

## **March 2023 Horticultural News**

For many a new growing season is just beginning, for others some of the preparation and development of one's plot(s) has steadily been progressing over the winter. At the time of writing (end of January), I have been behind in my winter preparation due to ongoing commitments.

Normally I collect my manure to top my beds late autumn and early winter. This year I have learnt leaving this too late into winter prevents one from collecting the manure due to very wet and muddy conditions. I have yet to start collecting the black magic for this season. I have however started prepping my paths with a thick layer of woodchip to suppress weeds in the summer. There are winter jobs one can undertake to develop ones plot, it is easier to do this at a leisurely pace in the winter rather than during the spring/summer when your time may be better spent encouraging your plants to grow.

If you have a new allotment then the preparation is usually more extensive, little and often is the best approach. Cover ground that you are not ready to cultivate with weighted down cardboard or light blocking material early on in your preparation. This will kill off a lot of weeds, the longer that the light barrier is in place the more weeds will be killed, making bed preparation much easier. The first year is usually the biggest struggle against weeds. Keep on top of it and in subsequent years you will need to weed far less as there are fewer weed seeds on your plot.

For some tips on starting a new plot visit our website there is a page dedicated to this subject.

[Your First Allotment - Halls Farm Allotment Gardens LTD \(weebly.com\)](http://weebly.com)

March is often the time of year that people get the urge to sow into the ground for the season. Seed packets often state sow March or later. I find that often this is optimistic as the ground is too cold and or too wet. The seeds just rot in the ground. There are a few vegetables that will germinate in cooler conditions. I sow my parsnips mid - March, I do not grow radishes, however they are quick to germinate and will germinate in colder soil temperatures (about 7 degrees centigrade). If your seed is fresh and radishes will not germinate then it is too early to sow your other vegetables in the ground. Remember it is the soil temperature and moisture content that will determine if your seeds will germinate, not air temperature. The soil temperature takes longer to rise in the spring than the air temperature. There are other vegetables that can be sown early in the season e.g. broad beans

Just be aware that sowing in early March can often be a mistake, wait a few weeks until the soil temperature has risen, you will get more success and the seedlings will grow quicker.

To overcome this problem I sow most of my seeds in pots or segmented seed trays indoors on a sunny window sill. I use grow lights, but if you keep the temperature cool about 7 to 10 degrees when the days are still short, then you can slow the growth to prevent the plants from becoming leggy and do not need grow lights. This will give you an early start and early first harvest.

This will give you better, healthier plants that you can plant out when conditions are more favourable. You do however need some space as you will need to pot up before you plant out.

I am however the worlds worst at starting my plants very early and cossetting them, growing them to a too big a size, then planting out in favourable conditions. It takes a lot of care, but I can get a harvest a month early. This gives me more time to grow a second crop. This is however not the recommended way, but it is doable.

Last summer was exceptionally hot and dry. Water evaporates from the soil via capillary action That is, the surface tension on the surface of the water that is present in between very small soil particles pulls the water up towards the surface. There the water can be evaporated rapidly on hot and or windy days.

If you mulch your beds with compost/manure then the capillary action is prevented or reduced at the soil surface. This means that you soil stays moist for much longer to the benefit of your plants.

Also you need to water less! This also reduces soil erosion, stops the capping on the soil surface. Capping prevents water from penetrating into the ground. Mulching is a good way to improve your soil and reduce your watering needs. Mulching your beds also makes weeding easier as the weeds pull out easily and you get less weeds. Some people mulch with grass cuttings, I do not as my beds are mulched with manure or compost, also I suspect this would increase slug damage.

If we have a warm dry spring, you may wish to consider some form of rain water collection system to allow you to water your seedlings/seeds before the water is turned back on.

Lastly, a tip for those who dig their plots, then make a fine tilth for seed sowing. If you wish to make a fine tilth for your seed bed after digging, then just as the soil colour changes as the soil dries out, hitting the soil with a glancing blow of the back of a rake or other tool will shatter the clod into a fine tilth suitable for sowing. Timing is important. Leave the soil too long the soil will go rock hard and difficult to break up.