For a windowsill, choose a compact selection such as 'Aurora'.