

Taste the good life

Tom and Barbara may seem unlikely role models, but growing your own veg is not only easy and satisfying – it's fashionable, too, says Martyn Cox

GROWING YOUR OWN FRUIT and vegetables used to be considered a bit embarrassing. But not any more.

Raising edible crops is officially cool, with Jamie Oliver and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall extolling the virtues of home-grown produce on TV, and a host of celebrity followers giving it extra street cred.

However, if you've never grown edibles before, growing your own (GYO) might seem daunting. Don't worry, it's dead easy. You don't need an allotment, or even a large garden. Many plants can be grown in the smallest back garden, patio, yard, roof space or even on the balcony of a high-rise flat.

If you're growing in pots and have a small garden, you won't be planning to become self-sufficient (although even raising a few plants will help to reduce the weekly shopping bill). For most, GYO allows the opportunity to try fruit, vegetables or herbs that you won't find in shops, while giving you the satisfaction of nurturing a seedling to the point where its produce lands on your plate.

The key is to start small, choosing a few foolproof plants – it won't be long before you start expanding your horizons. There really is nothing better than eating the fruits of your labour.

The best plants to start with

So what should you grow? Among the easiest plants to start with are radish, spring onions, peas, courgettes, sweet peppers, chilli peppers, aubergines, dwarf French beans, strawberries and baby new potatoes, such as yellow-skinned 'Lady Christl', pink, egg-sized 'Mimi' and 'Rocket'. There's very little to do with any of these plants, other than watering and eventually picking.

Leafy salads are satisfying to grow as some will be ready to harvest in as little as three weeks from being sown. Thompson & Morgan (0844 248 5383; www.thompson-morgan.co.uk) has a number of good mixes. Try Niche Salad Leaves Blend, a mixture of radish leaf, carrot leaves,

red amaranth, golden purslane, wrinkled cress, salad burnet and kale red Russian. Niche Oriental Mixed has an Eastern flavour, featuring komatsuna, mizuna, sky rocket, red leaf mustard and golden streaked mustard. Stir Fry Mixed contains mizuna, Canton pak choi, red mustard, texel greens and cavolo nero. Sutton's Seeds (0844 248 5383; www.suttons.co.uk) has a Leaf Salad Italian Speedy Seeds mix, with basil, lettuce 'Lollo Rossa', radicchio and rocket.

Apart from seed mixes, some straight varieties deserve to be grown. Among my favourites are rocket, salad bowl lettuce and corn salad, which has small, sweet

leaves. Mizuna leaves look very decorative on the plate, while beet 'Bull's Blood' has burgundy red leaves and a lovely mild beetroot flavour. If you prefer your salads to have a bit of kick, there are plenty of mustard leaves on the market. These include 'Red Frills', which has feathery leaves, 'Pizzo', whose bright green leaves are attractively serrated and 'Giant Red' – its spicy leaves are ideal to add to stir fries.



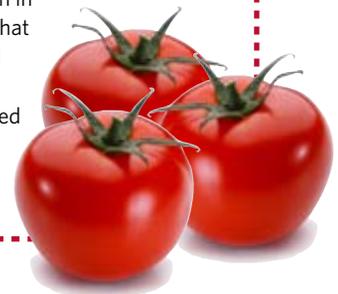


If you're feeling more adventurous

Once you've earned your GYO stripes, you're ready to take on plants that need more care and attention. Tomatoes are a must. There are so many fabulous types including plum, cherry and heritage varieties - these might have enormous fruit or boast a crop with an unusual colour, such as dark purple 'Black Russian'. However, as they grow, tomatoes need securing to support canes and you'll need to nip out their side shoots regularly. Leaves will need stripping from under developing trusses of fruit and they demand more feeding and watering than most other crops.

Nothing compares to the taste of fresh blueberries. For success, ensure you plant this acid soil-loving plant in ericaceous compost and irrigate with rainwater collected in a water butt. You will also need to protect the developing fruit from hungry birds by covering it with netting. Make the most of the pot by under planting with trailing alpine strawberries, lingonberries or cranberries.

Nectarines, apricots, peaches, currants, grapes, apples, pears and many other fruit trees can be grown in pots. Remember that these will all need pruning annually and some may need special measures to protect them over winter.



What not to grow

Avoid deep-rooted plants that will sulk when they are confined in pots, along with those that have a tendency to rocket upwards and become top-heavy, toppling over every time there's so much as a breeze. At the same time, give a wide berth to plants that plod along slowly, taking up valuable space for many months before providing you with anything to eat - life's too short to wait for these slow coaches and there are so many other crops that will reward you with a tasty harvest in a fraction of the time. Among those to give the cold shoulder are Brussels sprouts, parsnips, leeks, sweetcorn, asparagus, turnip and cauliflower. Steer clear of large potatoes that need a long season, choosing instead those that can be picked as baby new potatoes. ▷

The best possible taste, from far left: be creative with your pots - as long as they have drainage holes, any container will do; courgettes are an easy crop to start with; keep parsley, basil and other herbs on the kitchen windowsill for easy harvesting

Seeds vs plants

There's a huge range of plants available to grow from seed, but most of these are best avoided by beginners. Growing from seed means you have to remember to sow at the right time, have some specialist equipment to raise them, lots of frost-free space indoors for plants to develop, along with plenty of time on your hands to nurture young plants before they are ready for planting outdoors. Naturally there are some exceptions to the rule. Some seeds can be sown straight into pots outdoors, where they will grow quickly. These include mixed salad leaves, rocket, spring onions, radish, beetroot and carrots.

However, if you buy ready-grown plants, the growers have done all the hard work for you and all you need to do is plonk them into pots in your garden. In the past, the choice of ready-grown plants was pretty poor, but in the past couple of years a greater range has been offered. You can even find vegetables that have been grown organically in peat-free compost.



TOP TIP

Save time, effort and space on your window sill by snapping up ready-grown plants from garden centres, DIY stores or nurseries.

How to plant

Mix a handful of water-retaining crystals into your compost and fill your pot to the top. Gently tap to settle the compost and firm down with your fingertips to leave a level surface about 2.5cm below the top of the pot. Make a hole in the centre of the compost slightly bigger than the rootball of your plant, then place it in the hole. Replace compost around the plant and firm down.

Seeds often have specific needs so it's best to follow the packet instructions. For leafy salads, either scatter seeds thinly across the surface of the pot, above, or sow in rows, covering with compost, then watering.



Choosing pots and compost

Pick containers that are large enough for the eventual size of your plant. Many compact herbs are ideal in small pots, but most vegetables need a large pot, 20-45cm diameter, to give the roots plenty of space to spread and to provide a stable support for top-heavy plants that become laden with produce and are vulnerable to being blown over.

Plastic pots are cheap to buy, but glazed or plain terracotta wins when it comes to looks. However, these pots are porous, so compost can dry out quickly. Prevent this by lining the inside of the pot with polythene, pierced at the base for drainage.

Most plants like multipurpose compost, but some have special needs, such as thyme and other Mediterranean herbs which prefer well-drained soil and will thrive in a loam-based, John Innes compost.

Grow bags are great for gardeners starved of space. They

can be pushed up against a wall or slid on to a narrow balcony and have space for three plants.

Traditionally they have been used for tomatoes, but they are also good for peppers, strawberries, aubergines and courgettes. Or cut out a rectangular panel on the top to grow rows of leafy salads.

If you have room, a raised bed is a great way to grow lots of vegetables in a compact space. Essentially a giant container, a raised bed consists of a square or rectangular frame filled with a mix of 50% multipurpose compost and 50% top soil. Either make your own from timber, bricks, untreated railway sleepers or buy a kit. Although they can be made up to waist height, a 90cm square bed with 23cm high sides is ideal for most gardens.

Place your bed in a sunny, sheltered spot and protect from slugs and snails by sticking a band of copper tape around the outside. ▷



Looking after your plants

The key to looking after edible crops is to water. Often, crops in pots become thirsty quickly, so in the summer, while they are in full growth, this may mean watering once or even twice a day.

Many plants like a regular feed. Tomatoes, sweet peppers, chilli peppers and aubergines will all respond with a bumper crop if given a weekly dose of high potash fertiliser, such as liquid tomato food, starting from when they come into flower.

Tomatoes, peppers and aubergines will need staking with a cane as they grow. Tie shoots to supports regularly with garden twine to prevent damage from wind.



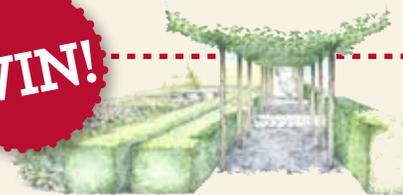
When should you harvest your crops?

The timing is obvious with many edibles as their crops look and feel ripe when they are ready. However, it's not so easy for those plants who hide away underground. Generally, potatoes, right, are ready when the foliage is topped by flowers, while carrots should be ready about seven weeks after sowing - test by pulling up a couple. Radishes can be picked about four weeks after sowing and shouldn't be left in the ground much longer as they will turn woody.

Start harvesting leafy salads when they are 5cm high, about four weeks after sowing. Either pull leaves as required or cut the whole plant off with a sharp knife, leaving a 3cm stump where a new plant will grow. □



WIN!



WIN! Champagne and flowers

Champagne Laurent-Perrier will, for the first time, have a garden at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2009 and is offering readers the chance to win a pair of tickets to the show on Thursday 21 May. The winner and two runners-up will also receive a bottle of deliciously fresh Laurent-Perrier Brut Non-Vintage.

Created by garden designer Luciano Giubbilei, the Laurent-Perrier Garden features an installation by acclaimed British sculptor Nigel Hall. Reflecting Laurent-Perrier's own elegant, handcrafted style Giubbilei's design is a peaceful space exploring the relationship between architecture and nature.

To enter, send a postcard with your name, address and daytime telephone number to the address on page 17 to arrive by xxxx.

The Chelsea Flower Show runs 19-23 May 2009. Tickets must be bought in advance (0870 906 3781; www.rhs.org.uk). For more on Laurent-Perrier, visit www.laurent-perrier.co.uk. For full terms and conditions, see page 174.

READER OFFER Chilli plants for just £6.95

Buy these five different varieties of chilli plant for just £6.95 or a triple collection (three of each variety) for just £13.90, saving £6.95.

- **CAYAMBE** - a dwarf, compact plant with mild, conical-shaped red fruits.
- **HIERRO** - a less fiery variety with eye-catching long red fruits.
- **NASU** - getting hotter, these deep red, pyramid-shaped fruits, above, have more bite
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To order, call 0870 950 7914 quoting SB9MAR or send a cheque, made payable to Mr Fothergill's Seeds Ltd, to Sainsbury's Chilli Offer, Rookery Farm, Joys Bank, Holbeach St Johns, Spalding, PE12 8SG. Delivery from late April. Supplied as plug plants. Please allow 28 days for delivery. Offer subject to availability.

