

Early veg sowings in Scotland

Early sowings can reap rich rewards.

Even if you were tempted to try an autumn sowing of peas, broad beans or garlic, a severe winter could have killed the crop, or mice could have removed all trace of these plants. As a general rule, our few hours of daylight, up to, and around, the shortest day, make autumn sowing much less successful in Scotland than in the south of England, so I would always recommend sowing after the shortest day, not before it. Never mind if you did an early sowing that failed – have another go now!

Garlic has become a 'must grow' plant, despite all the mystique, information and misinformation surrounding it. Most of the mystery stems from whether the variety of *Allium sativum* has a short or long dormancy. Most biennials and perennials 'shut down' or become dormant over the winter as a protective technique. Afterwards, they will need a cool temperature – usually 0°C - 10°C – to trigger their dormant buds into life. Many English gardening writers have suggested that you should plant in the autumn to be sure of this cool period, but that's hardly a factor in this country.

The terms 'short' and 'long' refer to the length of time garlic is dormant. 'Shorts' are planted in the autumn, are harvested between June and July, and are best used in the kitchen as a green or fresh flavouring because they don't store well. 'Longs' are usually potted up in January and planted out as soon as the soil is workable. They are harvested during August and September and will store well into the winter. When buying certified seed, find out which type of plant you're getting as this affects how you grow it. If your supplier can't help with this, don't buy.

The garden centre or mail order company sells heads of garlic. Isle of Wight Garlic [<http://www.thegarlicfarm.co.uk/>] offers the widest selection and best cultivation advice. Each head comprises several distinct cloves, which will each become a plant. Don't be tempted to plant the whole head. When I was running a 'grow your own' advisory session at a garden centre recently, one woman told me she'd done this and couldn't understand what had gone wrong.

In late January, I divide garlic heads, only using the large cloves on the outer circumference. The smaller ones are only fit for the pot. Use either 8cm pots or root trainers; fill with compost; tamp down and plant the cloves 2cm below the surface. Water well and put in a sunny spot in the greenhouse or on a windowsill. The cloves will produce healthy, green shoots within a few weeks, all ready to be 'hardened off' and planted out. Hardening off takes a week and involves taking the pots outdoors during the day and bringing inside overnight. Using a cold frame or planting under a cloche also works well. Garlic is planted in fertile, free-draining soil in a sunny place. Planting distances 20cm apart in rows 30cm apart are often recommended, but I get much bigger heads by planting 30cm apart each way.

I like to get my first peas and broad beans going in January. Again, we are often advised to plant in the autumn for earliest crops, but a January sowing will only be a week or so behind that. Sugar peas – Norli is a good, fast-grower – will produce sweet pods by the end of April; and a reliable podding variety is Avola. I put the peas in bean sprouter trays, watering every day for a week till the roots appear. I then plant 2cm apart in short sections of guttering [about 60cm long], and plant out when the shoots are 1cm tall. Alternatively, place the peas on damp kitchen towel and cover with another damp sheet. Keep moist, and pot on. You could use root trainers or small pots instead of guttering. Dwarf broad beans, Robin Hood, are planted 2cm/1"

deep in root trainers or 8cm pots, and planted out when growing shoots are 2cm tall. You'll get your first sweet, tender peas and beans in late April or early May – delicious!

Quick-growing Spike broccoli and caulis are also worth sowing now for a May harvest. Three quarters fill a small seed tray with compost; water the compost; and then very thinly scatter the seed on the damp compost. Just cover with compost, and allow to grow on till the first true leaves appear. Prick out the seedlings by first soaking the tray in a tub or basin of water; this way, you don't damage the delicate roots when you gently tease the seedlings apart. Then plant in small pots or root trainers and allow to grow on till the weather improves later in March – hopefully.

All these preparations in deepest winter will reap rich rewards.