

# Vegetable plotting

*Bill Sowerbutts*

At this time of year the number of things you can do in your garden is limited, and so gardeners tend to go inside, drift into semi-hibernation, and start thinking about the future. It's a time when you can let your imagination run riot and dream about all the exuberant plants you will be growing next year. You imagine there will be ideal gardening weather for the whole year, and dream about trying new plant varieties to produce an unrivalled range of plants. Seed catalogues encourage you with pictures of copious quantities of healthy flowers and vegetables on every page, and descriptions to guide you towards producing abundant crops.

Winter is a good time to think about seeds to fuel your dream. Concentrating on vegetable seeds, which ones to get will depend on your aims and interests. If you want vegetables with decorative qualities to merge with other cottage garden plants, then purple curly kale, chard and frilly lettuces are popular. Artichokes and maize grow tall and can be used to provide structure. If you want to grow vegetables for exhibition or size, beauty or novelty value there are specialist seed suppliers who will oblige. However, most vegetables are grown for food.

'You imagine there will be ideal gardening weather for the whole year, and dream about trying new plant varieties to produce an unrivalled range of plants'.

There is not a tradition of vegetable growers saving their own seed as there is for flowers. Indeed, preventing vegetables from going to seed is generally desirable as they become inedible. So how do you decide where to get your seed? I use a range of sources - I save some of my own broad and runner bean seeds, and have had some interesting varieties from the CGS seed exchange scheme. I attend potato days held locally at the start of the year, as they offer a wide range of potato varieties and allow you to mix and match. In March the heat-treated onion sets I seek are in garden centres. I buy packets of seed

locally for lettuce, tomato, spur of the moment and small quantity items. Around January a national supplier gets my main seed for more peas, beans (broad, french and runner), carrots, leeks and onions. As I tend to harvest these before they reach their maximum size, I need a lot of seed.



How should you decide which seeds to select from the wide range listed in catalogues? Your growing condition (soil type, climate, aspect) will not be suitable for everything, so refer to the cultural descriptions for each type to get a match. Also, see if the variety has an Award of Garden Merit (AGM). This is a designation by the Royal Horticultural Society following trials and assessment of all-round garden value. What you enjoy eating is an important factor - if space is limited it may be better to buy than grow yourself. If you are new to vegetable growing be prepared for a few failures as you discover by trial and error what does well with you and what less so.

Should you go for new vegetable varieties that seed suppliers are promoting, or traditional ones? If you've chosen the latter, be prepared to feel unimaginative when others discuss their latest seed orders. Your friend proudly announces he has ordered his tomato seeds and reels off exotic names like Alicante, Fantasio and Yellow Perfection. All you can muster is Gardener's Delight, Shirley and Money Maker - but there is a good reason why many traditional varieties of vegetable are still popular and have stood the test of time. Just because a new variety is highlighted in a catalogue does not guarantee it will be successful. For things like peas, french beans and carrots I usually grow three varieties; two that I've grown before and know do well, and one new variety to see how it performs against my favourites.

If you use the internet there is a world of information out there about all aspects of vegetable growing. The vegetable and fruit growing page on the CGS website has links to seed suppliers and lists potato days in 2014. *Bill gardens in Cheshire and is on our Executive Committee.* More information on potato days at <http://www.potato-days.net>.