

Growing hardy veg from seed



Sowing vegetable crops at the right time lets seeds germinate more quickly, gives them the right growing conditions and, if transplanting, the young plants should establish rapidly at the optimum point in their development.

Get timing and conditions right

Raising hardy vegetable plants in modules, trays or pots in an unheated but frost-free greenhouse is ideal. Early sowing, with speedier germination, is possible: the plants are a good size by planting-out time, and they will be more resistant to pest and disease attack. You can achieve gap-free rows of vegetables this way, and you may find you use less seed than when direct sowing, as no thinning is necessary. However, direct sowing may be more efficient for larger plots.

Sowing in modules also allows germination without competition, and reduces transplant shock on root systems – although larger seeds, such as broad beans, are best sown individually in 9cm (3½in) pots. Sow several seeds of beetroot, onions, radish and swede in each module, and transplant without thinning. If you use seedtrays to start seeds off, pot on into individual pots ('pricking out') or plant outdoors once they have grown their first pair of true leaves after the seed leaves.

Repeat-sow quick-maturing crops such as beetroot, carrots, lettuce, radish and spinach outdoors every few weeks for continuous supplies over a longer period.

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When to sow popular hardy crops

Most seed will only germinate when soil temperatures are at or above 7°C (45°F).

crop	In an unheated greenhouse (in modules, trays or pots)	Direct sow ^a advisable to fleece crops planted early in these months
beetroot	Mar, Apr	Mar ^a , Apr, May, Jun, July
broad beans	Feb, Mar, Apr; Oct, Nov to overwinter	Feb ^a , Mar, Apr; Oct, Nov to overwinter
Brussels sprouts	Feb, Mar	Mar ^a , Apr
cabbage (summer / autumn cropping)	Apr, May, Jun, Jul	Apr, May, Jun, Jul
calabrese (broccoli)	Feb, Mar, Apr, May, Jun	Apr, May, Jun
carrots		Feb ^a , Mar, Apr, May, Jun, Jul
chard	Mar, Apr, May, Jun, Jul	Apr, May, Jun, Jul
Florence fennel		Jun, Jul
kale	Feb, Mar	Apr, May, Jun
leeks	Feb, Mar	Feb ^a , Mar ^a , Apr
lettuce	Jan, Feb, Mar	Mar, Apr, May, Jun, Jul, Aug, Sep
onions	Jan, Feb, Mar	Mar ^a , Apr, May
parsnip		Mar, Apr, May
peas	Jan, Feb	Mar, Apr, May, Jun
radish	Jan, Feb, Mar	Apr, May, Jun, Jul, Aug
spinach	Mar, Apr	Mar ^a , Apr, Jun, July; Sep to overwinter
swede	Apr, May	Jun
turnip	Mar, Apr	Apr, May, Aug



Growing seeds in individual modules means that plants can germinate and grow without competition.

Growing tender vegetable crops

Harvesting tender vegetables can be the essence of summer. A little planning now ensures the best start in life and good-quality crops. Some tender crops can be sown straight into the ground in early summer (see table below), but others need a longer growing season to give of their best, so need to be started off indoors.

When to sow tender crops

The season starts now with slow-growing aubergines, chillies and sweet peppers. Sow these from late February to March in 9cm (3½in) pots or modules in a heated propagator in an unheated greenhouse, or on a windowsill in the house, at a minimum temperature of 18°C (64°F). Once germinated, grow seedlings on above 16°C (61°F), then plant out into a tunnel or greenhouse to grow to harvest. In the warmest, most sheltered areas, some cultivars can be grown outdoors.

Sow tomatoes in temperatures above 15°C (59°F) in April or May; once germinated, grow on at 21°C (70°F) ideally in a greenhouse. Tomatoes beyond the seedling stage soon begin to become 'leggy' in the relatively low light levels on windowsills in the house. Unless you have facilities such as heated propagators, and ideally a greenhouse for growing on, beware sowing seed too early.

Sow outdoor crops (including runner and French beans, courgettes, squashes and sweet corn) later, individually, in 9cm (3½in) pots or large module trays to ensure minimum root damage when transplanted. You won't want to hold them back for too long in their pots, so sow no more than four weeks before your last anticipated frost. Or, sow direct into beds a little later.

Hardening off

All vegetables grown under cover will need acclimatising to outdoor conditions (hardening off). Place them outdoors,



Aubergines (above) can be sown now but sweet corn (right) should be sown no earlier than four weeks before your last forecast frost, to avoid any checks to growth.



covered with two layers of fleece during the day, and bring them under cover at night for a week. In the second week, use just one layer of fleece. Towards the end of the fortnight, remove the fleece during the day.

If the weather is mild, leave the plants outdoors at night but ensure they are covered with fleece. During the third week, they will be acclimatised and can be planted out into their growing positions.

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When to sow popular tender vegetables

Note: most seed will only germinate when soil temperatures are at or above 7°C (45°F).

tender crop	Modules and pots Month of sowing indoors	Direct sowing outdoors Sow under fleece	Minimum germination temperature	Minimum growing-on temperature after germination
aubergine	Feb, Mar, Apr		21°C (70°F)	16°C (61°F)
chilli / sweet pepper	Feb, March		18°C (64°F)	16°C (61°F)
courgette / squash	Apr, May	May	13°C (55°F)	15°C (59°F)
cucumber (outdoor)	Apr	May, Jun	20°C (68°F)	15°C (59°F)
sweet corn	Apr	May, Jun	20°C (68°F)	20°C (68°F)
runner / French bean	Apr, May	Jun	12°C (54°F)	12°C (54°F)
tomato	Apr, May		15°C (59°F)	21°C (70°F)