

Winter is almost over

VEGETABLES

These are sowing/planting times for the South of England. Growers living further north should delay for 2-4 weeks. If a hard frost is forecast soil can be covered with horticultural fleece to protect germinating seeds.

SOW OUTDOORS

- * Broad beans
- * Parsnip
- * Onion (from seed)
- * Peas (for May/June crop) try Feltham First or Meteor

SOW UNDER COVER

- * Summer cabbage, e.g. varieties Greyhound, Hispi, Primo, Derby Day, Stonehead, Minicole, Winnigstadt
- * Radish (summer varieties)
- * Lettuce
- * Rocket
- * Spinach
- * Early turnip e.g. purple top milan

SOW UNDER HEATED COVER

- * Aubergine (for a greenhouse crop)
- * Pepper (for a greenhouse crop)

PLANT OUTDOORS

- * Jerusalem artichoke tubers
- * Shallots

PREPARATION

Start chitting early potato varieties in preparation for planting in late March/early April. Individual tubers can be placed in egg cartons (or similar) in a cool place under indirect light.

HARVEST

Jerusalem artichoke, perpetual spinach, early purple sprouting broccoli, brussels sprouts, celeriac, celery, chicory, endive, kale, leeks, parsnip, radish, salsify, scorzonera, spinach, swede, turnip.

FRUIT

- * Finish planting fruit trees and bushes (raspberries and other cane fruits).
- * Finish pruning apple and pear trees.
- * Shorten sideshoots on red and white currants to just one bud and remove old stems crowding the centre of the bush.
- * Prune gooseberries.
- * Protect blooms on early flowering fruit trees - peaches, nectarines, apricots - with horticultural fleece or similar.
- * For an early rhubarb crop force a few crowns by covering with buckets. Place straw/compost over the buckets for added heat.



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Insecticide exposure increases risk of rheumatoid arthritis and lupus

Women's risk of developing rheumatoid arthritis or lupus (systemic lupus erythematosus) increases incrementally according to the frequency and duration of exposure to insecticides, a new study suggests.

The US study of 77,000 post-menopausal women (aged 50 to 79) found that those who personally mixed or applied insecticides were one and a half times more likely to get rheumatoid arthritis or lupus compared with women who reported no exposure (adjusted hazard ratio of 1.57 (95% CI 1.18 to 2.11)).

Moreover, this risk increased with greater exposure. If the women had been exposed for more than 20 years, or had at least six exposures per year they were twice as likely to develop the diseases.

Most of the women (63%) reported their exposure to insecticides in the home while the remainder reported exposure in the workplace.

Rheumatoid arthritis and lupus are both autoimmune conditions. Various possible mechanisms could explain their link with pesticides, such as changes in both adaptive and innate immune responses resulting in immune suppression, and altered responses to infections and inflammation.

Parks C, et al, Insecticide use and risk of rheumatoid arthritis and systemic lupus erythematosus in the Women's Health Initiative observational study, Arthritis Care Research 2011; 63: 184-194.

Costenbader K, Laden F, What do pesticides, farming, and dose effects have to do with the risk of developing connective tissue disease? Arthritis Care Research 2011; 63: 175-177.



GENERAL TASKS

- * Remove any volunteer potatoes to keep plot free from blight.
- * Harvest green manure crops when the soil is ready to dig. Young crops can be incorporated into the soil a few weeks before planting. More mature crops should be composted.
- * Warm the soil by covering it with plastic sheeting a couple of weeks before sowing.
- * Wash down the greenhouse roof and sides to remove grime.
- * Clean out gutters.
- * Clean and sterilise pots and trays.
- * Collect plastic water bottles to make mini-cloches.
- * Order seeds and other supplies.
- * Make 5 in square mats to place around cabbage shoots to protect from cabbage root fly - cardboard or carpet works well.
- * Provide some food for the birds.
- * Plan your planting scheme ideally around a 4-year rotation.
- * Prepare potato bed by forking in compost or rotted manure. If soil is too wet cover with plastic for a few days to keep rain off.
- * Top-dress perennial or over-wintering crops with compost.

DAMPING OFF

Just about now you may be thinking of ordering seeds and planning your sowing schedule for the year to come. It might also be a good time to consider the general maintenance of young seedlings.

Damping off is probably the most significant disease to affect young seedlings and can be caused by a number of fungi, most typically *Rhizoctonia solani* and various species of *Pythium* and *Phytophthora*. These fungi feed off the cells of dying seedlings, growing through the infected tissue and killing the plant in the process. The most characteristic sign of damping off is that seedlings fall over. You may also notice the base of stems becoming thin and brown with possibly a white fluffy fungus developing. However, the fungi can also attack seedlings below the ground accounting for poor stands in many crops. In these cases damping off may be mistaken as poor seed viability.

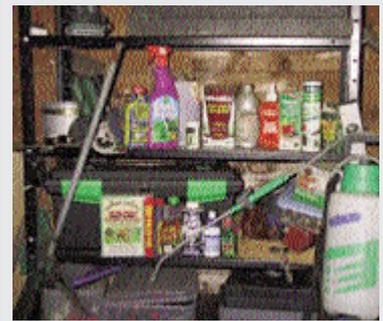
The fungi responsible for damping off are common in soils. They are stimulated to grow and infect seedlings by the nutrients they release. The fungi like cool, damp conditions and seedlings that are over-crowded or over-watered are most at risk. A wide range of vegetable and ornamental species are affected.

If seedlings are affected there is no way to rescue them. Affected plants and compost should be discarded carefully by burning, binning or burying on spare ground. If only a few seedlings are affected from a tray you may be able to rescue the remainder by removing those affected. Any tools that have come into contact with the infected material should be washed thoroughly in hot water.

Good garden hygiene can prevent damping off.

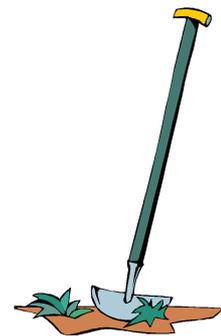
- ◆ Ensure potting compost used for sowing seeds is disease-free. Commercial compost/soil mixes are sterilise. There is a risk that home-made compost/soil mixes will carry spores of fungus. Soil can be sterilised in an oven at 120°C for 15 minutes.
- ◆ Ensure the potting mixture is free draining to avoid waterlogging. Drainage can be improved by mixing with horticultural grit or perlite.
- ◆ Sow seeds thinly and ensure the area is ventilated.
- ◆ Never over-water seedlings. Water thoroughly allowing the soil to dry in between.
- ◆ Wash all seed trays in hot water and dry immediately after use. Exposing them to the sun on a hot day will help to sterilise them.
- ◆ Do not plant seedlings into cold, damp soils. Wait until the soil has warmed up.
- ◆ If possible adhere to a strict crop rotation and avoid planting the same crop in the same place in consecutive years.

Damping off fungi may cause root rots in older plants. However, the fungi are less able to grow through older tissue. They rarely kill older plants but can affect productivity.



Do you have any stored pesticides?

Did you know that disposing of old pesticides in bins or down drains can pollute land and water. Most local councils offer a service for safe disposal of old pesticides and other chemicals. Find out what facilities are available near you at: www.pesticidedisposal.org or call your council.



Pesticide Action Network UK (PAN UK) is an independent non-profit organisation working nationally and globally with individuals and organisations who share our concerns. PAN UK projects enable us to work effectively towards specific targets to enable us to:

- ◆ Eliminate the hazards of pesticides
- ◆ Reduce dependence on pesticides
- ◆ Promote alternatives to pesticides

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