

Mid Ulster is Growing from Home

2020 Growing Season



Comhairle Ceantair
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District Council

Introduction

Hopefully you and your families are all keeping well, while you are trying to stay safe at home and adapt as best as you can to this very different life we are all suddenly facing due to the unsettling coronavirus situation.

- *maybe you are missing the regular gardening activities at your local community garden*
- *perhaps you had big plans what crops to grow this year on your allotment*
- *you increasingly feel the need to relax and focus your mind on practical tasks such as seed sowing, planting, weeding, watering your plants?*
- *or you wish more than ever that you had a self-sustaining fruit & veg garden at home and aren't so hopelessly dependent on shops & supermarkets to supply you with all your daily foods!*

So why not start growing some food at home?

You don't need to have a big garden - a backyard with a few large containers or even pots on a windowsill will be sufficient to grow a few herbs or leafy greens to add to your diets

Most gardening activities will require some form of soil. This can be topsoil from your garden, multi-purpose compost, well-rotted organic matter from an old compost heap or well-rotted animal manure, or even re-usable soil you could salvage from last years grow bags, window boxes or pot plants. Even without any soil or compost you can grow a few sprouted seeds to add to salads or stir-fries.

What food to grow? Try focus on a small number of vegetables with a big impact onto your diet for example to have some daily fresh salad leaves, add herbs known for their healing qualities and grow a few superfoods for immune boosting soups.

And what about seeds? Maybe you didn't get a seed order in yet and your gardening centre is now closed? A number of seed suppliers still take online seed orders although there might be a delay for dispatch and delivery and many of the larger supermarkets also sell a range of seed packets. You could also phone your local gardening centre to see whether they do deliveries.



You can also grow quite a few vegetables and herbs from foods bought in the shops!

So if you have recently bought potatoes, garlic, any packets of dried peas or beans or even some grain seeds such as quinoa or amaranth for cooking you can take a few for sowing into seed trays or planting into pots. Many spices in our cupboards are in fact also seeds and (if not too old) can be used to grow in the garden or window sill such as dill, caraway, cumin. Only whole seeds will work, not ground spice!

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Let's get started this week with planting Garlic,

which is almost fool proof to grow, but will take about 6 months to mature. If you have bought a head of garlic for cooking you can split off a few individual cloves and plant each of them to grow into a new whole head of garlic. Magic!

The young green stalks ('scapes') that grow from the garlic bulbs and will eventually produce flowers are also edible and can be used like chives or spring onions in **salads or champ**. Most gardeners cut them off in spring, before they flower, to encourage the garlic plants to produce bigger bulbs, but be careful not to damage the actual leaves or bulb.



Garlic will grow in pots or directly in the open ground. Plant each clove **with the pointy end up** (see photo) about an inch deep into the soil and 10 -15 cm apart.

Add more soil/compost to your pot to cover the cloves fully.

Make sure you keep them watered throughout the growing season!

Hope your garlic will grow well 😊

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Sowing into Seed Trays



Sowing into seed trays and keeping the trays for a few weeks indoors is an easy way to start off your vegetables, because you can give each young seedling the space, growing conditions and care it needs and you can start sowing earlier in the season when temperatures outside are still a bit too cold or your ground isn't quite ready. Raising a steady supply of seedlings throughout the growing season means you always have a few plants ready to transplant into your vegetable plot or outdoor planters when free space becomes available there.

Watch out: While most vegetables and herbs can be started in seed trays or little pots, a few deep rooting vegetables such as carrots or parsnips don't like being transplanted –they should only be sown directly into their permanent growing place.

What trays to use?



Modular trays with individual cells are handy for sowing because they will make transplanting very easy, but you can basically use any shallow tray or small pots among your recycling materials, such as plastic trays from packed fruit or veg, yoghurt or margarine pots, paper cups, egg cartons etc.

Make sure to drill some drainage holes into the bottom of your trays/pots if they don't have any and place another tray (without holes) underneath to catch the water when watering your plants.

Cut toilet roll tubes in half and place into trays to create plug trays and use old lolly pop sticks as plant labels. Clear plastic trays can also be used as a cover – to speed up germination.

How to sow:

Decide what you want to sow and have your prepared plant labels ready. Make sure to sow vegetables which you and your family actually like to eat! Peas are usually a great choice, as most people will enjoy harvesting them and love eating them directly fresh from the pods.

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Don't sow too many seeds of one variety – it's better to make successive sowings of small amounts (e.g. use one short row in a seed tray per vegetable) to ensure a steady supply of fresh produce throughout the summer.



Fill your trays with compost or soil. Don't compact the soil at this stage and don't overfill the cells.

Sow seeds by placing them into the trays and pressing them gently with your fingers down into the soil.

How deep you plant the seed depends on their size – about 2 times as deep as they are wide. So larger peas or bean seeds need to be pushed a good bit into the soil.

Vegetable seeds come in many different shapes and sizes:

For larger seeds (peas; beans; courgette; pumpkin; sunflowers) sow only one seed per module or 2-3 seeds in a little pot.

Make sure to plant courgette/squash seeds with their pointy end down and runner beans on their side with their scar facing downwards.

For other large vegetables, such as Kale, Cabbage, Chard, Spinach aim to sprinkle 1 or 2 seeds into each cell (don't worry if a few extra fall in, you can thin the seedlings out later).

Chives, Spring Onions, Leeks and beetroot can be sown as little bunches – just sprinkle a few seeds into each module and transplant the whole bunch of young plants when they are ready to go outside.

Sprinkle very small seeds (e.g. lettuce, herbs, some flowers) as thinly as you can into your trays and prick the seedlings out and transplant into bigger pots as soon as they have a few sets of leaves. If you leave them too long in crowded conditions they will become very leggy and impossible to separate.



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Used, damp tea bags can be used to enrich your compost/soil or you can even plant larger seeds such as peas & beans directly into the teabags if you have no potting compost or soil available



Once you have all rows in your tray sown out, cover you seeds completely with compost/soil.

You can use a riddle (soil sieve) if you have one to sieve a layer of fine compost over your seeds.

Press down the soil gently with your flat hands – this is important to ensure all seeds are in close contact with the soil.

Don't forget to mark each row with plant labels and water the trays properly before taking them into the house (or greenhouse/polytunnel/coldframe).

It will take 7-10 days for most vegetables to sprout, but some will take longer. Warm temperature will speed up germination and plant growth. Your seedlings will also require sufficient light and regular watering. Don't let the compost dry out completely, in very sunny conditions this may mean to water them twice a day - however, don't overwater neither!

So let's get started – and let me know which vegetable varieties you have sown 😊

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Container Growing



If you don't have any suitable open ground you can still grow some fresh produce in a couple of planters or growbags in your backyard, make use of window boxes or plant up a few large pots to sit on your window sills. Growing in containers is easy to do and much less strenuous than cultivating open ground. You can easily move smaller pots around according to changing temperatures and add interest and colour to your house or backyard.



Type of containers to use: You can re-use all sorts of old, recycled containers you may have available (including old buckets, wooden crates or plastic boxes/tubs, terracotta pots etc) as long as they have drainage holes and are large enough for the type of vegetable you want to grow. **Make sure you thoroughly clean your pots before use!**

Generally, the bigger the container the better. As they grow your plants will need sufficient root space and plenty of soil (=nutrients) to thrive. Small pots also tend to try out very quickly.

Most plants will thrive in full sun, some vegetables such as spinach, lettuce or rocket will do better in part shade. Lack of light can become a problem indoors – choose the sunniest window sills and swop/turn plants around if necessary.

Fill your containers with good quality potting compost. If you don't have enough you can mix in soil/well rotted organic matter/compost from old grow bags etc, but results may not be as good and as garden soil is not sterile you will get more weeds growing too.

You can **either sow directly or start your seedlings indoors in seed trays** and transplant into your containers at a later stage

Container growing requires regular watering – sometimes twice a day! Don't let the compost dry out completely or plants will wilt very quickly, or tend to bolt such as lettuce, rocket or spinach. On the other hand, make sure your plants don't sit in water, or they may start to rot.

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What can you grow?

Most vegetables, herbs and some fruit can be successfully grown in pots. Your limiting factors are likely to be finding appropriate containers and a suitable location where to put them. If you haven't been able to source any seed packets and have a very limited supply of compost you could try growing a few vegetables from seeds found in your grocery shopping: dried peas, butternut squash or chilli peppers should hopefully work well in a few big tubs.

- Individual **Tomato and chilli plants** do well in pots (12 inch or bigger) on very, sunny window sills. Both need a long, sunny growing season, so will work best if you have raised your seedlings early indoors. The plants will also need some form of stakes for support.
- **Herbs** are ideal pot plants – either on indoor window sills or in a sheltered outside place close to your kitchen. If you give each herb its own pot you can water according to each plant's needs.
- The easiest & most popular fruit to grow in containers are undoubtedly **Strawberries**. Even if you aren't currently able to purchase any plants from your garden centre you might be lucky to find a few runners that have self rooted in your garden, which you can easily pot up into 6 inch pots or several plants together into larger tubs
- Shallow rooting vegetables such as **lettuce, rocket, spinach, scallions, beetroots and oriental greens, such as mini pak choi or mizuna** are quick growing and can be sown directly into window boxes or any type of containers. Sow in small amounts regularly throughout the growing season for a steady supply of green leaves. **Swiss & Rainbow Chard** can also be sown into pots, spaced closer together than you would in the open ground and leaves picked early to add to salads.
- Sow **Carrots**, especially short, stubby varieties, directly into deeper containers such as window boxes or large tubs.
- Larger vegetables such as **Peas/Mangetout, Runner or Dwarf French Beans, cabbages, kale, courgette and squashes** are best started in seed trays or small pots and then transplanted into big containers at least 30 cm deep. Brassicas are heavy feeders and need a lot of soil, extra feeding might be necessary! Keep pots with tender plants such as runner beans, courgette/squash and sweet corn indoors until mid/end of May.



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Making best use of limited space:

If you are growing in a larger tub or planter you could plant one or two seedlings, such as kale or cabbage which will require a lot of space as they mature and combine them with a few climbers like peas or nasturtiums, which you can grow up vertically along a wigwam structure for support. While these plants are small you could even sow a small crop of salad leaves to fill the temporary gaps.

Plan a succession of crops – e.g. harvest early sowings of spinach and rocket by mid/end June and sow some leeks or oriental vegetables into the available space.

Repotting

It is useful to start small batches of sowings in seed trays throughout the growing season to raise young plants that can be planted out into larger containers (or the open ground) when space becomes available or temperatures have sufficiently risen. Once seeds have germinated you will discover that some plants grow with an astonishing speed and you will need to separate your seedlings and transplant them into pots as soon as you can handle them, usually when the first true leaves appear. Seedlings started in loo roll tubes can be planted out as they are, but I prefer to peel off the cardboard before transplanting.

Most seedlings will be transplanted at the same depth as they were growing before, but **Tomatoes** are an exception – plant tomato seedlings deeper into their new pot, so that the soil level sits just beneath their first seed leaves. Ease seedlings slowly out of the seed trays and handle them carefully either holding the entire root ball or at a leave when repotting. You may have to repot larger plants several times as they grow.



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Growing flowers and attracting pollinators



Flowers in the food garden

Even if you are mainly interested in growing fruit and veg it is still a good idea to include a few flowers in your plantings. Flowers don't only look and smell beautiful and add that spectacular dash of colour to your garden; they have many other beneficial uses which should earn them a spot in your vegetable plot. Early summer is a good time to sow most annual flowers directly in the ground.

Edible Flowers

- Sunflowers with their edible seeds are always very popular to grow with children – make sure to grow them along some structure to tie them up to like a fence or garden shed.
- Borage, nasturtiums, and pot marigolds (*calendula officinalis*) can also be easily sown directly or raised in seed trays/little pots and planted among your vegetables.
- Chive flowers are also edible and the impressive looking yellow flowers of courgette plants can be dipped in batter and fried as an unusual addition to your meal.

Other Useful Flowers

Comfrey

is a hardy perennial plant, which can be propagated from root cuttings and should be part of any vegetable garden (be careful to keep it under control though as it tends to spread). Comfrey leaves are brilliant compost activators and can also be used to make liquid plant feeds. Bees love their flowers.

Flax (Linseed)

must be one of the most useful plants on the planet as it can be grown for fibre, seeds/oil and ornamental purposes. It produces an abundance of beautiful little blue flowers throughout the summer. You can easily grow a few flax flowers from seed in pots or planters or directly in a well prepared patch of open ground.



Flowers as Companion Plants

Traditionally many gardeners have used flowers for companion planting, which is based on the idea that some plants help certain plants to grow better, while they may hinder the growth of others. In addition many flowers either deter and/or attract specific insects, which can be of great use for chemical free pest control.

- **Pot Marigolds** are great companion plants for many vegetables and can be generally grown to attract beneficial insects such as bees, butterflies and hoverflies into your garden.
- **Flax** (see photo) can be grown alongside carrots and potatoes to improve their flavour and to deter potato bugs
- **Nasturtiums** are good companion plants for potatoes, cucumbers, kale and squashes
- **Borage** is a useful flower to grow near apple trees or strawberries



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Flowers to repel pests

Organic growers make use of the insect repellent properties of some flowers and place them strategically around their vegetable beds.

- **Californian poppies** and **French Marigolds (Tagetes)** are well known to repel aphids; both attract hoverflies and ladybirds who are the natural predators of greenfly and aphids. French Marigolds are also planted close to tomatoes against whitefly.
- **Nasturtiums** will attract blackfly so that they don't attack your beans; grow them alongside marigolds to attract hoverflies as natural predators to the aphids. Nasturtiums can also be planted to attract the Cabbage White butterfly away from your cabbages.

Pollination



Most fruit and some vegetables need to be pollinated by bees or other insects to successfully produce a crop. So if you have apple trees in your garden or want to grow melons or soft fruit such as currants, strawberries or blueberries it is a good idea to attract bees and other pollinating insects by planting suitable flowers. Vegetables that rely on insect pollination include pumpkins, courgette, squashes, cucumbers and runner beans. (Sweetcorn is wind pollinated so always grow in blocks rather than rows, which helps to distribute the pollen efficiently.)

Timing – it's important to think about the timing of when you need the flowers to attract pollinators. Apple trees and Currant bushes flower early in spring, which is the time you want the bees around your garden.

Flowering Herbs

One of the best herbs to attract bees very early in the season is Rosemary, which flowers almost all year round – my own Rosemary bush is planted right beside one of my apple trees and Red Currant bush and seems to be daily visited by a stream of busy bumblebees. A little bit later in spring the purple flowers of chives and in mid/late summer Lavender and Thyme are extremely popular food sources for pollinators.



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Wildflowers

Many common wildflowers such as primroses, dandelions, red & white clover, buttercups, vetches and stinging nettles are also good food sources for pollinating insects and often flower much earlier in the season than most of our cultivated garden flowers. Of course you don't want them growing right in your vegetable plot, but maybe leave them in some other areas of your garden or create a dedicated wildlife patch.



Ornamental Flowers

If you want to sow or plant out a few annual cut flowers to attract pollinators you could try out Purple Tansy (*Phacelia tanacetifolia*), Cosmos, Zinnia, Sunflowers and French Marigolds, but only choose **single flowered varieties**, as modern bred double headed flowers are pretty much useless to bees.

You could also plant a few flowering shrubs that are popular with bees and other pollinators, such as Cinquefoil (*Potentilla fruticosa*), a very easy to grow little shrub (see right photo below) with an abundance of flowers from May until late autumn, or add pollinator friendly perennial flowers to your borders such as Rudbeckia, Asters or creeping Phlox (see photo on left), which can also be successfully grown in containers.



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Pollinators in the garden - by Mark Edgar, MUDC Biodiversity Officer

With many of our native habitats increasingly under threat, gardens have become ever more important for the survival of some of our well known species. The range of mini-habitats contained within a garden can support a rich variety of wildlife.



Providing Food for pollinators

To encourage pollinators (bees, bumblebees, hoverflies, etc.) into our gardens we only need to provide food (nectar and pollen) and shelter. Food can be provided by growing suitable flowers - types where the pollinator can access the nectar and pollen. Fortunately, we have a range of pollinators with a range of preferences, so there will be flowers available that both you and the pollinator will like. Recommended species to attract bees include (but not limited to): bluebell, honeysuckle, thyme, sedum, aster, rosemary, hebe, cornflower, poppies, and one of my own favourites, borage. I have found borage to be a favourite with the bees in my garden, in particular the early bumblebee (the smaller species of bumblebee). Apparently bees can see purple more clearly than any other colour. I know borage flowers are probably technically blue, but it is close enough to purple for me.



If chatting about plants for pollinators, there is one that I haven't yet mentioned. If you have room, a buddleia (also known as the butterfly bush) is always good. If you do have a buddleia, and you notice the number of bees and butterflies visiting it during the day, I would encourage you to go into your garden in the late evening with a torch and check out your butterfly bush. You may be surprised at the number, variety and colour of moths.

Another point to remember is that when selecting your plants, try to get a range of species so that something is always in flower right from early spring through to autumn. This will provide nectar throughout the season.

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Providing nesting for Pollinators

Hopefully with the food sorted, all you need now is somewhere for the bees to nest..... Natural habitats suitable for bees to make their nests are not as common as they once were. However, creating nesting sites in our gardens is very easy, and costs very little (or even nothing!) Wild bees nest in small colonies, so you won't get the swarms that we see in the movies! They have no interest in humans, are not aggressive, and just go about their business. In Ireland we have around 100 species of bee. We have 1 native honeybee, 20 species of bumblebee, and the rest are solitary bees. As their name suggests, solitary bees live on their own, so definitely no colonies. We will only see solitary bees for 6-8 weeks of the year. The rest of the time they are developing in the nest (as eggs and grubs) or hibernating, so please try not to disturb the nest.

Leave some wild patches for bumblebees ...

Perhaps the easiest way to provide a suitable place for bees to nest is to leave a small area to 'grow wild' during spring and summer. This will be suitable for bumblebees with some species making their nests above ground in the tussocky grasses, other species preferring to use burrows. They will use existing holes, or if you want to give them a helping hand, try an upturned flower pot (with a slate or tile set above the hole to prevent rain getting in, but high enough above the pot to allow access for the bumblebee through the hole).

... and some open ground for mining bees

With bumblebees catered for (as simple as that), let's think about the solitary bees. We have 77 species of solitary bee, and these are broadly divided into two groups, mining bees, of which there are 62 species, and cavity nesting bees, of which there are 15 species. Their names are fairly self-explanatory as to how they nest, mining bees burrow (mine) in bare ground, while cavity nesting bees use existing holes (cavities) in hollow stems, wood, or stone walls (different species using different cavities). So, after leaving a little patch to 'grow wild' for our bumblebees, the next habitat to create is to attract mining bees. All we have to do is leave (or create) an area of exposed ground. Clearing the vegetation from your chosen patch to leave bare ground is all you have to do! A variety of ground conditions (from flat to vertical slopes) will attract a variety of species. Any sloped areas are better if south facing to catch the summer sun. This simple action will provide a potential home for the vast majority of our bee species.

Build a bee home



If we want to attract cavity nesting bees into our gardens, we will have a little more work to do – but it is only a little! There are a range of bee homes available to buy, but home-made ones work just as well. Fill a flower pot with bamboo canes, or hollow stems (elder is good), with straw/hay packed around the edges to hold the bamboo in place. The bamboo can be hollowed out with piece of strong wire/narrow screwdriver. The straw/hay can be pinned in place with thin wire (opened paperclips) and excess straw trimmed to get it to look neater.

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When cutting the bamboo to size, sand off any sharp edges or splinters. This will deter bees from using the bamboo as they may scratch their wings when entering the hole. The bamboo should range in diameter to provide a range of hole sizes to attract different species.



Variations on this general idea can be made. A slightly fancier version is to use an old log with holes drilled in it, and bamboo filling the space between the log and the roof. Hopefully the photo shows that this is quite easy to make. This bee home can be set or hung in a suitable place or with the backboard can be fixed to a shed, fence or post.

Another type that I have made for the first time this year is just to drill a few holes in a piece of timber. I used 4 inch x 2 inch (as that is what I had lying about). I can't guarantee this will work, but it looks similar to ones that can be purchased and the same principles apply. A variety of hole diameters (I used 4, 6, and 8mm) with the hole supposed to be a minimum of 10cm deep. However, mine were a bit shorter as my drill bit wasn't quite 10cm long. Also, I didn't want to drill right through the wood as that would only create a wind tunnel. As when using bamboo, I just sanded around the entrance holes so any investigating bee wouldn't damage its wings on sharp edges, and fixed it to a fence post.



It is recommended that bee homes for cavity nesters should be fixed as high as possible, ideally 1.5-2m high, facing south-east to get the morning sun. However, this is not always possible, so if it is a bit lower (as some of mine are), or not quite facing the right direction, (as some of mine are, but they are roughly 'south-ish'), it is definitely worth trying a bee home or two.

If you are lucky enough for a bee to take up residence you will see the hole sealed off. Some species use mud, leafcutter bees use – leaves! Several bees (even different species) may all use the same bee home, but each will use a different hole. Each individual bee will collect nectar and pollen to create a food store at the back of the hole. It will lay one egg, and seal it off creating a chamber. It will



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repeat this process along the length of the bamboo, stem or hole, so that each hole may have from 3-4 up to 7-8 chambers. Each chamber has one egg, and a food supply for when the egg hatches. The adult bee will not emerge until the following spring, so try not to disturb the bee home over the winter.

There are some examples of huge bee-hotels which could accommodate hundreds if not thousands of bees. While the effort this has taken has to be applauded, the latest thinking now is that bigger is not always better. It has been found that such large congregations of bees attracts more predators and enables viruses, mites, and moulds to spread throughout the nests, destroying the food supply and killing the larva. It is suggested that creating a number of smaller bee homes and spreading them around your garden may be more beneficial than one large bee-hotel.

With many of our bee species in decline, anything we can do to give them a helping hand has to be worth a try. As many of these ideas are fairly easy, quick and inexpensive, why not give a couple of them a go?

Recording pollinators in your garden

I hope you have found this interesting, and that I have convinced you to help our bees. Some of you may already be aware of the All Ireland Pollinator Plan, but for those that aren't, please check out

<https://pollinators.ie/8-ways-to-help-pollinators-without-leaving-your-garden>

and take a look at the FIT Count (Flower-Insect Timed Count). Watch a 50x50cm patch of flowers for 10 minutes and record how many insects visit. As each patch takes only 10 minutes, why not try a couple of different patches with different types of flowers. See for yourself what ones attract the most insects. You don't need to be an invertebrate specialist for your records to make a real contribution. Definitely worth having a go at, and hopefully a few people will take part and show that we do have some good biodiversity in Mid Ulster.

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Harvesting & Eating – Part 1

Summer has started and we can finally begin to lean a little bit back from all the hard start-up gardening work in the spring with endless sowings, re-potting, getting ground ready and structures put into place. Gardens are suddenly green and in flower and fruit and vegetables are starting to look like the real thing!



Eat it when it's ready!

Now it's time to enjoy and eat some of the first results of your hard efforts as your garden is getting more productive and a number of early crops can be harvested. To keep your garden going you need to pick your fruit and veg as it is getting ready; this might mean changing your eating habits – include a few fresh green leaves or ripe berries from your garden on a daily basis and get a bit more inventive when it comes to making up dishes with the available crops in your garden.



The fresher the better!

If you want to get the most out of your vegetables in terms of vitamins and nutrition – make sure to eat the produce as soon as possible after harvesting.

Once cut off spinach or salad leaves for example will lose a high percentage of their vitamin contents very quickly, so only pick your leaves when you are ready to prepare your salad and don't leave them sitting for hours!

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Lettuce/Rocket/Salad Crops

These fast growing vegetable crops will be ready for harvesting (keep sowing them throughout the summer for a steady supply), so you need to get into the habit of making fresh green leaves a daily addition to your meals.

If you have sown cut-and-come-again salad crops you can start picking a colourful mix of leaves for your daily salad or sandwich topping by carefully cutting/pinching individual leaves off each lettuce plant, leaving the remainder of the plant to regrow a few times. Or you can take out entire small plants from in between other plants and leave a few lettuces to grow into full heads for harvesting later.



Spinach/Chard

You can start to pick the leaves of spinach and chard as soon as they are big enough to eat. The young fresh leaves are very nice to eat raw in salads etc. The stalks of Swiss chard and other red & yellow varieties of chard are also edible and can be cut up to add to stir fries, risottos or any other vegetable dishes.



Don't wait until the entire plants are becoming very big, but rather get into a habit of harvesting daily – this might at the start only be a few leaves at a time.

Regular watering is also really important for these leafy type vegetables in order to prevent them from bolting - sending out sudden upwards growth. If individual plants are starting to bolt, you need to harvest the entire plant as they will now go into flower and their leaves will start to taste bitter.



Fruit

Pick strawberries and other soft fruit as soon as they are ripe – you may also need to protect your fruit bushes from the birds at this stage. Keep harvesting stalks of rhubarb for another month or so for some tasty home baking or for making jam - after July leave the rhubarb plants to recover for next year.

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Parsley ...

Parsley is certainly very slow to start from seed and your seed grown plants are probably not ready for harvesting yet. However, if you divided and replanted your supermarket parsley you should have a few sturdy, flourishing parsley plants by now.

And once parsley takes off it is usually growing very strong, so start using parsley in your day-to-day cooking in a range of dishes such as soups/stews, omelettes, scrambled eggs, risottos or just sprinkled over salads, sandwiches and ready cooked food.

Regular picking will ensure a continuous supply of new growth throughout the summer. For harvesting cut off a few whole stalks from the outside of the plants, rather than just snipping bits off across the tops.

... and other herbs

Don't forget to use the rest of your herbs neither:

Basil, thyme and oregano might have looked a bit sparse during spring, but will have started growing more strongly now with longer hours of sunlight and constant higher temperatures. Look around your window sill herbs or herb bed for inspiration in your daily cooking.



Peas

Once you see your pea plants in flower it won't be long before pods start to form. Mangetout and Sugarsnaps are eaten as whole, tender pods – raw, steamed or cooked - and should be harvested as soon as they reach eating size. For peas in the pod varieties you need to wait with harvesting until the pods fill up with delicious little round peas. (There are also many varieties which can be harvested both as early mangetout and later as fully formed peas.) It is really important to harvest your peas often and regularly as this will encourage the plants to grow more flowers and therefore more peas. If you leave the pods on the plants they probably think their job is done and stop producing, so you only get a smaller crop.

Mid Ulster is Growing from Home - 2020 Growing Season



Kale ...

Depending when it was sown kale might not be quite ready, but once the plants take off and have enough space, water and good soil they will usually be growing fast. You can get some early pickings of kale when thinning out a row of seedlings or by just removing a few outer leaves from young plants, leaving them in the ground for growing on.

... and other thinnings

Make sure you don't discard any seedlings when thinning out rows of other greens too such as broccoli, beetroot, sunflowers, cabbages, peas and radishes, but rather treat them as an additional harvest of nutritious microgreens. These thinnings can be eaten raw in salads and sandwiches, or used as pizza toppings and many other cooked dishes.



Courgette plants might show the first tiny courgettes developing which should be harvested when about four inches long. Don't let them get too big, rather keep harvesting them when young and your plants will keep producing a crop for a longer time. And remember that you can eat the flowers too, but don't harvest all the male flowers before the females have set or you end up with no courgettes.



Early Potatoes

If you have planted early potato varieties they should also soon be ready for harvesting. Look out for the flowering stage (see photo on right for second early 'Charlotte' currently in flower), which is when tubers form and make sure to water regularly during this time.

You can carefully check in the soil for the size of the tubers and start harvesting once they have reached the size of baby spuds.

Please note that main crop potatoes probably won't be ready for harvesting until much later (September/October) and are usually only lifted when their foliage has completely died down.



For next week's gardening mailing please send in your recipes and photos or your first home-grown harvests and dishes enjoyed 😊

To receive further guidance and food gardening tips throughout this growing season – make sure you are on the mailing list for the Mid Ulster is growing from Home Project.

For queries and feedback please email yvonne.zellmann@midulstercouncil.org