



A YEAR TO GROW

A Month-by-Month Guide to
Growing Vegetables
for Families

Emma Huggett

A YEAR TO GROW

Growing Vegetables for Families

A LETTER FROM EMMA

Hello!

I am so happy that you are here and that you have taken the leap into gardening with your kids.

We all know that being out in nature is good for the soul, but caring for plants, whether it's on a windowsill or in an allotment, brings a sense of peace and a connection to Earth that no other activity offers.

I am passionate about getting families involved in growing. And it's not just veg – growing flowers, succulents, herbs and even carnivorous plants gifts your child a sense of responsibility, achievement, patience, botanical skills as well as some hard graft! And as a family, it brings connection, wonder and excitement too.

As a home educator, I have written this guide with “learning through doing” in mind, and if you are a home educating family too, this guide could be used to complement your other studies, or you could use it as a basis for all of your study.

It is not exclusive to home educating families though – this guide is for anyone that wants to grow vegetables with children. Whether you are using this guide as Parents, Grandparents, Aunts and Uncles, neighbours or even in home educating cooperatives, whether you are experienced or have never grown so much as a sunflower, whether you have a giant allotment or a small windowsill, or whether you have all the time in the world or just a couple of hours a week, there will be something here for you.

If the thought of gardening with your kids feels daunting, that's okay. You don't need to have all of the tools or know it all to get started. Part of the fun is learning together, through the epic fails and huge successes. Think of it as one exciting experiment that you get to do together!

You'll notice, in this guide, that my methods are planet friendly as much as possible – meaning that I actively encourage you to use what you have, not to throw anything away, and to use wildlife friendly pest control methods and organic fertilisers. I hope that my intention to make this guide accessible to as many people as possible, as well as my desire to share Earth-friendly cultivation methods, comes through.

This guide aims to teach you more than just how to grow veg with your kids – you'll learn about foraging, composting, pollinators and other wildlife, harvesting, gardening skills and much more.

Included is a monthly growing guide, which tells you everything you need to know about what to sow, when to transplant and how to harvest. You'll also get a list of jobs for the month, to keep your patch in tip-top condition, a foraging guide and some accompanying recipes, as well as art, science and botany activities to try.

As well as this, you'll find an A-Z of vegetables at the back of this guide, which will tell you more about how to care for particular plants.

So, let's get growing!

Emma

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SECTION ONE

GETTING STARTED

SAMPLE

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Growing Vegetables for Families

I have written this guide so that you can start growing at any point in the year – even in winter! So whether you're picking it up in January or you're starting in the summer, there will be plenty to do. As time goes on, you'll have more to care for and you'll reap the rewards of growing your own organic food, well into the following year.

Growing veg is for everyone, from toddlers to the elderly, and if you've never done it before, this guide will take you through every step of the way, building your confidence and helping you learn alongside your family.

If you're a more experienced grower, you might like to take on a challenge and grow vegetables that need more attention.

I've also designed this guide to ensure that no matter what size space you have, whether it's a few pots on your windowsill or a huge allotment, that you'll still be able to join in the fun. You'll notice I use the term "patch" often, and this refers to your growing space, no matter what size it is.

As this is a guide for families, you can choose to share a patch, but I encourage you to allow little ones to have their own designated space too. Allowing your kids to have their own area means not only do they get to choose what to grow, but also they get to have full responsibility for it. Younger children may need some help to maintain their patch, but older children can fully take the reigns.

What Is My Child Learning?

Kids love nature and it starts from a very young age. Growing veg comes with natural learning opportunities, without you or your children even realising. Simply dividing your seeds into pots brings a quick opportunity for maths.

But learning happens at any age, and this guide is designed to bring you together as a family, not something that you'll set up for the kids and leave them to it.

Gardening brings plenty of opportunities to build physical skills including heavy work (such as using a wheelbarrow, digging with a large fork and construction), using tools safely, planting and gardening skills (such as pruning and composting).

Of course, botany features heavily, including how plants grow, harvesting vegetables, lifecycles and caring for plants.

You can also weave in some maths by counting seeds, dividing them into pots and problem solving, design skills by sketching out and planning your garden and science – for example investigating soil acidity, learning about pollinators and the water cycle.

No matter what your child is doing in the garden, I can guarantee there will be some learning going on.

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Setting Up Your Patch

To get started, you'll need to define some growing space. It doesn't have to be huge, and it doesn't have to be outside either. You can enjoy growing plenty of plants in containers on a windowsill or balcony.

If you're lucky enough to have a larger outdoor space for growing, section off a little area for your child. An area measuring about 1m x 50cm is plenty for little ones – any bigger and they'll struggle to reach the watering can over efficiently. In hardware stores, you can get wooden veg frames at reasonable prices, which can sit directly on the soil, or you can buy liners to go inside, if they'll be positioned on concrete. Older children could have a couple of patches, or a larger one, depending on what they want to grow.

I actively encourage you to involve your children in all stages – from prepping the beds, to sowing seeds, to caring for the plants, to harvesting and then cooking. Giving your child the opportunity to experience every step from patch to plate teaches them so much about where food comes from, and how it ends up in their dinner. A butternut squash looks completely different on the vine, than it does in mash. These are valuable learning opportunities. And you might even find that selective eaters are more willing to try food they have grown themselves.

What You Need

There are many, many garden tools out there that are designed for specific jobs, but you really don't need to have all of them to be able to work on your patch.

If you're growing indoors, you'll need a **trowel**, a **watering can** and some **pots**, and that's probably enough!

A bigger patch though and you'll also need a **hand fork**, a **larger garden fork**, a **spade**, some **secateurs**, **string**, **scissors**, **plant pots** or **seed trays** and a **rake**.

Get children smaller sized tools that are functional. There is nothing worse than not being able to actually use the tools that you're given! I highly recommend looking out for smaller sized adult tools, like seed tray trowels, than buying brightly coloured or plastic children's garden tools, that won't actually do the job. Toddlers love carting around mini wheelbarrows too!

Check your local second hand sites for garden tools, as you can often find bundles of tools for reasonable prices, or even free! If you're able to invest in quality tools though, you'll benefit from a longer tool lifespan.

Take care of your garden tools too – if you leave them out in the rain, they could suffer from rust damage.

It's also handy to have a supply of **bamboo canes**, and a **bucket**. If you don't have any and don't want to buy new, ask around, and I'm sure you'll find someone that has some they can give you.

I also like to reuse **plastic meat trays** to put my plant pots in and **clear plastic fruit punnets** as they make great propagators. Just plonk one over your seedlings and they'll germinate nice and quickly in early spring.

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What To Plant

Each month, in the growing guide, you'll be given a wide selection of veg and flowers to grow. If you're new to growing, you'll see a little asterisk next to the plants that are easiest to grow. Always grow food you'll actually eat, too!

If you and your family are beginners, choose easy to care for and quick growing plants – you'll see the benefits quickly and it will spur you on to try more. It also means that if something goes wrong, it won't feel like you have wasted lots of time and energy on growing a plant that ends up on the compost heap a few months later.

If you like a challenge, you might want to try plants that need more care and attention.

For very young growers, choosing plants with larger seeds are preferable. Your child can see them more clearly and their little fingers can pick them up more easily.

Before you get started, take a look at the veg list in this guide to help you choose what to grow, then make a list of all of the veg that you want to plant throughout the year.

Planning Your Patch

It is fun to spend some time sketching out your growing space, whether you are growing in pots or in a larger area. If you've got a bigger space, section off your patch into small areas and label them with the veg you want to grow. Keep it somewhere safe and refer back for inspiration over the year.

If you're the artistic type, you may also like to take the opportunity to use paint or colour on your sketch, and hang it somewhere that you'll see it often. I like to keep mine in my allotment shed!

Composting

Learning to compost is one of the easiest and most beneficial ways to recycle your plant waste, and all that goodness goes right back in to nourish the earth, and therefore your crops!

Set up a composter at the same time as your patch, so that you can use it as you go. You can buy a compost bin (check your council website as some local authorities contribute towards the cost), grab one second hand or even better, make one out of old pallets or even a bucket. Your composter doesn't need to be huge, but it does need small holes to allow air (and bugs) in, and a lid which will keep the light out and the heat in. There are lots of DIY composter tutorials online.

In order to create compost quickly, position your compost bin in full sunlight. Heat and moisture help to break down the plant material more quickly. A healthy compost bin should never smell, but if it does, check out the troubleshooting section on the next page.

Having a compost bin near your patch is convenient when you're weeding and harvesting, and it's also a great way to encourage lots of interesting bugs into your garden, which will be fascinating for your little ones to discover.

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Here's how to do it:

There are two types of waste that you'll need for your composter – green waste (nitrogen rich) and brown waste (rich in carbon).

Green Waste	Brown Waste
Grass clippings Coffee grounds or loose tea Fruit and vegetable scraps Spent plants Young weeds (without seed heads or you'll be spreading weeds around your garden) Cut flowers Nettles Seaweed and kelp Coffee filters Brushed out hair or fur	Autumn leaves Small branches (cut up smaller for faster compost) Shredded newspaper or scrap paper Cardboard (avoid glossy, waxy or heavily dyed card which will add unwanted chemicals) Hay or straw Wool and feathers Sawdust Pine needles/cones Wood ash (not charcoal ash) Stalks Nuts and their shells Tree bark Crushed egg shells

Fill your compost bin in layers: one part green, then two parts brown. After 6-18 months, you'll have gorgeous, home made compost for your garden! You can speed up the process by turning your compost with a garden fork once a month.

Some waste will take longer to break down unless you help to speed up the process and chop it up. Things that are large in size or hard like nut shells, tree bark or branches will need breaking down before you add to your heap.

Things to avoid

- Putting **citrus foods** in your compost bin will make your compost too acidic and kill worms.
- Don't put **cooked food, fat grease, lard or meat** in there – you'll attract unwanted wildlife and it will smell awful!
- **Teabags**, as most contain plastic.
- Never put **animal faeces** into your compost as you'll contaminate it (unless it's waste from a plant eating animal, like horse manure)

Troubleshooting

- If your compost bin smells, it's usually because there's too much nitrogen and not enough oxygen. Resolve the problem by adding more brown waste.
- Moisture imbalances can affect the rate your green and brown waste break down. If it's too dry, add some water and lessen the amount of brown waste you put in or add more greens. If it's too wet, ensure the lid is secure to avoid adding excess water, and add more brown waste.

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Sowing

When you are growing from seed in Spring, ideally you want to be sowing your seed indoors or under cover in a green house or cold frame, until the weather warms up. From June onwards, most seeds will survive being planted outside straight away, although you will have to keep them well watered and protect from pests.

Hardening Off

Once your indoor seedlings are looking strong and healthy, you will need to “harden” them off before planting them outdoors. Essentially, this means that they have to get used to outdoor conditions – the cold and wind in particular. You can do this around April/May by introducing your seedlings to the outside during the daytime, when it is warm, and bringing them back inside at night. Do this over a period of about 10 days, and then they’ll be happy to be planted outdoors. Choose not to harden them off, and you could end up having to start all over again, which can be disappointing and a waste of your efforts.

Transplanting

You can then transplant your young plants into the ground. Dig a hole large enough for your plant before you start. Better to go slightly too big, than too small, so don’t be shy! Do this by slotting the main stem gently between your fingers, then tipping the plant pot upside down. Give the pot a little squeeze and try not to disturb the roots too much, then pop your plant into the ground. Earth up around the stems and provide canes or netting for support if your plant needs it.

Harvesting

Depending on what you’re growing, there are lots of techniques for harvesting your plants. You can find out more about when and how to harvest particular plants, by checking the veg guide at the back.

Jobs For Your First Month

You can start using this curriculum at any point, but in your first month there will be some additional prep to do to help you get off on the right foot. Tick them off as you go.

- ☐ Prep your patch – clear a space and dig out any weeds.
- ☐ Decide what to grow
- ☐ Plan your patch – draw a picture of what will be grown and where
- ☐ Source tools and clean them
- ☐ Buy your seeds
- ☐ Set up a compost bin

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Growing Tips

This guide intends to help you grow veg from start to finish. Most vegetable plants are annuals, which means you have to start again each year. However, if you want to grow plants that continue to produce food year after year, like fruit bushes and trees, you can easily add these to your growing space. If you're intending to grow in a communal space like an allotment, check your agreement first, as some councils require approval before planting larger plants like trees.

Fruit bushes There's an abundance of fruit bushes you can buy in garden centres, such as red currant, black currant, blueberry or gooseberry. Prune them back in the autumn to keep them in shape then they'll flourish come spring. Check the information on the label as some, like the blueberry, prefer different soil conditions. Buy a bush that is self fertile, otherwise you'll need two of the same kind in order to harvest any fruit.

Fruit canes Canes typically grow up in very long, thin branches from the ground and will need propping up with some garden canes and string. You can train fruit canes to grow in particular directions, such as along a fence or wall, and you can even create a fruit "hedge" in your growing space. Be mindful where you grow though – fruit canes are notorious for rooting anywhere they choose and you could end up with shoots sprouting up all over your garden. To control growth, plant in a container. In the autumn, once the plant has stopped fruiting, cut down the canes from the previous year and leave the new ones for the following year. Fruit canes include different varieties of raspberries, blackberries and tayberries.

Fruit trees You can buy a huge variety of fruit trees these days, and if you're choosing to plant a tree, I encourage you to consider buying a native plant like an apple, pear or plum. There are many varieties including some really interesting ones like humbug pears, which grow with stripes, or red devil apples, which taste like cherries. Always check the label before you buy – some trees can grow to be enormous, and you'll need to ensure they'll fit your space – otherwise you may end up having to cut it down if it gets too big. If you're looking for a smaller tree, search for one labelled "dwarf" and it should only grow to a couple of metres in height. You can also buy "espalier" trees that have been trained to sit flat against a wall and which make excellent garden screens. It could be the perfect addition to a small garden.

Vines Grapes can make a beautiful summer display of fruit and leaf over trellises or arches. They prefer warmer weather, so if you live in the South of the UK, you might be able to cultivate them outside, however for a more reliable crop, grow inside a greenhouse. Aid pollination by gently shaking their branches and harvest when they're soft to touch and taste sweet!

Asparagus One of the tastiest vegetables going, but patience is a virtue because it can take years to mature! Plant it now, and you'll be looking to harvest in about 3 years time. It's long lasting though – you'll be reaping the rewards for as long as 20 years.

Artichoke Artichokes take a couple of years to get going, but once they're there, you'll be harvesting for seasons to come. As well as a fantastic addition to your evening meal, artichokes make beautiful contributions to your flower garden too. In the first year, you'll need to allow it to establish growth, so cut off the flower heads as they form, but from the second year you'll be able to harvest it's edible artichoke heads.

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Bamboo If you're looking to go completely zero waste, why not grow and harvest your own garden canes too? Bamboo is incredibly fast growing, and can root itself all over the place, so control its growth by planting in a container.

Herbs Every patch should have some herbs in it. They give your garden a gorgeous scent as well as attracting pollinators and adding extra flavour to your meals. Grow tender herbs like basil or coriander indoors, while hardier herbs like thyme and rosemary hold up in most weather conditions. Grow them in containers, where possible, so you can move them around your garden easily. Keep mint in a pot – it grows like wildfire and, if in the ground, will pop up everywhere!

Fun Extras

Whittle your own plant labels

Your patch will look amazing as it is, but you can make your patch look even better with some funky plant labels. Just grab some thick sticks, whittle the ends off with a potato peeler so you've got somewhere to write (watch your fingers) and then label up with a permanent pen!

Bug hotel

No patch is complete without a bug hotel! You'll attract all kinds of fabulous bugs and insects into your garden by setting up a small area for them.

Simply bundle up some sticks, dried leaves, moss and other dead plant material from your garden and leave it in a shady and damp spot, untouched for at least a week.

Every so often, you can take a peek and see what's come to live in your bug hotel! Use an app like Seek by iNaturalist to identify any beasties you're not sure of. Always remember to leave your bug hotel as you found it so your visitors can enjoy their time in your garden.

Make a garden friend

Scarecrows are hardly scary these days – they don't even seem to scare off the birds. But they can be a fun addition to your vegetable garden.

Dress them up in some of your old clothes, add a funny hat or some hair and draw on a face. Your kids will be so proud of their creation! You'll be able to find some easy tutorials online.

Bird and Bug Feeders

To encourage wildlife into your garden, set up some feeders for the birds and plant some wild flowers to attract pollinators.

You can make some easy bird feeders by simply pasting a pinecone with nut butter or animal fat, rolling in seed and then hanging on a tree!

Decorate plant pots

In the winter months when there's not much happening, it could not be easier to inject some colour into your garden by decorating plant pots. Simply draw on terracotta pots with permanent markers, or paint them with acrylic paint. You can even seal them with varnish if you would like.

SECTION TWO

MONTHLY GROWING GUIDE

The monthly growing guide is designed to be an easy, step-by-step monthly guide to take you through a whole year of growing vegetables on your patch.

Each month, you'll learn what to plant, when to plant it and how to know its ready for harvest.

There's a checklist of jobs to help you keep your patch in tip-top condition, as well as a monthly gardening skill to learn and tips on how to manage pests.

There will be an abundance of wildlife to look out for each month too, including the pollinator of the month and the plant of the month, and you can have fun foraging with your family using the tips and recipes each month.

In the "Let's find out more" section of each month, you'll have the opportunity to explore some of the science behind growing your own vegetables too.

Hopefully there will be plenty for you to do each month but if you're looking for more, you can purchase the A Year to Grow Activity Guide, which provides additional monthly activities including science experiments, recipes, art projects and more.

If you haven't yet completed the tasks for your first month, outlined on page 8, go back and do those before you delve into the month. You'll thank yourself later that you did!

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MAY

Ready, steady, GROW! As the weather warms, May is the perfect month to get sowing. With overnight frost becoming increasingly unlikely, your seeds and seedlings will survive the drop in temperature at night, and the longer hours of sunshine will give those plants the boost of growth you have been waiting for.

Considered in Great Britain as the first month of summer, May is the peak of spring's fertility. "May" replaced the Old English word 'primilce' – the month in which cows can be milked three times a day. May comes from the Old French word 'mai' and Latin 'Majus' and it possibly also descends from the Roman earth goddess, Maia (meaning 'mother'), who was considered to be the queen of flowers, bringing passion, playfulness and wishes.

MAY AT A GLANCE

Planting

This month you'll be able to plant almost anything. Some of your more tender plants will want to be sown indoors, but lots will be able to be sown straight into your patch. You'll also be able to harvest some of your faster growing crops from earlier this year, like peas, radishes and spinach. And if you planted sprouting broccoli in the previous year, now is the time to enjoy it! Turn to the growing guide to find out more about what you can sow, plant out and harvest this month.

Jobs for May

There'll be tons going on in your patch right now, so you'll have plenty to keep on top of. You'll have lots of plants ready to transplant and you'll need to keep all your seedlings well watered. If they dry out, you could risk losing them, which will set you back. Find out more about your jobs for the month on [page...](#)

If you're foraging in May, you can enjoy chickweed pesto, hawthorn in your salad and sorrel in your soup. Find some recipes on [page...](#)

Wildlife to Watch

May might bring you an abundance of growing opportunities, but with that you'll also encounter more pests. Slugs and snails will love your salad seedlings and birds will enjoy your peas. Find out more about how to deter those pests with planet friendly methods.

As well as plenty of veg to grow on your patch, May hosts a wealth of wild flowers to enjoy on your walks such as the infamous bluebell, cornflowers, chamomile and meadow buttercups. Check out the spotter guide and see how many you can find in your local area.

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GROWING GUIDE - MAY

Seeds to Sow

Use the notes here to help you decide what to plant. Bigger seeds are easier for little hands and some of the faster growing vegetables are ideal for beginners. I = sow indoors, O = sow outdoors

Beetroot	O	Big seeds, easy for beginners, great for containers
Broccoli	O	Tall, slow growing plant that needs space
Brussels sprouts	O	Tall, slow growing plant, big crop
Carrots	O	Great in containers, perfect for beginners, tiny seeds
Cauliflower	O	Needs lots of space, single crop per plant
Courgettes	I	Big seeds, easy for beginners, need space
Cucumbers	I	Big seeds, climbing plant
French beans (dwarf & climbing)	I	Fast growing, big seeds, easy for beginners
Kale	O	Perfect in containers, fast growing
Kohl rabi	O	Perfect in containers
Lettuce	I	Easy for beginners, frequent harvest
Parsnips	O	Sow now for winter harvest
Peas	O	Big seeds, easy for beginners, fast growing
Pumpkins	I	Big seeds, sow now for late autumn
Radish	O	Easy for beginners, fast growing
Runner beans	I	Big seeds, easy for beginners, fast growing
Savoy cabbage	O	Needs space, single crop per plant
Spinach	O	Easy for beginners, fast growing, frequent harvest
Spring onion	O	Great in containers, fast growing
Sprouting broccoli	O	Sow now for next year, very slow growing
Squashes	I	Big seeds, sow now for late autumn
Sweet corn	I	Big seeds, grows tall
Swiss chard	O	Fast growing, fast growing
Tomato	I	Large plant, big crop, easy for beginners
Turnips	O	Perfect in containers
Winter cabbage	O	Sow now to harvest in winter

Transplanting

If, earlier this year, you sowed any of the seedlings listed below, you can now plant them out once they're big enough and they've been "hardened off". Head back to [page...](#) to learn how to do this and check the individual vegetable guides at the back for more info on how to transplant each of your seedlings.

Brussels sprouts	Leeks
Courgettes	Pumpkins
Cucumbers	Runner beans
French beans	Sweet corn

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Harvesting

If you have been planting veg from earlier this year, you could begin harvesting some of them this month! Check the veg guides at the back for more info on how to harvest your veg.

Beetroot	Radishes
Cabbage	Spinach
Lettuce	Spring onions
Peas	Sprouting broccoli

Flowers to Grow this Month

Sow **sunflowers** direct into your patch now. **Nasturtiums** can be sown too but keep them covered to begin with. Nasturtium leaves and flowers are edible and surprisingly peppery in taste! To attract butterflies and bees, sow **poppies**, **corn flowers** and **scabious** – they'll keep coming up year after year too.

Now is also the perfect time to plant bulbs like **dahlia**, **begonia** and **gladioli**. If you have tulips, daffodils and grape hyacinth in your garden, lift the bulbs from the ground when they've died back completely (to allow all the nutrients to return to the bulb). Gently rub off any excess soil, and dry them by placing the bulbs in a single layer in a cardboard box in a cool, dry place, like your shed. If the bulbs are still hanging onto some green foliage, you can lift and replant somewhere inconspicuous, but sunny, in your garden while they finish doing their thing.

Jobs on the Patch

Tick off your jobs as you go.

- ☐ Water seedlings regularly – don't let them dry out!
- ☐ Build a wigwam for French or runner beans
- ☐ Earth up potatoes – drag soil up and over the stems of any foliage, leaving just a few leaves at the top. This will encourage more potatoes to grow underground.
- ☐ Remove side shoots from your tomatoes, to encourage tall growth and more fruits.
- ☐ Thin your carrot, beetroot, lettuce, parsnip and turnip seedlings, then water well.
- ☐ Hoe between crops to keep the weeds down and moisture in around your veg.
- ☐ Put straw under any strawberries you have, to keep them off the bare soil. It prevents them from rotting and protects against slugs and snails.
- ☐ Check your crops for green and black aphids. If you can find some ladybirds hanging around, pop them on the plants for a nutritious feast! If there aren't any ladybirds around, you can buy larvae online or, if you're not squeamish, squashing a few aphids will send the rest on their way, as they release a scent which alerts danger.
- ☐ Net up your veg to protect from bird attacks. Simply pop some canes in the ground around your patch, place some plant pots on top of them and then spread the net across the top. Pin in place with some garden pins or, if you don't have any, cut and bend some wire coat hangers into small U shapes. Or use whatever else you have lying around.

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Skill of the Month - Making Fertiliser

Fertiliser is like liquid gold for plants, offering many nutrients that the soil doesn't always provide, giving your crops a boost and encouraging better growth.

But you don't need to go out and buy some, you can easily make your own! Try these three easy, organic and free home-made fertiliser recipes.

REMEMBER – they're for your plants, not for you! Please don't drink these plant "teas".

Grass clipping plant "tea"

Grass clippings are high in potassium, nitrogen and phosphorous, and makes a great fertiliser for root vegetables. Before you stick your clippings on the compost heap, fill a net bag or old pillowcase with grass clippings and pop in a bucket. Add water to the bucket, right to the top. Pop a lid on top (a piece of wood held in place with a couple of bricks or a paving slab works well) and let it steep for 1-2 weeks. Lift your net bag or pillowcase out and your fertiliser will be left in the bottom. Fill your watering can with it and then feed your veg! Chuck the remaining clippings onto a compost heap or bury them in the ground. You can also use this technique with weeds, or any other soft garden clippings.

Banana peel "tea"

Banana peels are full of potassium and phosphorous. Collect a few banana peels and place in a mason jar. Fill with water, secure the lid and leave to soak for 1-2 weeks. When ready, sieve and feed to your plants. Chuck the peels onto your compost heap afterwards.

Used cooking water

Probably the simplest of all fertilisers. If you have boiled food, veg or not, there will be valuable nutrients in that water. Let it cool and then feed it to your plants.

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WILDLIFE TO WATCH

Pests to Watch For

Slugs and snails will love all your tasty new seedlings, so keep a watchful eye for them. They like to come out in the evening, particularly if it has been raining, or you have watered, so try and water earlier in the day to avoid attracting them.

Go out with a torch and a bucket once night has fallen and check your veg patch. If you see any slimy culprits, gently remove them and take them to another location, away from your garden.

If you're not able to remove them by hand, you can use copper tape around the tops of planters and raised beds to deter them. The copper tape will create a static charge which is too much for the slugs and snails to bear, but it won't kill them.

Slugs and snails make a tasty snack for birds, foxes, hedgehogs, badgers and other wildlife.

Pollinator of the Month: Hoverfly

Hoverflies are an underrated insect that you'll most certainly be able to find in your garden this month. They belong to the family Syrphidae, a family within the order Diptera (true flies).

They have distinct yellow and black markings on their body, so you'd be forgiven for mistaking them for a bee or a wasp. In fact, they're harmless and use their mimicking appearance to escape predatory birds, who believe them to be something more harmful.

Sometimes known as flower flies, they get their common name "hoverfly" from their habit of hovering over flowers in order to feed on nectar.

There are close to 6000 species of hoverfly. Around 280 species live in Britain and over half of these have been recorded in Leicestershire and Rutland. Some species of hoverfly even migrate to this country.

Hoverflies go through all stages of insect life: egg, larva, pupa, imago (adult) and range in size from just a few millimetres to 2cm.

The hornet mimic hoverfly is the largest species to be found in the UK. It is commonly found in southern regions, and is prevalent in urban areas. You can identify the hornet mimic hoverfly by its mainly orangey-yellow abdomen with dark bands and dark brown thorax (middle section). It differs from the hornet in that it has much larger eyes, much smaller antennae, a broader body and no sting.



Hornet Mimic Hoverfly



Hornet

Talk to your child about why pollinators are important to the plants and plant some wild flowers to attract more of them into your garden.

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Growing Vegetables for Families



Plant of the Month: Bluebell

May is the month to head out and see bluebells. You'll find them growing in ancient woodland – areas that have been continuously wooded for over 400 years – giving them a sense of magic and enchantment. Their distinct smell attracts bees into shaded woodland that they might otherwise avoid.

Commonly there are two main types of bluebell in the UK – the Spanish bluebell and the English bluebell, the latter being under threat from its non-native counterpart. There are 11 species globally, and around half of them can be found in Britain.

You'll be able to tell the English and Spanish bluebells apart because the English bluebell bows, and its bell-shaped flowers hang elegantly from one side of its delicate stem. The Spanish

bluebell, however, grows vertically and you'll see its flowers on all sides of the stem, which is much broader.

The whole part of a bluebell is poisonous, so don't pick them. Leave them for the pollinators to enjoy.

The sticky sap from the bulb of a bluebell has been used throughout history as glue: in the bronze age to attach feathers to arrows, and its toxicity prevented insects from attacking books, when used as a book binder.

The bluebell symbolises constancy, humility and gratitude and poet Alfred Lord Tennyson described bluebells as "like the blue sky breaking up through the earth".

In folklore, it is believed that if you pick a wild bluebell, you will be led astray by fairies and lost forever, and that if you wear a garland of bluebells, you will be compelled to tell the truth.

Foraging

Foraging can be fun, but only if you know exactly what you're looking for. Some plants can be confused with very poisonous plants that look similar, so it is important to be confident that you know what they are before you eat them.

Use the app Seek by iNaturalist to help you identify plants and pick them from locations away from roadsides.

This month, forage for chickweed, sorrel and hawthorn.

Hawthorn

Hawthorn bushes are in full bloom in May through to June. Look for thorny bushes with bright green, deeply lobed leaves and small, white flowers with five petals. They have an almondy smell.

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You'll find them in hedgerows, woodland and waste ground, and the young leaves, flower buds and young flowers are all edible. Add them to salads as a pretty garnish.



Hawthorn



Sorrel



Chickweed

Sorrel

Sorrel looks a bit like spinach with succulent stems and tender, arrow-shaped leaves. They taste tangy and can be added to hot and cold dishes. Look for it amongst meadow grasses and flowers in spring and summer. Only pick fresh, young leaves as the older ones can taste bitter, and add them to curries and soups.

Chickweed

Chickweed is a nutritious plant that is high in vitamin C, vitamin B complex, iron, calcium, magnesium and zinc. Look for a creeping plant with small, pointed leaves and star-like white flowers. You'll find them in your borders in the garden and on waste ground from spring to late autumn. The leaves, stems and flowers are edible either raw or cooked.

Make Chickweed Pesto

Chickweed pesto is bright green, fresh and perfect over pizza or pasta. You can also freeze it.

Ingredients:

- 70g pine nuts
- 2-3 cloves garlic
- 300g chickweed, chopped
- 1tbsp lemon juice
- 115g extra virgin olive oil
- ½ tsp salt
- ¼ tsp ground black pepper
- 30g freshly grated parmesan cheese (or vegan alternative)

Method:

Place all ingredients into a food processor and blend until smooth.

Add a little more olive oil for a looser consistency.

You can also forage for **small-leaved lime**, **mallow**, **oxeye daisy** and **red clover**.

A YEAR TO GROW

Growing Vegetables for Families

LET'S FIND OUT MORE

Photosynthesis

May is a great time to talk to your child about growing food, and how plants make their own food through photosynthesis.

Photosynthesis:

- Photo, meaning "light"
- Synthesis, meaning "collection" or "combine"

With no mouths or digestive systems like animals have, how do they do this?!

Plants capture energy from sunlight with a pigment in their green leaves and other green parts of the plant, called chlorophyll. That's where the green colour comes from. With its chlorophyll, the plant absorbs the energy from the sun, and then combines it with carbon dioxide and water to create glucose, which is sugar – the plant's food and bi-products: water and oxygen. This is photosynthesis.

In summer, when the days are long and there is a lot of sunlight, plants continuously make chlorophyll. When the temperatures cool and days become shorter, trees stop producing chlorophyll. When there is no chlorophyll, other pigments in the leaves are exposed and we see yellow, orange and red leaves before they eventually fall off.

Yellow leaves contain a pigment called carotenoid, which is also present in carrots, corn, bananas and even canaries.

Red leaves contain a pigment called anthocyanin, which is also found in cranberries, red apples, cherries and strawberries.

You can help your child to find evidence of photosynthesis by extracting chlorophyll from plants. Simply whizz up some spinach in a food processor and strain, and you have chlorophyll right there! Be careful – it can stain. Don't waste all that goodness though – pop it back into the food processor and add some fruits and veg for a green smoothie, or return it to the earth by popping it onto your compost heap.

A YEAR TO GROW

Growing Vegetables for Families

YEAR TWO AND BEYOND

Your first year of growing is likely to have been eventful, and it's a great idea to take some time to reflect on all the successes and pitfalls you have encountered on your journey. Perhaps even take a

photo of yourselves to mark the occasion – I'm sure the children have grown immensely over the past year!

Crop rotation

When you're planning your second year of growing veg, keep in mind that vegetable plants take out and put in many different nutrients to the soil, and there will be imbalances.

If you plant the same vegetables in the same spot for a second year, you'll risk a failed crop. To resolve this, we crop rotate. The rule of thumb is not to plant the same vegetable in the same place two years' running.

Now, there are two ways you can go about this: create a four-year plan for your patch to ensure you don't plant the same veg in the same place twice or... wing it.

There are five main vegetable types:

- Legumes (vegetables with a pod such as beans, peas, broad beans, mangetout etc.)
- Solanums (potatoes and tomatoes)
- Alliums (onion plants for example garlic, leeks, shallots and spring onions)
- Roots (plants where the root is the main edible part like carrots, beetroot, parsnips)
- Brassicas (leafy vegetables including broccoli, cabbage, kale, pak choi, cauliflower)

Roots and alliums are often sown together as they complement each other in the patch and they don't take up much room.

Some plants don't need rotating so often such as courgettes and squashes (curbits) and salads, but it can't hurt to rotate them, if you have space.

Here is an example of a four-year plan, based on a patch that has four beds, or sections. You can create your own based on the vegetables you grow.

Bed	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
1	Legumes	Curbits	Brassicas	Alliums and Roots
2	Solanums	Legumes	Curbits	Brassicas
3	Alliums and Roots	Solanums	Legumes	Curbits
4	Brassicas	Alliums and Roots	Solanums	Legumes
5	Curbits	Brassicas	Alliums and Roots	Solanums

If you are growing on a windowsill, the best thing to do is to replace the compost each time, however you can revive it by mixing in some fertiliser or fresh compost.

SECTION THREE

VEGETABLE GUIDES

This last section will be helpful to flick through when you are looking for more specific information on particular vegetables.

You will be able to learn more about the growing conditions of particular veg, how to sow the seed, how to harvest, as well as grab some recipe inspiration and some fun facts to share!

Older children may enjoy the benefit of reading them too.

A YEAR TO GROW

CURRICULUM

Growing vegetables for families

Beetroot are easy to grow and ideal for beginners. The seeds are large and knobbly, perfect for little hands!

Family: *Chenopodioideae* (the beetroot family). Includes quinoa, spinach, sugar beet and chard.

Growing conditions: Beetroot likes fertile, well-drained soil. Before you sow, dig in some garden compost.

Sow: From March to July, you can sow straight into the patch in rows 30cm apart. Make holes with a dibber or the end of your hand fork 2.5cm deep (1in) and 10cm apart, then pop three little seeds in each hole.

Seedlings: As you sowed your beetroot straight into the ground, you won't need to transplant the seedlings, however, once you can see some little seedlings there, after about 2-3 weeks, prick out the weaker ones, so you're left with one good and strong seedling.

Harvest: All of the beetroot is edible. The leaves, when small, can be eaten raw in salads, and if a little larger can be chopped and added to soups and curries. Pick beetroot alternately when the roots are about the size of a golf ball.

Eating: Beetroot is a very versatile vegetable and you can use it in salads, soups, juices, risottos and even cakes!



Common problems and pests: Beetroot will bolt (flower too early) if it gets too dry so ensure you're watering regularly.

FUN FACT

Since the 16th century, beetroot juice has been used as hair dye! The Victorians used it to dye their hair red.

BEETROOT

Sow: March to July

Harvest: June to October



Growing tip: sow little and often for a continuous crop.

A YEAR TO GROW

CURRICULUM

Growing vegetables for families

Broad beans are an easy crop with large, brown seeds. They grow in pods and, when picked early, taste sweet and tender.

Family: *Fabaceae/Leguminosae* (the bean family). Includes runner beans, french beans, peas and clover.

Growing conditions: Broad beans are pretty hardy, so they don't mind the cold. Stake them up with canes when they get too big.

Sow: The main sowing period is from March to April although you can sow them in February, as long as you protect them from the cold. Sow seeds in cardboard tubes, which you can transplant straight into the ground without disturbing the roots too much, or sow directly into soil in rows 5cm deep and 20cm apart. You can also sow seeds in the autumn and leave them over winter.

Seedlings: Harden off any young seedlings for 3-4 days before planting out.

Harvest: Either pick them small (about 7-8cm long) and cook them whole, or if you want to eat just the beans, wait until you see the beans through the pod before picking.

Eating: Enjoy broad beans in salads, smash them and eat like mashed potato or add to curries and stirfries. Try making broad bean dip!



Common problems and pests: Blackfly love broad beans. Cut off the affected tip of the plant.

BROAD BEANS

Sow: February to May
Transplant: April to May
Harvest: May to July



Growing tip: a black scar on the bean means it's too tough to eat.

FUN FACT

Broad beans are used in traditional Chinese medicine as a tonic, diuretic and expectorant.

A YEAR TO GROW

CURRICULUM

Growing vegetables for families

Broccoli is an easy crop. With high vitamin content and anti-cancer agents, it's known as the "crown-jewel" of nutrition.

Family: *Brassicaceae* (the cabbage family). Includes brussels sprouts, cauliflower, kale and radishes.

Growing conditions: Grow broccoli in well-drained, fertile and moisture retentive soil. It loves lots of sunshine!

Sow: In March and April you can sow indoors in cardboard tubes which can be planted straight into the ground. From April, you can plant straight into your patch. Sow three seeds 2cm deep, 30cm apart.

Seedlings: If you sowed seed indoors, you can transplant your seedlings into the ground, 30cm apart, whilst still in their cardboard tubes. Seedlings planted outdoors can be thinned as soon as they're big enough to be handled. Prick out the two weakest ones.

Harvest: Broccoli is ready to harvest when the flowery heads are well formed. Leave them too long and tiny individual flowers will begin to open. Harvest the central spear first, then the side shoots over the next month or so.

Eating: Broccoli has to be a British staple at the dinner table and is best cooked with a bit of "bite". Mash it with potatoes, make soup, serve roasted or stirfry this versatile vegetable.



Common problems and pests: Birds and caterpillars love broccoli. Protect your veg by netting them up with fine netting or an old bed sheet.

BROCCOLI

Sow: April to July

Transplant: May to August

Harvest: July to October



Growing tip:
Broccoli grown in cooler weather taste sweeter.

FUN FACT

"Broccoli" comes from the Italian word "broccolo" meaning flowering crest of cabbage.

A YEAR TO GROW

CURRICULUM

Growing vegetables for families

Brussels sprouts have small, round seeds. They're easy to grow and will be ready to harvest just in time for your Christmas dinner.

Family: *Brassicaceae* (the cabbage family). Includes broccoli, cauliflower, kale and radishes.

Growing conditions: Plant your brussels sprouts in a sunny but sheltered spot. They're not fussy about soil condition.

Sow: Sow outdoors early for the best crops, from early March to early April. From February, sow indoors, three seeds per module in a seed tray, or in card tubes and prick out the weaker seedlings a few weeks later.

Seedlings: From May onwards, transplant your seedlings into their final position and protect from birds using cloches or cut some old 2l plastic bottles in half until they're bigger.

Harvest: For the best flavour, wait until the sprouts have been frosted in early winter before harvesting. Start from the lowest sprouts, snap them off of the main stem with a downward tug, when they are tightly closed and around the size of a walnut.

Eating: Surely the best way to eat brussels sprouts is fried with some chestnuts? Or why not try a brussels sprout tarte tatin or chuck them in a pea and ham risotto?



Common problems and pests: Caterpillars, cabbage root fly and birds will decimate your sprouts. Protect under cover with horticultural fleece, fine netting or an old bed sheet.

BRUSSELS SPROUTS

Sow: February to April
Transplant: May to June
Harvest: Sept. to March



Growing tip: Firm the soil around your plants for firm vegetables..

FUN FACT

Brussels sprouts were first recorded as a spontaneous sport from a cabbage plant found in the Brussels region of Belgium around 1750.

A YEAR TO GROW

Growing Vegetables for Families

ONE FINAL NOTE

Now we are at the end of your first year. What an achievement!

I hope that this guide has brought you and your children a love for growing that will continue to flourish for years to come. Growing vegetables comes with such reward – not just in the food you grow, but in the opportunities to learn and connect as a family, through nature.

It still completely blows my mind that one tiny seed can grow into a towering golden sunflower or a creeping vine with huge, round pumpkins growing from it. I will be forever fascinated by the way that creatures and plants connect in a perfect circle of life, sharing resources and creating new life together.

Nature is just incredible.

Hopefully, over the past twelve months, you have grown more than just vegetables: a bond with the earth and all its wonders, a sense of peace and tranquillity, connection with your family, everlasting knowledge and skills and perhaps confidence and pride too.

With any luck, your little ones will have gained independence, freedom, trust and responsibility, as well as a deep love for the miracle that is their planet, which will carry through with them for the rest of their lives. Perhaps they will even pass on that deep love to their own family one day.

I hope that this is a guide you will enjoy year after year and that you and your family will continue to learn and grow together.

Keep growing!

Emma