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His refreshing approach to growing unusual and forgotten food along with the best of the familiar has done much to inspire a new generation of gardeners and cooks. As well as his books, Mark has written for the weekend broadsheets, and magazines as diverse as *National Geographic*, *Country Life* and *Delicious*.

Mark was involved with River Cottage in the early days, appearing in the TV series and writing three of the *River Cottage Handbook* series.

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# **GROW & COOK**

The Ultimate Kitchen Garden Guide

**MARK DIACONO**



# For my Mum

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## INTRODUCTION

Grow at least a little of what you eat, just once. You deserve it. Life is busy, I know, and time is precious, but don't let too much time pass before you taste a sun-warmed tomato plucked from a plant you grew yourself; before you enjoy a salad of homegrown leaves; or know the pleasure of an apple, a peach or a handful of strawberries eaten straight from the plant. Even if you do it only once, it will enrich your fleeting time on this planet. You don't even need to commit to an allotment or a garden: create a collection of herbs by the door and though they ask little of you, they can change every meal you eat.

Look over a few garden walls or into an allotment and you'll see that most of the space given over to edibles is dedicated to a few familiar foods. Potatoes, carrots, onions, various cabbages and salad leaves dominate, and very fine they are too. And yet they are a slender selection from the many possibilities for your kitchen garden. This book is an encouragement to take a wider look, to consider *all* the finest flavours I know. Whether your garden is a bunch of containers, a small patch of earth, a forest garden or a smallholding, you'll find a wealth of delicious possibilities from which to choose.

To get the most from your garden, let go of all preconceptions of what you might grow. Imagine no one had ever grown any of their own food, and that an all-powerful deity appeared in the sky and bestowed upon each of us a little outdoor space in which we may grow anything we'd like to eat. Faced with all this beautiful possibility – the prospect of our favourite flavours

and textures, of tastes and experiences we may never have tried but that take our fancy, and only the climate and our imagination to limit us – what would you choose to grow?

I'm optimistic enough to think it unlikely that, fuelled by the excitement and freshness of new possibilities, we would dedicate most of our garden to the cheapest, most disease-prone, most widely available food there is. With a clean mental slate and no history of gardening to dominate our thinking, we would almost certainly come up with different choices to our neighbours. I love sprouts, No. 46 loathes them; the family over the road wants a mini fruit forest, their neighbour favours a sea of herbs. I like to think that we would display a touch of individualism, that our choices – and hence our garden – would reflect our personality, perhaps even be one of the ways in which we allow that self to develop. A garden will do that for you, if you let it.

If this book does one thing, I hope it will uncurl your fingers from familiar choices. Those familiars may be perfectly fantastic – ideal for you even – but let them alone for now: they're not going anywhere. You can always grasp them later if they're still the ones you want.

This book is also an invitation to ask yourself a few questions. Do you want to grow expensive food rather than cheap? Is flavour or yield more important to you? What is your favourite food? How much time do you want to commit? Are you open to the possibility that you might be embarking on something far more rewarding, far more happy-making, far more profoundly important even than eating delicious, nourishing meals?

Amongst the couple of hundred edible plants in these pages, there is everything from the ubiquitous to the unusual: none are inherently 'better' than others. To some, none of the plants in this book will be new: people have long grown even the most

uncommon foods herein. Remember, there are no right answers: if you want to grow potatoes, then do; if loquats are your fancy, give them space. My only hope is that you grow something, and that you grow it in the way that gives you the most reward and pleasure.

## Love what you have

Many people perceive themselves as being in transition: on the way to a new job, that house, more land, a perfect future. It rarely arrives, largely because we take ourselves with us. More often than not, any improvements we ask of life are more about ourselves than our lot – and so it is too with our gardens.

To be alive where you are is the key to happy gardening. Imagine you will live where you do for years (and often, that's exactly how it works out). Don't hesitate in planting an asparagus bed – the worst that will happen is that you move and leave something that will brighten the springtimes of those that follow for the next couple of decades. Scratch that: the worse that can happen is you don't plant if for fear of moving on, and three years later when you should be living off the tender green spears, you're still there umming and ahing about whether to plant or not. This was me at our first house. Within a few weeks of moving to the second, out came the spade – I planted asparagus crown after asparagus crown. Don't waste the time I did in between. Live like this is the only place you'll ever garden. If it's too small to be your ideal garden, take the free time as an opportunity to enjoy something else; if it's too large, share it.

Limitations are often to do with attitude and perceived

ideals. Be positive. If your soil isn't ideal, you can improve it; if it's non-existent or truly awful, a raised bed or containers will overcome. While a sunny spot may allow you to grow the majority of plants that need plenty of warmth and light to produce well, there are leaves, sour cherries and currants amongst the many that find happiness in the shade. Detach yourself from the myth that summer harvests are necessarily more desirable or delicious than those from cooler months – celeriac is no less fabulous than a tomato, a fistful of sprouting broccoli is every bit as good as a pepper. There is always something delicious to grow whatever your patch – find yours and enjoy it.

Remember: there is almost always a way of growing something, whatever your space. Very dwarfing rootstocks can hold almonds and most other fruit and nuts to 1.5 metres in height and spread; blueberries will thrive in pots with ericaceous compost if your soil doesn't suit them; while a combination of rootstock and training can keep most fruit trees to a size that will flourish in a pot on a balcony. If there is a way, this book will show you it.

Lastly, love what you have because it might end up being exactly where and what you want it to be. The next place isn't always better; the larger piece of land not necessarily an incremental pleasure. If you ask for something else, you might find it's not what you thought it would be – you might realise you already had it.

## Choosing what to grow

Choosing what to grow is really choosing what to eat. Almost. Let your tastebuds decide for you and allow your sense of antic-



ipation to lead your decision making, then you are unlikely to be disappointed when it comes to the eating.

Take time to decide what you'll grow and ask yourself: do I want gluts, a steadier supply or a mix of both? Is saving money a priority? Am I looking for some new flavours and experiences from my garden? Would I like my garden to be beautiful?

All are important, yes, but keep at the front of your thoughts that flavour inspires pleasure – it should be your guide. A handful of something full of flavour will enrich your life and encourage you to grow more of it. A wheelbarrowful of mediocrity is enough to put anyone off.

Even if your primary aspiration is to provide yourself with the core of your meals, your kitchen garden – whatever form it takes – can be a place of pleasure and of eye-opening flavours, where life balance can (miraculously) be restored. Whether it's solitude, companionability, somewhere to share with loved ones, exercise or relaxation you are looking for, your kitchen garden can offer it in abundance.

Providing you bite off what you can chew and tailor your garden to your life, your kitchen garden should light up rather than weigh down your life. The trick, as in most things in life, is to find a starting point that suits you. This is essential. Many people overstretch and give up gardening quickly, often blaming the world for not telling them that growing food was so much work. There is no such thing. If I gave you a pot of mint to look after, I suspect even the busiest amongst you would find it hard not to dedicate yourself to the once-in-a-while watering it requires. The key is to start small and build up, rather than overstretch and work back.

One thing I hope to do is to convince you that the familiar flavours are not necessarily the ones you'll enjoy most. Most

food in the supermarkets is there because its qualities suit the transport and storage necessary for it to reach the shelves in good visual condition, while resistance to disease is likely to have played more of a role in their selection than flavour. You can be confident that the French beans you buy are probably not that close to the finest they can be; and a mulberry or a wineberry are no less spectacular than a strawberry, despite their absence from the shelves.

Like everyone, I have favourites – flavours that I love or particularly connect with – and I will be unable to keep some preferences from becoming apparent. Feel free to ignore me or disagree when it occurs. Or take it as a challenge to try that hated brassica one more time, a different way to how you've had it before – it may just turn out to be special.

Despite giving equal prominence to less familiar foods, I remain enthusiastic of the well known. It is, after all, quite hard to improve upon the first new potatoes of the year or a handful of sunwarmed strawberries.

And lastly, I'm expecting – hoping even – that you'll disagree with me, that I might challenge or infuriate from time to time. All of that is crucial to getting to where you should be, with the kitchen garden that suits and works for you, and that provides you with fine food and pleasure in equal measure.

WHAT TO GROW

# VEGETABLES



## **AGRETTI**

*Salsola soda*. Also known as: European barilla plant, opposite-leaved saltwort, monk's beard and barba di frate. Hardy annual.

Agretti has been a real fixture in my garden in recent years. The slightly succulent texture and gentle mineral flavour of its slender leaves (like a green monk's beard, hence its name) go perfectly with eggs and fish and other seafood, and it adds delightful punctuation to almost any salad. Agretti has a wonderful texture and flavour raw, but is also happy to be cooked briefly - either steamed or sautéed. It's hard to find a finer lunch than an agretti tortilla.

**VARIETIES:** Generic.

**STARTING OFF:** Sow seed in late winter or early spring, as it needs cold to germinate. Sow in modules or direct into the ground 5–10mm deep. Germination can be erratic so sow twice as many seeds as you want plants.

**POSITION:** Full sun and light soil ideally – to suit its Mediterranean seaside origins.

**SPACING:** 20–30cm apart.

**PRODUCTIVITY/EFFICIENCY:** A great cut-and-come-again vegetable that's hard to find in the shops.

**GROWING:** Grows to full size (50cm height and 30cm spread)

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in less than two months. Each plant will grow into a small succulent bush that can be kept in shape with frequent harvesting. Easy to grow and pretty much pest free.

**POTENTIAL PROBLEMS:** Leaves can turn tough early in autumn. Seed is extremely short lived, with only a few months' viability.

**HARVEST:** Cut the green tops off the plants when they have reached 20cm – they will soon re-sprout and can be cut again.

## **ASPARAGUS**

*Asparagus officinalis*. Hardy perennial.

In mid-spring, asparagus provides the vegetable equivalent of that first mouthful of cider on a summer's afternoon when you should be working - it virtually defines springtime. It is the embodiment of the uniqueness of home-grown flavour - eat the slim spears cooked within a few minutes of cutting and you'll understand what makes otherwise grumpy old men and cranky old women leap from their beds brandishing asparagus knives during April and May. As good as food gets.

Asparagus needs little cooking - just a few minutes' steaming or simmering in water is plenty - it should be just tender. Hollandaise, mayonnaise, butter, pepper and Parmesan all go beautifully with asparagus. Do try it raw too - it has a flavour very like bright, fresh, unsalted peanuts.

**VARIETIES:** 'Darlise' is a very fine, vigorous French variety. 'Stuarts Purple' is one of the few purple varieties to retain its colour on cooking - tasty and tender. 'Connover's Colossal' is an old variety - flavourful and chunky, perfect for a late-season harvest.

**STARTING OFF:** Although asparagus can be started from seed, I'd suggest planting crowns – dormant clumps of roots – in early spring. Dig a ditch to a spade's depth and within it create a ridge, then lay the crowns over it. Cover with soil and water well.

**POSITION:** Sunny and well drained.

**SPACING:** 40cm apart.

**PRODUCTIVITY/EFFICIENCY:** A little work planting, some patience while they establish, but then low maintenance for a couple of decades of delicious productivity.

**GROWING:** Asparagus hates competition, so keep the bed weed free. Cut the stems back almost to the ground when they turn yellow in autumn/early winter.

**POTENTIAL PROBLEMS:** Watch out for asparagus beetle on mature plants (pick them off by hand), and protect young plants from slug damage.

**HARVEST:** Pick your first few spears 2 years after planting. The following year, harvest for just 6 weeks then stop to allow the plants to build up reserves for the following year.

## **AUBERGINE**

*Solarium melongena.* Frost-tender perennial.

I eat aubergines in more varied ways each year and, perhaps not by coincidence. I'm also getting better at growing them. Growing aubergines is a bit of a gamble: you need to kick them off early with heat and light and then hope that the bit you can't control – the summer – is sunny and long. If all the stars align, late summer will present you with really superb aubergines – likely smaller than those in the shops, but with such fine

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flavour and texture. They are at their best thinly sliced, lightly olive oiled and griddled. Their affinity for cumin (and, therefore, perilla) should be explored, especially in a curry.

**VARIETIES:** ‘Moneymaker’ and ‘Slim Jim’ are early and reliable varieties with taut, deep purple, shiny skins. They don’t tend to grow too large, so are good for cool areas. You could also try the beautifully coloured ‘Turkish Orange’. Perfect for a container, this Turkish heirloom variety produces small fruits that turn from green to orange, and have sweet flesh with little bitterness.

**STARTING OFF:** Aubergines need heat and light and a long growing season, so should be started off in February or March in modules or small pots in a heated propagator or airing cupboard. Once growing, pot on as the roots begin to show at the base until you reach a 30cm container. Either grow in the pot or plant into the ground in late May or June, ideally under cover. Consider young grafted plants: they are quick to mature and hence the fruit get more of the summer’s heat.

**POSITION:** Full sun and shelter, in a well-draining soil or compost. Best in the warmth of a greenhouse or polytunnel.

**SPACING:** 60cm apart.

**PRODUCTIVITY/EFFICIENCY:** Rarely highly productive in Britain, but the flavour and texture of home-grown aubergines is very special. Plants need plenty of feeding and warmth.

**GROWING:** Feed with a comfrey or seaweed feed every fortnight as soon as your plants have flowered. When the plants reach 30cm tall, pinch out the growing tip to encourage side shoots, and be sure to stake your plants. For larger varieties of aubergine allow only 5 or 6 fruit to develop, removing all other flowers.

**POTENTIAL PROBLEMS:** Aubergines need really warm weather to perform well and may fail to produce fruits in cooler summers. Spraying with water to increase humidity should discourage red spider mites, but you can use a biological pest control *Phytoseiulus persimilis* if this doesn't work. Aphids can usually be rubbed off as they appear but also try companion planting with basil.

**HARVEST:** Cut fruits in late summer when they are firm and shiny.

## **BAMBOO**

Various species - see below. Evergreen perennial.

Many years ago, when my couple of bamboos were getting established, Martin Crawford (author of *Creating A Forest Garden*) cooked me lunch of bamboo shoots, Good King Henry and sweet cicely seeds - it was my first taste of freshly harvested bamboo and it was incredible. Happily, mine are now throwing up plenty of crisp, fresh shoots every year - they seem to go through a door, before which they are slow, after which they are highly productive. Shoots can easily grow to 30cm in a couple of days, and should be picked no larger as they'll be tough. Their flavour isn't powerful, but rather like an interesting courgette. Non-bitter varieties can be eaten raw, or otherwise steamed for 10 minutes.

**VARIETIES:** There are many species of bamboo, all of which are edible. Generally speaking the *Phyllostachys* species are most productive in cooler climates like the UK. *Phyllostachys edulis* throws up shoots in spring whereas *P. aurea* produces them in autumn and both of which can be eaten raw. You could



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also try *P. viridiglaucescens* (early summer and also good raw) or *Pleioblastus simonii* (late summer, needs steaming to remove bitterness).

**STARTING OFF:** Source plants from a good supplier or divide established clumps.

**POSITION:** Tolerant of most moist soils and prefers light to moderate shade.

**SPACING:** This is dependent on species but running types such as *Phyllostachys* are keen to spread by throwing up new shoots, sometimes many feet away. Happily, once cut the shoots don't regrow and in this way the plant is easily kept within your chosen area.

**PRODUCTIVITY/EFFICIENCY:** Bamboos are very productive. With careful choice of varieties you can have young shoots from spring to autumn and with each variety producing new shoots over a period of 2–3 months. Some varieties like *Phyllostachys dulcis* begin putting up shoots in early spring when little else is around to eat.

**GROWING:** Little maintenance required. If harvested regularly then an annual mulch of compost will be needed or grow a nitrogen-fixing tree or shrub nearby.

**POTENTIAL PROBLEMS:** Control spread by cutting young shoots.

**HARVEST:** From spring to autumn, cut shoots at ground level, or just below, when it is around 30cm long. Remove the outer layers until you reach the tender pale green to white flesh.

## BEETROOT

*Beta vulgaris*. Hardy biennial.

I'm genuinely mystified as to the divide between beetroot lovers and haters - this is one of the must-haves of my garden. Reliable, easy, provider of delicious sweet roots and really under-appreciated leaves - I can only put any dislike down to poorly pickled beets eaten in childhood. Sow a few rows of the varieties below in spring and see if you still dislike them by early summer when they're harvested. Washed, unpeeled and roasted beetroots become deliciously sweet and earthy with rosemary, garlic and a little oil.

**VARIETIES:** 'Barbietola di Chioggia', with its glorious concentric candy stripes, and 'Burpees Golden', with its deep ginger flesh, are as beautiful as they are delicious. Essentials. For large, sweet, tender roots of classic deep rich purple, try 'Sanguina' or 'Bolivar'.

**STARTING OFF:** Sow 2 or 3 seeds on to each module in March, thinning to the strongest couple when they've germinated, planting them out in April, under fleece if you like. Subsequent sowings can be made direct every few weeks for a good supply throughout the summer and autumn months.

**POSITION:** Full sun is best, though will take a little shade. Well-composted ground is ideal.

**SPACING:** Thin to 7cm apart, or further apart if you prefer bigger beetroots.

**PRODUCTIVITY/EFFICIENCY:** Easy and cheap, needing little care as they grow.

**GROWING:** Water through extended dry periods.

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**POTENTIAL PROBLEMS:** Generally trouble free, though snails and slugs can make small holes later in the season and birds can occasionally bother the seedlings.

**HARVEST:** Harvest the largest bulbs in each row by gripping the stems and pulling gently. The bulbs should come up easily. Any neighbours left behind will swell to fill the space. For baby beetroot harvest from 7 weeks after sowing. Seedlings thinned out can be added to salads.

### **BORLOTTI BEAN**

*Phaseolus vulgaris*. Frost-tender annual.

I wouldn't grow many things just for looks - that'd be crossing over to the dark side where ornamental gardeners live - but for borlottis I'd make a rare exception. Lively climbing beans that skate up their support in search of light and heat, hanging glorious red and cream speckled pods as soon as they can. The beans within are one of my favourites - nutty, creamy and flavourful in themselves yet happy to take on strong flavours like garlic, chilli and the woody herbs. Great used fresh and store well into and out of winter for hearty soups and stews. A must.

**VARIETIES:** 'Lingua di Fuoco' is the most common variety - available also as a dwarf, which is good for exposed sites. You can occasionally find 'Lamon' - large and tasty beans, and the traditional variety for pasta e fagioli.

**STARTING OFF:** Sow from March until midsummer for beans from summer to autumn. Sow into root trainers under cover, then plant out from mid-May on to a sturdy framework of canes. Sow direct from late April until mid-July if you prefer.

**POSITION:** Full sun and a light, well-composted soil.

**SPACING:** 20cm apart.

**PRODUCTIVITY/EFFICIENCY:** Borlottis take up little floor space but grow tall, so are good for those looking to get a good harvest from limited garden room.

**GROWING:** Tie young plants into canes to help them on their way. A liquid or manure feed will boost the size of your crops, especially if grown in a container. Save some of your crop for sowing the following year.

**POTENTIAL PROBLEMS:** Slugs can be troublesome when the plants are young.

**HARVEST:** Harvest beans in late summer into autumn to eat fresh while the pods are plump with beans, either when the beans are green or leave them on the plant and harvest when the plants are beginning to desiccate. You can use the beans demi-sec like this, or cut the plant at the base and hang it upside down to dry the beans for a few days more.

## **BROAD BEAN**

*Vicia faba*. Hardy annual.

Worth growing just for the scent of the flowers - as happy-making as any ornamental - and the leafy tops which grow above the pods. Sliced off and stir fried they are one of the great unbuyable gardener's treats. The beans themselves are equally special, particularly if picked small - they are sweet and less bitter than when allowed to plump up. Equally importantly, picking them early encourages the plant to produce more, so you get no less in the way of yield.

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**VARIETIES:** ‘Bunyard’s Exhibition’ is my favourite with its reliably delicious, tender beans. For autumn sowing, ‘Aquadulce Claudia’ is a tough, hardy variety that grows slowly through winter to give early spring beans. ‘The Sutton’ is a dwarf that’s ideal for windy spots or containers, but whatever your situation, make a little space for the beautiful ‘Crimson Flowered’.

**STARTING OFF:** Sow hardy types 5cm deep straight into the ground in autumn, or into root trainers under cover in late winter, planting out from March onwards. In spring you can sow direct too but I tend to start most of mine under cover to get them off to a good start out of the way of the slugs.

**POSITION:** Sunny, well drained and ideally sheltered.

**SPACING:** 20cm apart, with 60cm between rows.

**PRODUCTIVITY/EFFICIENCY:** A spring sowing will be ready to harvest in around 3 months. The secret with broad beans is to sow in repeated small batches every 2 weeks or so, to avoid gluts and give you a steady harvest. The legume family (of which beans are part) enrich the soil by capturing nitrogen from the air and making it available in the soil – cut the plant at the base when the beans are harvested, to improve fertility for the plants that follow.

**GROWING:** Sow every fortnight or so through spring and early summer for a steady harvest, with plants ready to replace those that tire. Broad beans are tall plants and may need support. Push canes into the ground at the ends of the rows and tie string between them. Pinching out the growing tips when the first tiny pods are beginning to appear will direct the plant’s energy to the developing pods.

**POTENTIAL PROBLEMS:** Plants sown in autumn can weather badly, so cover with fleece or with a cloche if possible. Black aphids love broad beans – wipe them off with a cloth when you see them; pinching out the tips helps.

**HARVEST:** Spring-sown beans will be ready in three months or so, with autumn-sown beans ready to pick in mid-spring.

## BRUSSELS SPROUTS

*Brassica oleracea* var. *gemmifera*. Hardy biennial.

One of my favourite winter vegetables, but I confess to growing only a small proportion of my consumption. Much as I love them – for the mini cabbages that sit on top of their trunk as much as the sprouts themselves – they are in the ground for an awfully long time (getting on for a year for later varieties). Much as they deliver in flavour, they take up a vast amount of space. A couple of lines, happily taken for tops and sprouts, are all I afford them – the rest I buy.

If you are a non-believer, try them thinly sliced and fried in olive oil with bacon, with thyme and cream, or in place of the cabbage in coleslaw. The tops are as fine tasting as any brassica – slice, steam and serve with lemon juice and olive oil.

**VARIETIES:** ‘Noisette’ is a particularly nutty early season variety for sprouts from October to Christmas. Traditional late varieties like ‘Seven Hills’ or ‘Wellington’ will give you sprouts when little else is around. You could also try ‘Red Rubine’ and ‘Red Bull’ for lovely purple and red sprouts.

**STARTING OFF:** Sprouts need a long growing season. Start them under cover in modules in early spring, potting on as needed and planting out from mid-May to June when around 10–15cm

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tall. Don't allow the plant's growth to be checked by delaying potting on. Firm them in well.

**POSITION:** Sunny position. Sprouts will do well in heavy soils. Preferably mildly alkaline soil, but not essential.

**SPACING:** 60cm apart.

**PRODUCTIVITY/EFFICIENCY:** Sprouts need little maintenance and certain varieties can crop over a long period of time. Sow salad leaves, radishes or herbs around newly planted sprouts to make good use of space, or nasturtiums to cover the ground quickly, while retaining water and providing a harvest.

**GROWING:** Sprouts are tall but shallow rooting, so tread the soil down firmly when planting out and, if exposed, use a cane for support.

**POTENTIAL PROBLEMS:** Cabbage white butterflies and caterpillars can cause huge damage on unprotected crops. Plant nasturtiums as a sacrificial crop and/or use canes to create a cage of fleece or similar to exclude them completely – place it over the plants as soon as they are planted out.

**HARVEST:** If you want your sprouts to mature all at once, chop the top off the plant in October (or choose a cultivar that naturally matures its sprouts together), otherwise, snap the sprouts off using a downward action when they reach a suitable size.

### **BUCK'S HORN PLANTAIN**

*Plantago coronopus*. Also known as: minutina, plantago and erba stella. Hardy perennial often grown as an annual.

This is a succulent salad leaf, sweeter and nuttier than spinach and with a faint hint of parsley. Harvest the leaves young and

before the plant begins to flower, when they are at their most tender. Don't miss out on the flowers though as they are also great in salads. A native of coastal areas in Europe, it thrives in cool, rainy conditions, and also won't mind saline soil.

**VARIETIES:** Generic.

**STARTING OFF:** The seed is tiny so sow in trays under cover from February, prick out into modules and plant out when roots are showing. You can also sow direct in early spring.

**POSITION:** Most soils with good drainage. Sun or light shade.

**SPACING:** 20cm apart.

**PRODUCTIVITY/EFFICIENCY:** A small patch can provide you with leaves for salads or for steaming from April to June (longer if you cut back flower stems).

**GROWING:** Cut back flower stems to promote fresh leaf growth.

**POTENTIAL PROBLEMS:** Generally pest and disease free.

**HARVEST:** Pick young leaves while tender and before the plants flower. Leaves can be eaten fresh or lightly steamed.

## **CABBAGE**

*Brassica oleracea* var. *capitata*. Hardy biennial.

I don't grow many cabbages, but I always, always have a line or two of 'January King'. It looks and tastes fabulous and the texture has the sort of stature you expect in a robust kale - making it perfectly happy to stand next to chilli, olive oil and garlic. Other than that, do consider a few spring cabbages - they may look tatty once they've hauled themselves out of winter, but



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beneath the outer leaves they're an early season smasher when there's little else around.

**VARIETIES:** With the right varieties you can be harvesting cabbage all year round. Try spring varieties 'Myatt's Offenham' or 'Pixie'. For summer cabbages I grow 'Hispi', 'Greyhound' or 'Marner Early Red'. Good autumn/winter varieties to try are 'Cuor di Bue', 'January King' and 'Best of All'.

**STARTING OFF:** Sow cabbages in modules under cover. Summer and autumn cabbages should be sown in March, winter cabbages in May, and spring cabbages in July/August. Plant out under fleece or Enviromesh 6 weeks later. Pot on and plant out when around 8–10cm tall. Cabbages, as with all brassicas, don't like their roots being checked, so plant out as soon as the roots are showing through the holes in the bottom of the pot.

**POSITION:** Full sun. Will do well in heavy ground.

**SPACING:** 25–50cm apart, depending on variety.

**PRODUCTIVITY/EFFICIENCY:** Cabbages will occupy space in your veg patch for around 16 weeks but without requiring much input from you. Make use of the space between your cabbages early on in summer and autumn by direct sowing leafy salad crops like summer purslane or herbs.

**GROWING:** Water in and firm the soil down well when planting. Water during dry spells to keep growth good and steady.

**POTENTIAL PROBLEMS:** Protect from cabbage white butterflies and caterpillars, and pigeons, with fleece or take your chances. Slugs can also do plenty of damage, so hunt out and pick off frequently. Clubroot can build up if brassicas are grown for

too long in the same patch of ground, so don't grow them for consecutive years in one spot. Adding lime to the soil to increase its relative alkalinity can help rectify clubroot.

**HARVEST:** Use a sharp knife to cut the whole head once a firm heart has formed.

## **CALABRESE**

*Brassica oleracea* var. *Italica*. Hardy biennial.

Another of my favourite vegetables (usually sold as 'broccoli' in the shops). It's quicker from sowing to harvest than many brassicas, but frustratingly I don't grow them well. Don't let that put you off - they aren't tricky; I just don't have the knack, but I am trying again this year after a couple of years off as I love calabrese steamed or broken into florets and roasted with lemon and olive oil.

**VARIETIES:** 'Chevalier' is reliable and has a good flavour. 'Green Comet' is good for early crops.

**STARTING OFF:** Calabrese is prone to bolting at any perceived slight, and won't take well to transplanting. Sow short rows direct into the ground from April to early summer, or sow in modules under cover from March until June and take care not to disturb the roots when planting out. You can also sow in October under cover for a spring polytunnel crop.

**POSITION:** Full sun in a well-drained and composted soil is ideal, though it can take some shade.

**SPACING:** 25–30cm apart.

**PRODUCTIVITY/EFFICIENCY:** You will have your first crops of

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calabrese 3–4 months after sowing, with little maintenance required.

**GROWING:** Steady growth is important, so prevent plants from drying out in hot weather.

**POTENTIAL PROBLEMS:** As with all brassicas, cabbage white butterfly, pigeons and clubroot are the main things to look out for. Try planting nasturtiums nearby to attract the butterflies or fleece against them (and the pigeons). Lime if clubroot is a problem and don't grow brassicas in the same place 2 years in a row. Soil must be kept moist or the threat of bolting rears its head again.

**HARVEST:** Harvest when they are firm and before any of the buds have started to turn to flowers. You should find smaller side shoots appear providing you with a second crop.

### **CALLALOO**

*Amaranthus* species. Half-hardy annual.

A delicious and beautifully ornamental plant, with leaves that taste somewhere between spinach and watercress. Hugely popular in West Indian cooking, this easy, fast-growing, impressive plant produces leaves that can be coloured anywhere from green through to vibrant red. If allowed, it will grow tall and produce wonderful seed heads in late summer. Use the leaves as you would spinach.

**VARIETIES:** Callaloo seed is usually sold under the generic name common amaranth. You could try varieties 'Hopi Red Leaf' or 'Callaloo', which do well in cooler areas.

**STARTING OFF:** Sow seed in modules under cover in April. Pot on if necessary before planting out after the last frosts.

**POSITION:** Full sun and good drainage.

**SPACING:** Around 45cm apart.

**PRODUCTIVITY/EFFICIENCY:** Callaloo is a vigorous plant, taking up reasonable space but providing you with greens for several months from June. The seeds are also edible. Covers the ground well and is grown as a block, so needs little weeding or watering.

**GROWING:** Keep picking the shoots to prevent the plants from flowering and to encourage more shoots to form.

**POTENTIAL PROBLEMS:** Generally pest and disease free.

**HARVEST:** Pick leaves and shoots for steaming once plants are well established – usually from June until September.

## **CARDOON**

*Cynara cardunculus*. Hardy perennial.

Growing to 3m at times, and almost indistinguishable in appearance from globe artichokes, cardoons give structure and year-round presence to a garden. I love them most in winter when they stand strong against the cold, wind and rain. The leaf stalks (looking like bodybuilder celery) can be stripped from the leafier part and steamed to eat as a crudité with dips or steamed before making into a gratin.

**VARIETIES:** Cardoons are generally sold as unnamed varieties, but if you can find them try ‘Argente de Geneve’ or ‘Gigante di Romagna’.

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**STARTING OFF:** Buy as small plants or start seed in early spring in modules under cover.

**POSITION:** Tolerant of poor soils and grow well in shade, but happiest in full sun.

**SPACING:** 80cm apart.

**PRODUCTIVITY/EFFICIENCY:** Whilst cardoons do take up a large amount of space there is little work to do with them and the flowers are marvellous for the bees.

**GROWING:** Leave dead flowers and flower stems on the plant over winter and cut back hard in spring as the new leaves start to shoot. After a few years of growth, split clumps of cardoons in autumn and replant or pot up.

**POTENTIAL PROBLEMS:** Slugs can attack young plants, but beyond this vulnerable stage cardoons are trouble free.

**HARVEST:** The edible part of cardoons is their celery-like stems. On a dry day in late summer, gather together the leaves, wrap a collar of card or thick newspaper around them, tie it in place and leave for around 4 weeks to blanch.

## CARROTS

*Daucus carota*. Hardy biennial.

To my mind, there are two types of carrot: early, expensive to buy, occupy their space for a short time, sweet and small; and large, late, relatively cheap and perfectly fine carrots. I grow only the first, for reasons that I hope are obvious. Many of the earlies are eaten straight from the ground, soil brushed off and leafy tops cast semi-accurately at the compost bin. Lifted early, they free up space for another batch or a different crop.

**VARIETIES:** With a polytunnel, the right varieties and storage you can have carrots for a good part of the year. Try ‘Nantes’ and ‘Chantenay’ for a classic sweet and early carrot. ‘Paris Market’ is another early sweet variety – it comes golf-ball sized and shaped and is good for a heavier soil. Late winter storing varieties are ‘Autumn King’ and ‘Flakee’. ‘Rainbow Mix’ is an early maincrop, which includes white, yellow and purple varieties.

**STARTING OFF:** Best sown direct. Early varieties can be sown successionally from March to June outside for a good supply of small sweet roots throughout the summer, and from February to August if growing in a tunnel. Sow carrots for storage in May or June.

**POSITION:** Full sun in a well-drained and stone-free soil. Compost/manure isn’t needed.

**SPACING:** Sow seed thinly in shallow drills 15cm apart or broadcast sparsely and rake in. Thin to around 7cm.

**PRODUCTIVITY/EFFICIENCY:** A small piece of ground can yield good crops of carrots over a long period of time.

**GROWING:** Keep weeded and well watered.

**POTENTIAL PROBLEMS:** Carrot fly is the main nuisance. Use fleece or companion plant with something oniony.

**HARVEST:** Pull early carrots as soon as they are ready from May onwards. You can leave maincrops to overwinter in the ground, but if rain or severe cold is threatening they can be dug up and stored (unwashed) in paper sacks or in crates or boxes with slightly damp sand.