

Monty Don

Gardening

at Longmeadow



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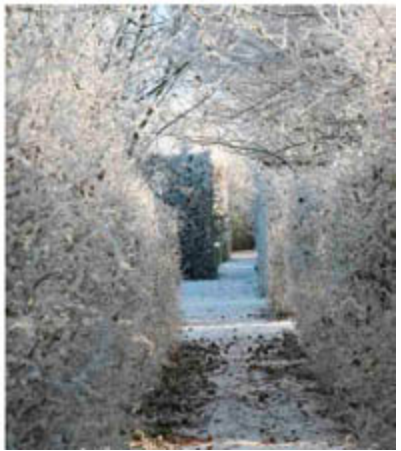
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About the Book

From the earliest snowdrops peeping through the snow in the Orchard in January to the luminous green of the spring meadow, vibrant red hues of the summer borders in the Jewel Garden and the abundance of the vegetable gardens in the autumn, Longmeadow is a truly seasonal garden.

For Monty, the key to success is working with this cycle of nature to get the most from the soil and the plants. Month-by-month, Monty describes the individual plants coming into their own in the floral and vegetable gardens and talks through the key tasks, from composting and lawn maintenance to topiary clipping and fruit pruning.

This indispensable guide to gardening will inspire you to achieve a balanced, healthy garden that's spilling with produce and full of colour all year round.

About the Author

Monty Don is the lead presenter of *Gardener's World* and has been making television programmes for over twenty years on a range of topics, spanning travel, craft, outdoor living and gardening. He is a horticultural writer and a *Sunday Times* bestselling author whose books include *Around the World in 80 Gardens* and *Italian Gardens*, as well as *The Complete Gardener* and *The Ivington Diaries*. Monty was *The Observer's* gardening columnist from 1994 to 2006 and has been the *Daily Mail's* gardening columnist since 2004. Monty is also the President of the Soil Association and a passionate gardener.

Monty Don Gardening at Longmeadow

Photography by Marsha Arnold



**Gardeners'
World**







Introduction

I FIRST SAW THIS GARDEN on a particularly dank autumnal day in 1991. The front was covered with piles of building rubble. At the back was a little yard filled with knee-high weeds happily seeding themselves, and beyond that was a paddock where a grumpy horse tried to find sustenance amongst the brambles. There was nothing here that could possibly be described as a garden. But beneath the years of neglect was a blank canvas that I could fill with the garden of my dreams.

For the first six months all my time and energy was directed towards the house – which was an uninhabitable ruin – and it was not until the following spring that I began clearing the field at the back. Three times that summer I cut the grass, and three times I raked it up along with buried and tangled tree trunks and discarded farm machinery. To get to know the land through hard graft was better than through a drawing board. In fact, this slow gestation was the best thing that could have happened and I recommend it to anyone making a garden from scratch. Take your time. Make and unmake it in your mind until you are ready to begin. You will know in your bones when that time comes.

Then I persuaded a neighbouring farmer to plough the cleared land for me. The turf unfurled to reveal rich, dark soil. Everything grows lustily in it. Even the weeds – especially the weeds – are astonishing in size, vigour and range. That vigour is a huge advantage for any gardener. Mind you, this was just about the only apparent advantage. Otherwise the odds were stacked against me. The site was wind-blasted and needed shelter. To all horticultural intents and purposes, it was empty: there was just one large hazel outside the back door and a hawthorn at the edge of a ditch that bisected the field.

Then I had my big break. On the famously chaotic day of the Grand National in 1993 – April 3rd – I went to a local tree sale with a proposed budget of £200 intending to buy

some good-sized yew plants for a hedge. I came back five hours later having spent £1,300 on 1,400 trees and hedging plants. It poured with rain all day and by lunchtime the allure of the pub and the Grand National was enough for most people to leave the sale. A tiny handful of us stuck in, soaked and buying increasingly large lots at increasingly minuscule prices. The last batch of 15ft-tall *Tilia platyphyllos* I bought – and which now make up the Lime Walk – were 50 pence each. However, only a frantic phone call to the bank – in the days when managers were real people – increased our overdraft to cover the cheque. But this was the critical moment that made this garden.

I also bought a batch of very cheap box plants that I had learnt about through the local paper. When I went to collect them, they turned out to be an established and neatly clipped hedge. I dug it up and replanted it as two parallel hedges in the Ornamental Vegetable Garden, where it has remained for the past 18 years and provided thousands of cuttings. (The Ornamental Vegetable Garden has also provided us with thousands of meals from its rich Herefordshire loam.)

Although I had played it all out in my head before we began planting, there has been quite a lot of trial and error at Longmeadow. I never think of it as finished – just where it happens to be now. We have moved trees and even entire hedges and we are constantly replanting borders. I am a great believer in moving plants until they are absolutely at home, and I do it all the time. We made mistakes too, and I wish that most of the paths were wider. We planted the main hornbeam hedges in 1995 and although I knew how high I wanted them, I had underestimated how wide they would grow. We are constantly reducing their width.

Longmeadow is a garden centred in its geographical place, which is the Herefordshire Marches, just eight miles (as the crow flies) from the Welsh border. It is dead flat and hard by a river, and about a third of the garden regularly

floods. The soil is clay loam over gravel, which is wonderful when dry but intractable mud when wet and rather heavy and slow to warm up. It is a very cold site, exposed to the wind and the rainfall is very high. But the western wind quickly blows away the bad weather and the rain means that we rarely suffer from drought.

The garden is essentially a rectangle with the house in one corner. This made the design awkward so I made a path across the width of the site coming from the main door that leads from the house with three longer paths leading off at right angles through the length of the garden. Other paths cut across these three main highways to create an irregular grid that the garden and all its 19 different parts have come to fill.

These different sections (that have gradually acquired names – and separate identities – over the past 20 years) include a small Spring Garden just outside the back door, an Ornamental Vegetable Garden which is a formal grid of box-hedged beds filled with colour, exuberance and good food within a tight structure. Come to think of it, that probably describes my garden at its best. There is also a more straightforwardly practical vegetable plot that we call the Top Veg Garden – not because it is necessarily the better of the two but because it is at the top of the garden – an Orchard and a Soft Fruit Garden.

The Jewel Garden is the largest area and right at the centre of the plot. It is filled with only jewel- or metallic-coloured plants for maximum impact from spring to autumn. The Walled Garden is in front of the house and surrounded by a stone wall on two sides, and that yew hedge I went to buy plants for on the fateful Grand National day in 1993. We have a Coppice filled with flowers in spring; a Damp Garden that is the first to flood; and a Dry Garden in the front made on almost solid stone.

Some parts feel like rooms at the end of a corridor that you have to make a special journey to visit while others are

communal spaces or even the corridors themselves. But I think it all hangs together and, most importantly, has become irreducibly itself and is more than the sum of its horticultural parts.

It is where I garden – and although I have written millions of words about gardening and made television programmes about it for a quarter of a century – I never think of gardening as an objective process. It is what I do in real life in my real garden. It is a record of failure, bewilderment and surprise, as well as endless pleasure and some success. It is about life in all its complexity, sadness and joy as much as the intricacies of horticultural technique.

I do believe that most good gardens are personal, private, domestic and above all, intimate. The measure of their goodness can be reckoned to some degree in absolute terms of design, planting or horticulture but not to any meaningful extent. The truth is that our response to gardens is invariably subjective and if they are our own, completely so. To an astonishing and powerful degree they are loved, and love cannot be reasoned or measured.

Which puts me in rather an odd position. Over the years I have often written about this garden but have never been answerable to anyone or anything other than private whims and fancies. It was made as a wholly domestic place where, over the past 20 years, my family has grown up. The other critical point is that it is not mine alone and nor would I want it to be. Every tiny detail is shared and it has always been a joint venture with my wife Sarah. Nothing in it has happened or been planted without discussion and both of us have an absolute power of veto over the other. In every sense it is as much her creation as my own and that fact enriches my own enjoyment of it.

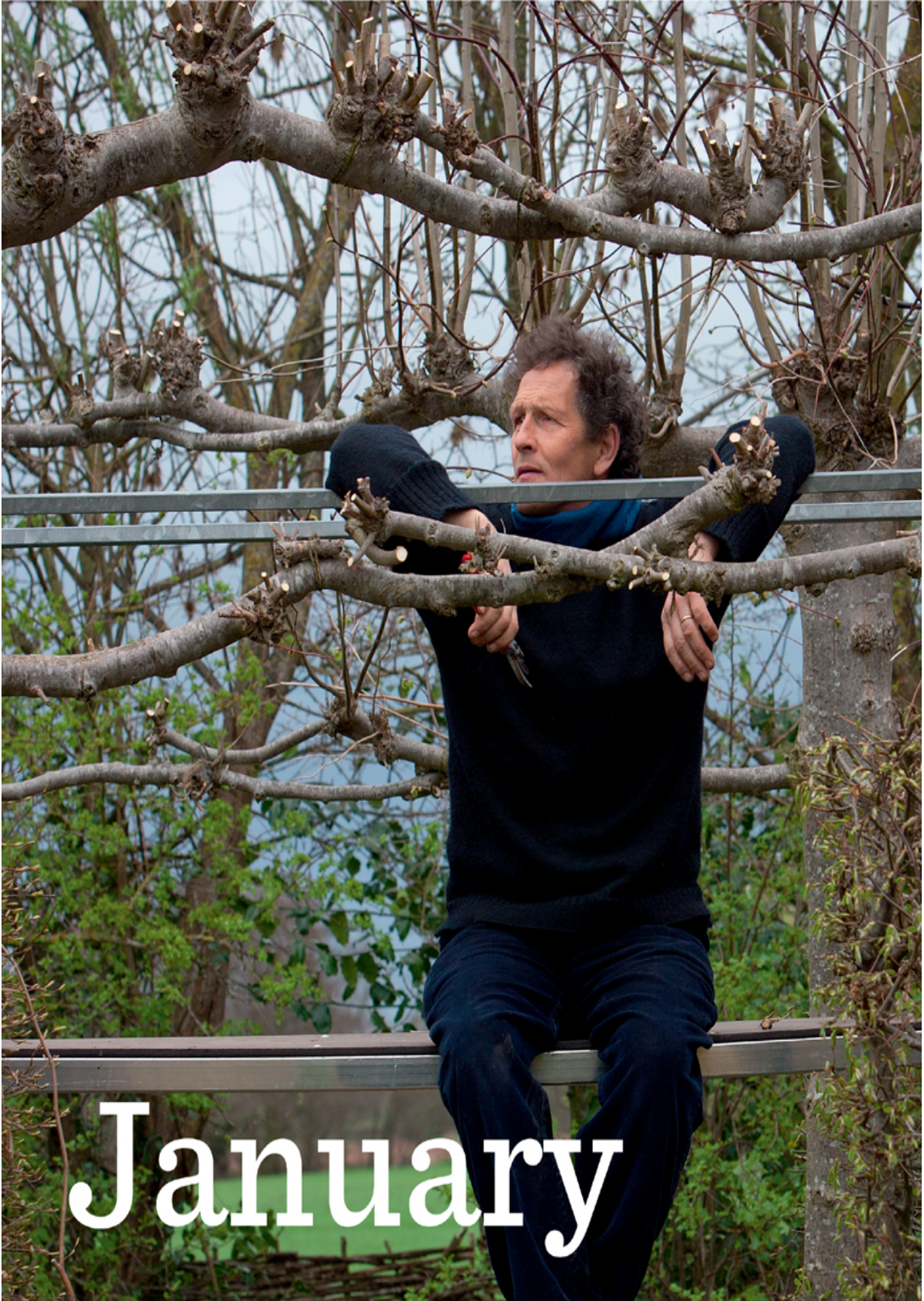
Yet now it is shared with more than two million people every week via the medium of *Gardeners' World*. The very private has spilled into the very public. Although I have

made gardening television continuously since 1988 (including a five-year stint with *Gardeners' World* at Berryfields from 2003–2008) the combination of professional and private in one's own back yard is very different. But that potentially awkward balance is exactly the reason I agreed to do it. The challenge was irresistible.

I can not completely separate my passion for gardening from my passion for this garden. This is probably a flaw – but although other gardens can be visited, admired and analysed, they could never replace the depth of involvement that I get daily from my own plot. So when the opportunity came up – completely out of the blue – I took a deep breath and realised that I had to do it.

So, although much of the horticulture in this book is based upon received wisdom or knowledge and techniques shared by many generations of gardeners, it is personal. Everything in it is based upon our experiences of gardening here and how we go about making and tending it across the days.

Although I share a lifetime of experience and knowledge I make no apologies for idiosyncrasies and particularities. Technique and skills are important and useful but only as a means to an end, and the only end that matters a jot in gardening is to make a beautiful garden that will give you sustenance and pleasure and to be able to share them with those you love. Everything else is secondary.



January

EVERY YEAR I HAVE AN ALMOST TANGIBLE sense of renewal in January. Part of it is sheer relief. November and December are my two least favourite months and I am glad to see the back of them.

This is mainly to do with light. I hate the darkness of a British winter. For me it is less of a cosy time to hole up in front of a fire than a dark, dank tunnel that I have to crawl through in order to reach the light at the other end. And now, at the end of the year, I can just see a tiny pinprick of hope at the end of that tunnel. Every day is stretching out, just little by little and that is enough motivation to keep me moving towards the light.

Now I am sure that this is a gardening thing. Many people I know get most down in January and February, finding that after the New Year the winter stretches out ahead of them. But if you are a gardener then these next few months are an exciting, increasingly busy time. The garden starts to peek its head up from below the ground. Snowdrops, aconites, hellebores, winter honeysuckle, mahonia and viburnum are all pushing into flower.

The structure of Longmeadow comes into its own and on a crisp frosty day the garden is etched in clean, strong lines. It is stark but strong and the balance and proportions are very pleasing.

Then there are all the things I ought to do and have left undone. Leaves to gather, ground to prepare, garlic to get in the ground as soon as possible, onion seeds to sow and sets to buy – in fact all my vegetable seeds to order – the greenhouse to wash, tools to mend and go through, and the potting shed to give a thorough tidy out. These are jobs that should be done at the end of the year but if I am honest I never do them then. Thinking about it just makes me feel tired. Now it feels like tidying the kitchen in order to make a lovely meal whereas at the back end of the year these jobs feel like clearing up after someone else's mess.

In January, minute-by-minute, the days lengthen and hope creeps back into my world. I cannot tell you the relief. There is a hawthorn in the boundary hedge of Longmeadow. It is a scrubby affair, not much more than a bush really, but every mid-January the sun lingers just over the top of it before dipping down over the horizon across the fields. This is an important day because that light shines right down the garden and catches the panes of my greenhouses. The garden is literally lit up for the first time since October.

Aconites

The buttercup yellow flowers of winter aconites (*Eranthis hyemalis*) are usually the first to open in January and are the brilliant midwinter counterpoint to snowdrops' modest charm. Their flowers, fringed with a green ruff, open in the winter sunshine, reflecting light, then close again at dusk.

They are bulbs – or more accurately rhizomatous tubers – but spread by seed very easily once established. When the plants flower they are without a stalk but this develops to carry the seedhead, raising it above the surrounding fallen leaves and grass so that the seeds can scatter better. One way to promote a good spread of the plants is to strim the ripe seedheads, flinging them further than their natural distribution. 'Guinea Gold' flowers a little later than the common aconite with bright orange flowers and a bronzed fringe, or involucre, creating a dramatic contrast. It prefers more shade than the common version.

It is best to plant them 'in the green' which means as plants just after flowering. They like damp shade and the base of deciduous trees is ideal, but because the flowers only open up in sunshine they do need some sun during the short winter daylight hours. Mind you, the sunshine can be

accompanied by frost and icy snow and still the flowers will open, which seems to me to be as good a reason as any for getting out of bed on a winter's morning.

It is important to plant the rhizomes at the right depth, which is generally rather deeper than one might think, with the top of the roots about 8–10cm (3–4in) below the soil. They prefer an alkaline soil and good drainage and plenty of organic matter in the ground – which, of course, they would get from leaf mould in their natural habitat.

Snowdrops

I planted the snowdrops in the Spring Garden 15 years ago now. The first batch were a present lifted from a friend's garden and delivered wrapped in damp newspaper, and they have gradually been spreading by seed – at about the rate of 2.5cm (1in) a year – although every few years I do lift and divide a clump or two. Left to their own devices they will gradually carpet the entire area they occupy, with the rich, rather damp soil that they love, and some shade that also suits them. The pollination of snowdrop seed depends upon two things, some sunny, mild weather and the insects to spread the pollen. In the case of snowdrops the outer petals open to be horizontal when the temperature rises to about 10°C (50°F) and this attracts insects. The green markings on the inner petals (that every snowdrop has to a greater or lesser extent) are said to glow in ultraviolet light, which is another enticement for pollinators like the queen bumblebees that one sees bumbling around in the winter sun.



Snowdrops in January sun. All our snowdrops are planted in the Spring Garden in a growing ribbon either side of the path and have spread from one small original clump.

In fact, the best way to make a clump of snowdrops spread is to lift them immediately after flowering, divide up the mass of bulbs and replant them in smaller groups a few feet apart. Seed dispersal will mean that these clumps gradually meet, and repeated division every few years will further speed the process greatly.

Unless they are growing in grass then you are almost certain to disturb them when and if you plant anything else near to them – which you are almost certain to do as they disappear to nothing by midsummer and do not amount to much after mid-spring, as their foliage gradually withers. (As with all bulbs, resist any temptation to tidy or cut off that foliage because every last scrap of green is essential for the formation of a healthy bulb for next year's flowers.) In my experience, snowdrops are pretty good at dealing with the trauma of the occasional excavation and as long as they are popped back into the ground quickly they do not seem to suffer. However, a way round this risk is to plant them around the base and roots of deciduous trees and shrubs where they are less likely to be disturbed and will not mind the summer shade. The only thing to watch for is the ground getting too dry – especially in autumn when they start to grow again, albeit underground and out of sight for another few months.

Snowdrops are good as a cutflower if you pick them with a longish stalk. The first tiny bunch of modestly inclined flowers in a vase on the kitchen table is a wonderfully hopeful moment and they have a surprisingly strong honeyed fragrance drawn out by the heat of a room. They also grow well in pots and are ideal for small terracotta pots that you can sometimes find in large quantities at car boot sales. Use a general-purpose potting compost to plant a small clump in each pot and keep them outside in a cool corner, bringing them into the sun in the New Year. You can bring the pots indoors to make a lovely houseplant although the flowers will last longer outside in the cool.

They will not need repotting or feeding every year, but keep them watered from October through to June and every three or four years take them out of the pot, divide them into three, repot into fresh compost and let them get on with it.

No one seems to know if snowdrops are native or not, although because of their longevity and 'naturalness' they feel as though they ought to be. There is no reference to snowdrops growing wild before 1770, and indeed, the first garden reference is not until less than 200 years before that, in 1597. And although they seem carelessly natural they have been bred as intensively as almost any garden flower. There are over 350 different species and cultivars, although the differences are really very particular. The common *Galanthus nivalis* will do me fine although I do love the double *G. n. f. pleniflorus* 'Flore Pleno'. This is sterile, so will not spread from seed, but increases perfectly well from divisions and because it does not produce seed it has the bonus that the flowers last an extra long time.

Cavalo nero

Cavalo nero or black Tuscan kale is the most useful brassica growing in my garden and although it is at its best in winter when the leaves have had some frost on them, I grow it all the year round. It can be eaten raw in salads when the plants are young, or left standing from summer through to the following spring for use as cooked leaves. Unlike most cabbage the leaves can be cooked for a long time so are great in stews, soups and sauces. As a pasta sauce with garlic and hot cream it is fabulous.

You pick the leaves individually and the plant replaces them with more and more fresh ones until it starts to flower almost a year after planting.

I sow the first seeds of the year in a seed tray or plugs in January with a couple of extra sowings at monthly intervals. If germinated in seed trays the seedlings must be pricked out into pots before planting out into their final positions in ground that has previously grown a leguminous crop such as peas or beans. The plants grow fairly large so need 60cm (2ft) in each direction and may need staking. If grown as a salad crop they can be sown directly into the soil in rows and thinned to just 10cm (4in). They are a brassica so will need protection from cabbage white butterflies between June and September.



Cavolo nero growing in the Top Veg Garden. It is extremely hardy but delicious. Although good all year round, it is at its best after a frost.

Leeks

Leeks are one of the few vegetables to stand happily through all kinds of winter weather. I have dug them in pouring rain and mud and when the soil has been frozen so hard as to be almost impenetrable. Yes, they freeze solid, so you bring them indoors as a mad, mud-encrusted, Heston Blumenthal-inspired lolly, but once thawed they can be eaten in all their glory.

When I was a child, leek in white sauce was my idea of a treat. That comforting, slightly slimy, bland but distinctive texture and flavour was my perfect comfort food. Still is, although my range of tastes has expanded a little from a Britain in the psychological – if not practical – grip of rationing.

I start sowing my first leeks in February, the wispy green hairs of the new seedlings sharing garden space with last year's crop for a couple of months. I will make at least three sowings to keep a year-round supply. I used to sow in seed trays and then prick out into 8cm (3in) pots but nowadays I sow direct into the pots, a pinch of seed in each. I also used to plant the seedlings out (in May – as the residues of last year's crop are making wonderful minaret flowerheads) individually into holes made with a dibber, made in turn, from the handle of an old spade. It was how I was taught to do it as a child. But I now plant in small clumps of 4-8 plants and use a trowel. Less ritual, less rhythm and perhaps less magic, but just as good leeks – and the clumps of small- to medium-sized stems are ideal for each meal. Big leeks, let alone giant ones, are absurd. Keep them small and sweet for the kitchen.

Leek rust (*Puccinia allii*) has been a problem over the last few years, thanks to the warm, wet climatically changed weather, and I guess will continue to be so. Wider spacing, less compost and even tougher hardening-off regimes will encourage less soft growth which will help, but not stop, the problem.

I am fickle with my loyalty to varieties, although I try to grow at least one heritage variety each year. 'Musselburgh' is the oldest British variety, 'Pandora' has a blue tinge to the leaves and is fairly rust-resistant, and 'Varna' is one of the best for mini leeks, which, my biodynamic, market-gardener friend tells me, is the best-selling vegetable they grow.

Onions and shallots

I sow a batch of onions in the New Year to give them the longest possible growing season, although they will need the protection of a greenhouse or coldframe for another few months, and then a period of hardening off before they can be planted out. I take huge encouragement from this first creative act in the garden of the year, starting new life with the promise of a summer harvest created from this point in the depth of winter.

Planting onion sets



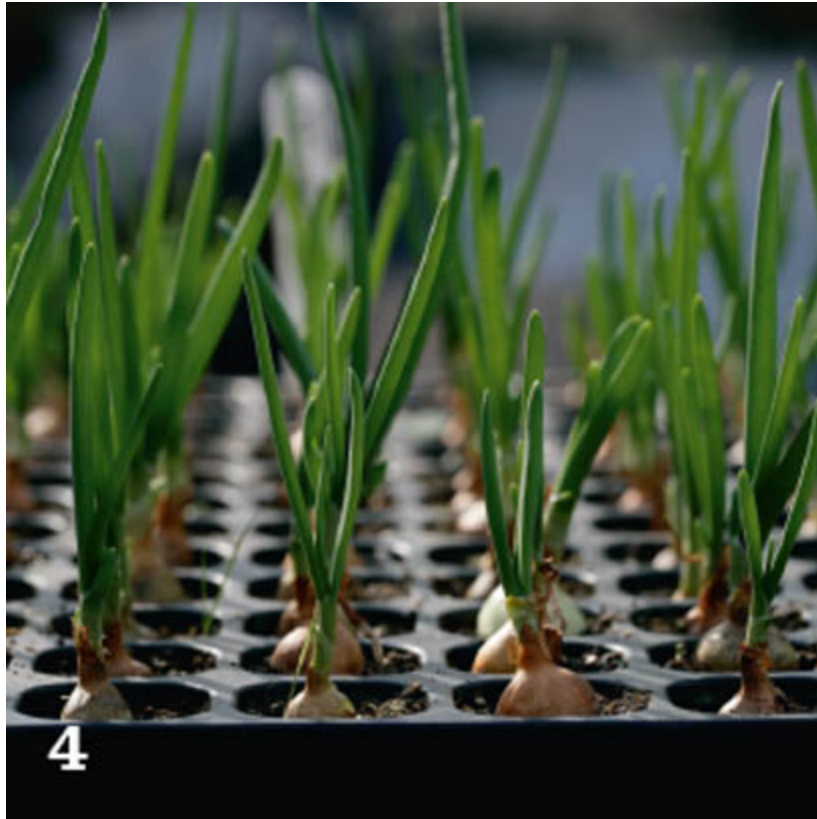
I fill a tray of plugs with seed compost and carefully insert one onion or shallot set into each one, dibbing a hole so the root plate is not damaged.



After watering thoroughly I place the trays on a bench in the greenhouse. They are very hardy so do not need any extra heat or protection.



After about a week green shoots will appear from the tip of each set and this indicates that roots are growing into the compost.



When each set has a couple of inches of healthy growth, I gradually harden them off outside and transplant them to their growing position as soon as the soil is workable.

The onion is one of the oldest vegetables cultivated by man and references to onions are found dating from 3200BC in Egypt. One of the reasons why people have always grown them is that they are obligingly easy to get right.

There are two ways of growing them, either from sets or seed. Sets take about 20 weeks to mature from planting. Seed takes perhaps another four weeks on top of that. There are many more varieties of onion available from seed but sets (which are just small onions) are easy to grow and so I always grow some as well as seed. You buy a bag of the small bulbs of a variety that appeals, prepare the soil so that it is fine and soft enough to stick a finger in to the knuckle without any soil sticking to it and then bury the sets so that the tops are sticking out of the ground.

I use a scaffolding board as both a straight edge for the rows and for me to kneel on to avoid compacting the soil. It is a good idea to make sure the sets are in a true grid because then you can hoe in both directions without clipping a bulb in passing. It is important to hoe – and occasionally hand-weed – onions as they respond badly to competition for water and nutrients.

Onions do best in good but lightish soil. If the ground holds too much manure or compost you will have lots of lush leaves but the onions themselves will be on the small side and more prone to fungal problems. Size does not matter so much – in fact a good batch of medium and small onions is more use than ones the size of croquet balls.

I think shallots are as important as onions and they are easier to grow. They tolerate poorer soil, hotter and colder weather and less water than onions. They also have a distinct sweetness of taste and they store much better than onions.

The real difference between onions and shallots is that each individual set or seed will multiply and produce a clump of around half a dozen small bulbs. These are harvested in exactly the same way as onions and when dry I store ours in a wire basket in the potting shed. When we need some for the kitchen I just go and scoop up a handful. If they are kept cool and dark they should reliably store well into spring.

The one essential is that they are as dry as possible before they are stored and the more sun that they have before harvesting the better they will last. As with all bulbs, it is important not to cut off any of the leaves but let them die back completely and dry out before removing the residue for storage. Onions should be lifted carefully with a fork rather than yanked from the soil to avoid damaging the root collar and thus reduce the risk of rot entering the bulb when stored. I always harvest mine on the morning of a hot dry day and leave them to dry on the ground for the rest of