



## A NATIONALLY RECOGNISED SUPPORT ORGANISATION FOR ALLOTMENTS AND GARDENERS

[www.swcaa.co.uk](http://www.swcaa.co.uk)

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# NEWSLETTER

**Welcome to our latest newsletter.** Here we are again with spring fast approaching and our thoughts turning to the gardening year ahead. This year is tinged with a little sadness for us here at SWCAA as we took the very difficult decision back in October to give up our plots. I will never forget the day I first got offered an allotment plot and the enthusiasm I had when I first saw my very own overgrown piece of heaven and the joy and sometimes pain it has given me over the past 12 years. It has kept me going through the bad times providing a welcome distraction even when the thought of going there seemed like to much hard work. There is something about gardening and growing your own produce that lifts the spirit and transports you into a world away from the everyday pressures of life. I will miss it but I am fortunate enough to have a lovely garden at home where I plan to continue to grow a few of my favourites in my little greenhouse and in containers and pots wherever I can squeeze them in. We also now have more time to travel around the UK in our VW campervan named Tigerlily allotment spotting as we go. Here's hoping for a cracking summer like last year and produce a plenty...**Ayesha Hooper, Director/CEO**



**To sow or not to sow....** Sow in haste, regret at leisure? At this time of year with spring approaching many a keen gardeners thoughts turn to sowing seeds. Search the internet and the gardening forums and there are always people sowing seeds way to early and wondering why they don't grow! The danger is that bringing seeds into life too early by giving them heat before you can offer the proper light levels for healthy growth results in leggy, pale seedlings rather than the virile green seedlings that make good productive plants. You'll also end up with windowsills groaning with seed trays. Most vegetable seeds won't germinate until the soil reaches a certain temperature, it varies from crop to crop, but around 8°C is a good guide to go by.

There is really no point sowing seeds direct into cold wet soil, it is best to wait until April or even later, when soil temperatures should have risen. If you prefer to start your veg plants off in modules in a greenhouse or on a windowsill, there's a good argument to get things going earlier than April. This is particularly vital for the heat-loving Mediterranean vegetables that need early sowings - tomatoes, chillies, aubergines and peppers need a long growing season if they are to fruit before summer ends. So these are best started off in a heated propagator or make your own propagator from a seed tray or pot covered with a clear plastic bag and keep on a warm windowsill. To increase your chances of sowing success, there are a few things you can do to help with of low light levels and stuffy indoor temperatures – both of which can encourage damping off.

- \* **Practice good hygiene**, wash trays, propagators and pots and rinse with a greenhouse disinfectant.
- \* **Always use fresh compost**, for best results use a brand new bag of compost.
- \* **Use fresh seeds**, New seeds are always best, old seeds may not germinate wasting your time and money.
- \* **Choose the right location**, a bright warm windowsill with a steady temperature is best.
- \* **Water wisely**, water seeds after sowing and then check daily and be sure not to let them dry out.

Bear in mind there are plenty of other gardening jobs you can do but, granted they do not offer the same excitement as the sight of a tiny seedling bursting through the soil.

**Choosing chickens for beginners.** Hybrid breeds have been bred to be the best egg layers and can produce up to 300 eggs a year for the first couple of years. They are cheap to buy and easy to come by and are also easy to handle, which is ideal for beginners. Most hybrid hens are good natured and friendly and there are many different breeds to choose from including Rhode Island Reds, Gingernut, Warrens, speckled hens and rangers. Bantam hens are a good alternative but do not produce as many eggs.



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**A garden in a gutter!** Gardeners have been starting seedlings off in guttering for years, commonly associated with peas guttering can provide a convenient way to grow many vegetables for the allotment, allowing you to hollow out a row and just slide the lot into place with no transplanting required. Anything shallow rooted will be perfectly at home in a gutter, from beetroot, turnips, baby leaf salads, strawberries and herbs as well as chard, dwarf French beans and mangetout. Guttering is ideal for protecting vulnerable plants from munching pests as they can be hung in the greenhouse or polytunnel out of the way. Guttering cut into about 1 metre lengths works best, add a few drainage holes and be sure to attach some stop ends. Fill the guttering with a multi purpose compost, water well and allow to drain. Sow the seeds as per packet instructions and cover with a little more compost and firm down gently. Seedlings will be perfectly happy in the guttering until they are around 10cm tall and then once hardened off they can be transplanted. Give the seedlings a good water, dig out your trench and gently squeeze the guttering to loosen the compost and then slide into place firming the soil around them.. Voila.



**Have a go and under sow!** Under sowing is a technique involving sowing another crop underneath a plant already growing. A key advantage being that it allows the second crop to become established a lot quicker before the current one is finished. Green manures lend themselves well to this technique so that they can over winter after the veg crops have finished. Most gardeners know that green manures are a good idea but many don't get round to using them to their full potential, getting the green manure established beneath the food crop before it is finished enables you to continue with your harvesting.

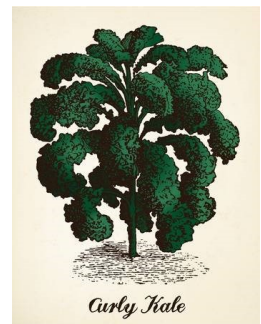
The general rule is to sow the green manure underneath the veg crop when it is still quite small, the food crop will grow quite quickly whilst the green manure grows as a low canopy beneath. When the veg crop is removed the manure will then take off. Getting the balance of crops right is crucial to

success as you do not want the green manure to take off too quickly and smother the food crop. Follow these easy steps below and under sow with confidence:

\* Sow your veg crops such as sweetcorn or climbing beans into trays in April. \* Around mid May prepare the ground by raking it into a fine tilth. \* Plant out the veg plants into the prepared ground. \* Sow the green manure seed at the same time and rake it in shallowly, use about half a teaspoon per square metre for good growth. \* Grow your food crop as normal. \* Remove any foreign weeds. \* Once the veg crop has finished remove it and the green manure will be left to overwinter. \* In spring cut down and dig in the green manure, do this just before you plant your next veg crop. The longer the manure grows the better for the soil.

**Tips for under sowing** - Choose larger, upright plants such as climbing beans, gourds, sweetcorn, tomatoes and cucumbers as these will have space underneath for sowing the green manure. Choose less vigorous green manures with a small leaf such as white clover or yellow trefoil for under sowing as they are less invasive. If the green manure is growing to quickly simply trim it back a little. Consider removing the food crop earlier if it has pretty much finished producing, this will allow the green manure to get better established over the winter months, which in turn will give it time to get lots of nutrients into the ground.

**Growing Kale.** A member of the brassica family kale's popularity has increased hugely due to its nutritional properties. It tolerates the cold weather well and is pretty much pest free. Kale is considered to be closer to wild cabbage than most domesticated forms of Brassica. There are many varieties to choose from such as cavolo nero, black magic, redbor and afro, dwarf green curled to name but a few, the leaves are best picked when young and tender. Sow thinly ½ inch deep in a seed bed in rows 6 inch apart from March to June. Thin the seedlings to 3 inch apart. Transplant young plants to their growing position when they have about six true leaves, setting the lowest leaves at ground level. Water well the day before moving, leave about 18 inch between plants and firm in well after transplanting and water well. Keep well watered in dry weather, consider a mulch to retain moisture. A spring feed will improve results. Protect the plants from birds by covering with netting or fleece.



**Incredible edible flowers.** Using flowers in food is something that has been done for many years and isn't just about garnishes and salads. They can be stuffed and deep fried and used in teas and preserves. Primroses are traditionally used to decorate Simnel cakes at Easter and violets are deliciously sweet and can be preserved in sugar and will last for months. By late spring winter salad crops and brassicas are going to seed and the striking cream coloured flowers of the rocket plant are sweeter than other brassica flowers and make a tasty addition to the salad bowl. Summer brings borage flowers which have a cucumber like scent and can be added to certain drinks like a G&T or Pimms and also calendula, hollyhocks and roses. Hollyhocks do not have much flavour but can add a lovely touch of colour to a summer salad. Roses have been used for many years they can be dried and used in teas. Nasturtiums will flower prolifically until the first frosts arrive and the flowers have the same peppery taste as their leaves but with an added sweetness from their nectar. These edible flowers can be grown quite happily amongst your vegetables and can help your plot find a natural balance by supporting both pollinating insects as well as the

predators. Carrot flies can easily be confused by the scent of a strategically placed row of marigolds! Try using the individual flowers of chives or even wild garlic which have a lovely onion tang and work well in salads, risotto or omelettes. Courgettes and other members of the cucurbit family mainly have large flowers which are ideal for stuffing especially with a ricotta cheese filling, dipped in a tempura batter and deep fried. Pick the flowers in the morning before they begin to fade and watch out for hidden insects.

All roses are edible but remove the white bases from the petals as these can be bitter. Rose petals are beautifully scented and are great in deserts but come into their own when used in syrups, jams, jellies and teas. Many edible flowers grow well in containers such as nasturtium, herbs like thyme, oregano and chives their flowers taste much the same as the leaves. Annual edible flowers such as borage, violas, calendula and nasturtiums will establish themselves as self seeders coming up all over the place year after year, filling gaps, helping out the insects as well as providing a riot of colour on the allotment plot.

*Edible Flowers*



**Thinning seeds.** It seems that however sparingly you sprinkle those smaller seeds they will never be as spaced out as they should be, this is not always a bad thing though as there is always a need for spares! When things get to crowded it's the time to get thinning, removing unwanted seedlings to leave the ideal amount of space between each plant. Choose the largest healthiest plants to keep and remove the rest being careful not to disturb the roots of the remaining plants. Use your thumb and forefinger to remove them at ground level. Some crops like carrots will provide an extra harvest if you thin them out gradually, pull every other seedling, then once they have grown a bit more and are rubbing shoulders with the carrot next to them repeat until you have about 5cm between plants.

**Avoiding blackfly.** The shoot tips of broad beans are irresistible to blackfly so keep an eye on your plants and be ready to act fast. Pinching out shoot tips once a month after the plants have set a few pods is pretty effective as it removes the tasty bits blackfly love. Squashing them between your fingers also works well but if your broad beans are heavily infested then spray with an insecticidal spray. Repeat if it rains and your plants should be pest free in no time. There is also a biological control that can be watered on to control the worst outbreaks.

**Register your allotment site with SWCAA** - Please register your allotment site and association with us and we will add you to our National register. This register is also a guide to the allotments in your area and contains information about the site and how to get in touch if you want a plot. We hope to build a comprehensive guide to all the allotment sites across the country. A registration form and full details can be found on our website <https://www.swcaa.co.uk/find-site>





