

February

Growing Guide with Charles Dowding



No dig

In February you can set the stage for a long growing season. Though it might seem like a quiet month, there's much we can do to prepare, even in wet weather. No dig makes it easier. Soil is wet and sticky at this time of year, but much less if you don't disturb it. Any kind of cultivation exposes wet soil to air, making it unpleasantly glue-like for a while, until the surface dries a little. With no dig, this adhesive effect never happens, and you have access to any ground, at any time. With no muddy boots.



To grow great vegetables, whether you dig or don't dig, the soil needs to be in top condition. Adding compost achieves this. I recommend using 10-12 cm when starting out, to lift fertility for several years ahead. The large dose in that first year is a kind of long-term investment. After that, I spread 2 to 3 cm on all beds every year. Ultra simple and quick.

Slugs and salad leaves

Tidy the garden to reduce slug habitat. This is my number one approach to flood control, and I never use pellets, even the organic ones. They have EDTA, a chelating agent which is poisonous to soil life.

This was researched by Dr Kathy Lewis of the Agriculture and Environment Research unit at the University of Hertfordshire, UK. She discovered that EDTA is toxic to earthworms.

I feel so grateful for my greenhouse and polytunnel at this time of year. The tunnel is a very solid one from First Tunnels, 18ft wide and 42ft long. Probably the longest it could be, without having mesh sides for extra ventilation. Most of the time the door is open to allow air over these salad plants.

We transplanted them in October as four week old seedlings. First pickings were in late November, and now in February, we are picking one or two leaves from each plant, once a week.

There's still a shortage in terms of keeping my customers fully supplied. Then, within one month, there will be a surplus!



Make a potting mix

For potting, I especially recommend making your own worm compost. Wormcasts are not only rich in nutrients, but they have some kind of enzyme profile, which must be what makes the difference. I notice when adding even 10% to an ordinary potting mix, the increase in growth is dramatic.

With a good compost mix, there is no need to do any feeding. That would be a supplementary job, and an extra expense.

However you need to feed if using a coir compost, because coir contains almost no nutrients. Likewise for many composts based on digestate, which have given me poor results. Read the small print on a sack, to see their origin.



Multisow ideas

Many plants like to grow in clumps, with their mates. In addition, multisowing saves time, space, and compost. It's suitable now for radish, turnips, spinach, onions, salad onions, Florence fennel, salad rocket (arugula, and before end-February), peas for shoots, beetroot, and dill. See my webpage for details of seed numbers for each vegetable.

Because you can grow more plants in the same space, it's feasible to grow lots of early crops of, say, turnips and radish. This applies especially at this time, when warmth for propagating is scarce and precious, in February and early March.

Then the harvests of radish and turnips in April and May are welcome, as 'hungry gap' vegetables, when fresh food is scarce and expensive. After those harvests, there is time to clear the space before planting summer beans, courgettes, brassicas and more. Starting early is a win-win.

All of the seeds I recommend here for sowing in February, can be started in the small cells of module trays I designed six years ago. They are now sold around the world, and are easy to use because the polypropylene inside is very smooth. Root balls pop out with no damage, and then you can reuse them immediately, without any need to wash or sterilise.



Heat and light for seeds and seedlings

Germination requires extra warmth, compared to what is needed by seedlings once germinated. Even in a greenhouse, night temperatures are often low enough to prevent the germination phase. Seeds are programmed not to germinate before it's warm enough. I recommend to invest in an electric heat mat.

Or if you have the space and the materials needed, make a hotbed of fresh horse manure. My video has the details.

Additional light is necessary only if you want to grow seedlings in the warmth of your house. Not for the germination phase.

I bring newly sown trays into my conservatory, or any warm room. But once leaves appear, unless you move seedlings to full light such as greenhouse or coldframe, extra light is required. Otherwise, seedlings grow long legs, another way of saying the stems are thin and weak.



Sow from mid-month

There will be further frosts, but what we sow at this time of year is cold resistant. In contrast, I don't sow tomatoes until mid March, cucumbers in April, runner beans in May. With extra warmth now, you can sow aubergine, pepper and chilli, because they take longer than tomatoes.

Sow any of broad (fava) beans, peas (for shoots in particular), spinach, lettuce, onions, salad, onions, cabbage, calabrese, kohlrabi, cauliflower, turnips, radish and Florence fennel. Sow parsley, coriander and dill. Plus an early sowing of celery can be worthwhile, to grow under cover especially. Leave celery seeds on the surface as they need light to germinate – cover with glass to retain moisture.

It's too early to sow celeriac, because they risk bolting by late summer if sown before mid-March. See my Sowing Timeline. In addition, you can sow perennial vegetables into modules, for eventual potting on and transplanting in late spring, such as asparagus, globe artichoke, and rhubarb. I find that asparagus from seed grows remarkably quickly, and gives a more reliable result than I have from planting crowns, which are one year old roots.



Harvests

Fresh greens outside are in short supply. I have started to cut off the tops off Brussels sprouts, as long as they have been protected against pigeons. There is beautiful flavour in these tops, steamed for four minutes.

Whether you have leeks depends on Allium Leaf Miner. I'm experimenting with covers to protect leeks and onions from this horrible new pest.

Purple sprouting broccoli will be a while yet, but white sprouting is more hardy and can start picking by late February.

At this time last year, I was picking coriander from a planting under mesh, and the sowing date was 7th September. The cover is made from plant matter and I don't yet know how many years it will last.

About the author

Charles Dowding is a pioneering gardener, educator and author based in Somerset, and the leading voice behind the No Dig movement. His approach developed through decades of practical growing and careful observation, demonstrating that productive, healthy gardens can be created without disturbing the soil. Charles teaches gardeners of all levels through books, courses and online content, sharing simple, sustainable methods that prioritise soil health and reduce weeds. His work has had a lasting influence on modern kitchen gardening in the UK and beyond, encouraging a more natural and resilient way of growing food.

Where to find out more

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