

## Be prepared to push the boundaries

This month's topic is more for someone who has gained some experience of what is normal, regards growing. However, there is some food for thought for the novice also.

Gardening in the traditional way, is a safer option for gardening, but not a certainty as weather is different one year to the next. Some crops do well one year and poor the next due to differences in pest and diseases and the weather, or the actions, or lack of actions of the gardener. So, be prepared to adapt to a curved ball that nature throws at you, learn from the unexpected and adapt to become a better gardener.

Think about why things happen, or don't and learn. It's this adaptation to circumstances that can lead on to a confidence to push boundaries to produce a new norm for you.

My new norm is very different to my norm when I first started growing vegetables. I am lucky enough to have a place where I can grow things outside of the normal growing period. My new norm is to start sowing in late December to early January sowing my onions also in January sow slow growing crops that are tender i.e. Tomatoes, peppers, aborigines, celeriac, leeks. I also start off my trailing lobelia for my hanging baskets and some flowers. February I start off my early brassicas, other flowers any vegetables that one would normally sow in March. And the pattern follows through the spring: I sow early and gamble that I can manage to keep my plants healthy, to give me an early crop. In a good year I will be cropping Calabrese late May to early June. I provide their growing conditions, not nature.

So why do this? Firstly you have to be able to provide the right conditions for your plants to grow i.e. light, frost protection, not too warm or too cold. This teaches you to observe your plants and detect when your plants are not happy. Then you work out why? And how to fix it! So the why is because it makes you a better gardener.

Secondly it gives you an early crop, so allow you to get more out of your plot. The early crop may avoid many pests whilst they grow, which is a bonus. It also allows me to take some early cuttings of my tomato plant at the end of March/early April to grow on and harvest late season.

Thirdly an early crop allows you to start off a second crop in pots etc and plant with the early crops as they are near harvest or just afterwards. This gives you more time to grow the second crop, at least a month or more sometimes. You can extend the growing life of the second crop by giving them some protection in the autumn.

How have I pushed the boundaries? Sowing in doors in a cool frost free room with good light. That works, but I have extended that further by using grow lights, to prevent my plants going leggy in January and February. You can succeed without grow lights, by balancing light and temperature.

You can also extend your boundaries by using a polytunnel or greenhouse. Much less expensive is to build/use a cold frame or cloches, these however are not frost free, so the limitations are

greater. You can use these in combination with covering with fleece during cold periods to give you a little extra warmth. The fleece can also be used when planting your seedlings out, to give warmth and promote growth.

What are my successes so far? Sowing and growing courgettes in February, planting potatoes under cover in the same month, longer growing season for celeriac and early Tomatoes, early harvest, longer growing season for my second crop and avoiding pests. Tomatoes harvest longer so you can allow extra trusses to grow outdoors, with increased yields.

My boundary pushed this year is Dwarf French beans sown in early March into large root trainers, to be grown and harvested in the root trainers, under cover. If it works I hope to get a harvest at the start of May. If it fails then a later sowing at normal times usually works.

Just be prepared to experiment with some of your crops, you may get a pleasant surprise and a new norm for you.



Tomatoes and dwarf French beans 30/3/22