

Growing vegetables

Bill Sowerbutts

There has been a revival of vegetable growing in recent years matched by a call from people wanting information on how to grow their own. This is the first of a series of articles on the subject, outlining stages of vegetable growing at different times of the year. Links to web sites providing more detailed information are given on the CGS website.

Many gardens planted in cottage garden style now rarely include vegetables. Traditionally, when a larger proportion of people lived in cottages, the term was used to describe the garden surrounding it, which often included a vegetable plot. Those who already grow a range of plants in their garden, and want to include vegetables, have a head start over complete newcomers because they usually know about how to look after plants, as well as how to avoid some of the pitfalls. A separate vegetable plot is not essential; vegetables can be grown among other plants and spaced irregularly rather than in lines.

My knowledge about growing vegetables has grown over the years and although I'd not describe it as very easy - I'd rather say it is not difficult - which assumes a degree of knowledge and understanding. It certainly helps if you know a bit about the soil types and the effect that water, light, and temperature have on plants. You need to develop a protective attitude because there are birds, insects and furry animals out there who will also enjoy eating your vegetables unless you stop them. Weeds will turn up uninvited, keen to show how fast they can grow. If you do not have garden beds or an allotment you can grow vegetables in pots, grow bags or window boxes. If you want to let someone else start growing your vegetable plants, or only want to grow a few of a particular type, you can buy partly grown plug plants instead of starting from a packet of seeds.

In September thoughts might be more about winding down for the year than about growing vegetables, but autumn is a good time to start routine maintenance on arguably the most important resource vegetables will need next year - your soil. To ensure my heavy soil is fertile and has a



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good texture I add compost and dig it over using a spade. This way surface plant debris ends up 25cm or so underground where it will rot. Furthermore, at that depth few weed seeds will germinate. Digging to 25cm or more can be tiring but it can be done in stages over several months and pays dividends. Winter frosts and rain break down the soil lumps, so by springtime the soil is approaching seedbed quality. If you cannot dig, a thick layer of organic matter put on the soil surface in autumn will rot down to make a soil suitable for growing vegetables - but it is my impression that when folk just ‘tickle’ the ground surface rather than give their soil a good turning over, they find persistent weeds are a problem.

If you already garden you will probably have most of the tools and equipment needed to grow vegetables. While most vegetables can be grown from seed sown directly into the soil, conditions, including the weather, have to be right to ensure success. UK weather is unreliable. Considerable control over growing conditions can be achieved using a greenhouse, but even a heated propagator is very useful for getting plants started. Most run on electricity and can be used indoors.

Bill gardens in Cheshire and is a recent addition to our Executive Committee. He says ‘Some people wonder if I am directly related to the Bill Sowerbutts who used to be on Gardeners’ Question Time, or am that very person. I am neither. However, some of my ancestors apparently came from the Ashton-under-Lyne area of Greater Manchester where my namesake lived and grew vegetables, so I feel I am from the same gene pool’.