



SOME GENERAL TIPS ON GROWING-YOUR-OWN...

For those who haven't grown-their-own very much in the past

1. Beware "Sow by" dates on seed packets. They are only a rough guide and, provided you look after your packets of seeds, your seeds will outlive most "Sell by" dates (some lettuce seeds with a "sow by date" of 2011 still germinated in 2015).
 - a) Use dry hands when handling seed packets and seeds;
 - b) Open the foil packet carefully so that, when you have taken the seeds you need, you can seal the packet by folding down firmly the open end.
 - c) Keep all packets of seeds in an air tight container (e.g. big Tupperware style box) and keep the box in a cool but frost-free, ideally dark environment.
2. You will often read or be told on TV gardening programmes that you should sow your seeds thinly in a drill and then, when the seedlings are large enough to handle, thin them out to (say) eight inches apart. Unless you can eat the seedlings, this is a waste of seeds. Far better to sow a group of three or four seeds, not touching, every eight inches and then, when they have germinated and are growing strongly, remove all save for the strongest.

Note that these two points mean that your seed purchases last longer, are more economical, and give the seed merchant (and garden centre if that is where you have bought your seed) less profit!

Note that our Association does not need to make a profit by selling seeds to you!

3. Most gardening books and TV programmes tell us things like, "Plant your seed potatoes [or onion sets or your young cabbage plants] a foot or whatever apart in rows, and have your rows two feet apart". This tradition, of having plants so far apart in rows and with the rows further apart, comes from arable farming and market gardening, where soil fertility in terms of humus and nutrients in the ground is very poor compared with most vegetable gardens and allotments, where we put homemade compost, or lots of well rotted muck, or leafmould onto our plots most if not every year. For the books and TV shows, it also means that the reader or viewer can see the rows clearly. You will lose nothing and be able to plant more crops if you have rows the same distance apart as the plants in the rows.
4. Most gardening books and TV shows keep each variety of vegetable separately. There is no need to and by having several varieties growing together you get more from the space. For instance, why not have climbing French beans (try the variety Cobra) climbing up your sweetcorn plants? Or, when you plant out your Brussels sprouts (at least two feet apart...which is a long way apart while they are so small), why not sow rows of dwarf French beans or beetroot in between them? Those crops will be harvested by the time the sprouts have spread their leaves across the entire bed.
5. If you can, arrange your vegetable plot into separate, ideally 'raised', beds narrow enough so that you can reach just over half way across, which means that you can tend to the crop growing there from the paths and never stand on the soil. Give each bed a good digging in the next winter, incorporating lots of humus (see 5., below) with the exception of beds where you will grow root vegetables like carrots and parsnips (they are less likely to 'fork'). After that, no really heavy digging will be needed provided you put a layer of 'humus' on top of the soil when the beds are empty over the winter period. Earthworm populations will thrive, and they will dig the beds for you as they drag down the humus, deep into the soil.
6. Think HUMUS! Think COMPOST! Think WELL-ROTTED MANURE! Think LEAFMOULD! They are all humus, the rotting remains of plants that hold water and mineral nutrients the plants need, and open up the soil allowing more air to the roots. The



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more humus in your soil the better that soil. Never, ever throw vegetable peelings, apple cores, banana skins, tea bags, weeds, potato haulms and turnip tops, and the annual or biennial bedding plants after they have flowered away or into the 'green bin'. They go in compost bins or on a compost heap together with ripped up cardboard boxes and shredded bank documents and pay slips. Similarly lawn mowing; similarly leaves that you sweep up in autumn. Turn them into garden compost. Buy a load of manure from our local stables and dairy farms. You could also use the recycled green bin waste. The only thing that doesn't go in the compost heap is diseased plant material. Weeds that you have gathered? Kill them and their seeds first by putting them in a bucket of water for a fortnight.

7. Think CLEANLINESS! Remove all dead or dying plant material immediately. Keep the soil well weeded. Don't let rubbish accumulate. And keep an eye open for disease, for there is no fungicide available to amateur gardeners for use on vegetables or fruit. Instead we must keep the plants so healthy that they can resist infection.
8. One way of keeping vegetable plants healthy is by making sure they are planted in sunny conditions, in well-drained, rich soil (see 6., above). It also helps if the plants are not stressed. Underwatering and overwatering both produce stress and give rise to diseases such as 'damping-off' [a fungal infection] of seedlings and blossom-end rot in tomatoes. Most growing vegetables are 'hungry' for mineral nutrients and if some of the micronutrients are missing the weakened plants are more likely to succumb to things like rust. So it is often worth giving your growing plants a foliar feed (you use a sprayer to produce a fine mist that wets the leaves), one of the best foliar feeds containing seaweed extract (ask at the Hut).
9. Should you buy 'ordinary' seed or F1 seed?
 - a) Most of us like to grow the occasional old heritage varieties. For these go to Thomas Etty, Heritage Seedsman, Puddlebridge, Horton, near Ilminster, Somerset TA19 9RL; email sales@thomasetty.co.uk, and, www.thomasetty.co.uk; tel. 01460 298248 and 07785 777341. They offer a great selection.
 - b) Otherwise you should consider F1 if you want a consistent, quality crop of aubergines, beetroot, calabrese and purple sprouting broccoli (try Claret or Inspiration), Brussels sprouts, cabbages, cauliflowers, cucumbers, courgettes, leeks, onions, peppers, sweetcorn and tomatoes. An F1 is a cross between two quite separate strains of a vegetable, and it includes the virtues of both parent strains with a little EXTRAumph called "hybrid vigour".
10. Keep a diary that records where in your plot everything was grown, the varieties, when you sowed, transplanted, and harvested, and problems (disease or pest attack). When it comes to ordering next year's seeds and sets, look back at the diary and then the seed catalogues..."Would that variety be better?" Try it! What is in your diary is a record you cannot forget.
11. Don't be ashamed at asking questions of other, more experienced gardeners. Newton-le-Willows Gardeners' Association has a hut from which we sell seeds, pots, seed trays, composts and fertilisers etc. But the hut is also a great advice centre...come and ask.