

## Choosing veg for a Scottish garden

Grow your own for the tastiest veg ever.

Brighten up your dinner plate with your own produce – even if it's only some parsley from a window box. What you grow depends on the space and the time you have. Concentrate on your favourites and the plants that are either expensive to buy or simply unobtainable. And go for ones that are much tastier when at their freshest.

If you're restricted to containers in a patio, herbs are the best bet. A south-facing patio is an ideal spot for thyme, rosemary, and winter savoury, herbs that need lots of sun. These Mediterranean species need damp, but not wet conditions: their main requirement is very free-draining soil. So provide a good mix of 3 parts general purpose compost and 1 part grit. Ignore the endless advice from experts who should know better, and do not put broken crocks at the bottom of a pot. This impedes drainage. Moisture builds up in the layer of compost above the crocks and only slowly oozes out.

When choosing herbs, select ones that are difficult or impossible to buy in the shops. Although rosemary is usually available, thymes are less so and winter savoury virtually unobtainable. If you want sorrel or garlic chives, you'll have to grow your own. Even the more unusual varieties of mint – ginger mint, peppermint and lemon mint – are a 'grow your own' must.

Quite a few vegetables do well in pots. Sugar peas, French beans, salad greens, chard are just a few. And don't forget strawberries.

These plants don't take up much space, and you harvest very little at a time, but, with a larger veg plot, make sure there's enough for a decent dish. Two pods of peas or three runner beans only make you want more. But one courgette plant or a couple of bush tomatoes are just fine.

Price and availability are worth considering. A few years ago, I was pleased to open a new allotment, but was sadly disappointed when some new ploholders told me they were itching to grow their own carrots and onions. What a waste! Freshly dug carrots are much better than shop-bought ones, but when stored, they're not much better than the cheap ones from supermarket shelves. And I defy anyone to tell the difference between a home-grown onion and a shop one. If there's space for these crops, that's fine, but they shouldn't be a priority.

Broccoli is a different matter. One or two plants produce a fine forest of succulent spears and with careful planning, you can plant different varieties for successive harvests throughout the year. This popular veg is expensive and must be eaten fresh: the tender spears are as good as asparagus.

Like all the large-leafed brassicas and salad crops, broccoli must be eaten fresh. You miss at least half the flavour by sticking the veg at the back of the fridge for several days. Ninety per cent of these crops are water and, after cutting, they transpire and wilt almost before your eyes. Sugars turn to starch and the spears become slightly rank-tasting.

Some shop-bought brassicas, like caulis, have very little flavour, and others – sprouts and cabbages – often taste bitter and positively disgusting. So, growing your own is the only solution. If you're lucky enough to have the space, nothing beats having a regular supply of fresh veg throughout the year.

Be adventurous when choosing this year's crops. Go for unusual varieties. Plant seakale for a tasty spring treat or sugar snap peas for a fatter, more succulent sugar pea. Try some of the James Wong selection in 'The Home Grown Revolution'. Cucamelon, Inca Berries 'Little Lantern' or Sichuan pepper, the most exotic pepper you'll grow in Scotland, are well worth the space.

### **Do you sow seed or buy plug plants?**

You get the widest choice of vegetable varieties if you grow from seed. Peas, beans, salading and root crops are best grown from seed, if you've space and time. The cabbage and leek families involve a lot of work so you may prefer to buy them as plants. But be warned: retailers will only stock two or at most three varieties of the type of veg you want.

If you don't have space to grow everything from seed, buy more tender crops as plants. Tomatoes, peppers, courgettes and squashes are difficult to get started without a heated greenhouse. You'll only want 2 or 3 plants, so it makes sense to buy them. But wait till the risk of frost has passed, and check the plants look healthy and don't have yellow or purple leaves.