15 July 2020
Dorothy Innes

Filling the “Hungry Gap”

Historically the “hungry gap” covers the few months of the year when the winter food stores run out, the winter crops are depleted or have bolted to seed, and the early spring crops are not yet ready to harvest. This time in the gardener’s year starts at the end of winter and runs until late spring (September till early December).

With our reliance on supermarket food chains and their stocks of unseasonal produce from global markets, many of us are not even aware the hungry gap exists; our only inkling being the higher prices of fruit and veggies in spring. Before the advent of supermarkets, early spring was a worrying season, especially in times of national uncertainty. For now we have the “surety” of an international food supply - but how sure is it?

Eating fresh, nutritious food from your own garden all year round is a pleasure and is achievable. With some forethought and a little planning, early spring can be a season of abundance in your home garden rather than the time of anxiety “the hungry gap” implies.

Learn how to fill the hungry gap before you need to and avoid paying high prices for veggies this spring. Following is a list of what you can sow in July and August for harvesting during the spring months along with some tips on how to prepare the garden bed to get them growing sooner.

Sow or Plant Date	**Crop**	**Sow:** **Under Cover (UC)** inside in trays, or **Direct sow (DS)** into garden bed	**Expected harvest times and what to harvest**
July	Broad Beans	DS without delay	Harvest growing tips from September & use as salad/stir fry green. Harvest beans from Nov/Dec
July	Garlic Garlic sprouts	DS cloves without delay DS whole bulbs without delay	Harvest bulbs from December. Harvest sprouts from August. Leave bulbs in the ground to multiply & sprout again next year.
July	Onions: Red & Salad Onions Long Keeper Onions	UC. Transplant when 10-15cm (4-6 weeks) in groups of 3-5 seedlings	Harvest main crop onions as spring onions when big enough - Oct/Nov. Harvest bulb onions from December. Spring Onions will not develop bulbs. Harvest when big enough - Sept
July	Shallots	DS urgently with bulb tip poking out of soil.	Harvest from November.
Late July	Carrots	DS. Cover with cloche	Harvest as baby carrots from Oct.
Late July	Mustard Greens	UC. Transplant as large seedlings in 4-6 weeks	Harvest from Sept.

Late July	Chinese Cabbage, Broccoli, Cauliflowers Kale, Kohlrabi, Green Cabbage	UC. Transplant as large seedlings in 4-6 weeks. Sow every 3 weeks until Nov for continuous supply.	Maturity is 3 months from transplant. Harvest from Nov-Dec
Late July	Beetroot Silverbeet & Swiss Chard Perpetual Spinach	UC. Transplant as large seedlings in 4-6 weeks. Sow every 3 weeks until Nov for continuous supply.	Harvest from October as baby leaves for salads and baby beets when large enough.
Late July	Spinach Lettuce Rocket	UC. Transplant as large seedlings in 3-4 weeks. Sow every 2 weeks for continuous supply.	Harvest from September. Pick baby leaves within a month.
August	Radish Coriander Asian Greens (Pak Choi etc)	DS a small row every week until the weather gets too hot and they start bolting.	Harvest from September.
August	Peas: Sugar Snap & Main Crop Massey	DS	Harvest growing tips as salad greens when plants are big enough (Sept); Harvest Sugar Snap pods from Nov. Harvest Maincrop from Dec.
August	Onions	DS	Thin to 10cm apart and use thinnings as spring onions.
August	Chit seed potatoes	Place on a tray in the sun in a warm room. Plant out late August/early Sept under a cloche	Bandicoot new potatoes from late October for early varieties.

Growing Tips and Bed Preparation

1. **Choose early maturing crops that enjoy the cooler weather.** Many hardy crops can be sown as soon as the soil is consistently at or above 10°C: Radish, spinach, peas, early carrots, broad beans, garlic, most salad leaves including lettuce, and beetroot. These early staples will mature within one-three months, so the sooner they are in warm ground the quicker you will be eating them. It also means they will be out of the ground quickly, allowing for repeat plantings or freeing up space for later sown crops. The sowing date given is the earliest you can sow if you take care with bed preparation and protect with cloching. You can keep sowing these crops over the next few months, so do not feel pressure to sow them in the next few weeks if time or weather is against you.

2. **Start seed in trays inside.** Most early spring crops germinate at 10°C. Spinach will germinate at. Sow most seed in trays or punets using a good seed raising mix, or make your own (see below for instructions). Some crops do not transplant well, so need to be directly sown (DS) into the garden bed. Put the trays on a sunny window sill in a warm room in the house. The seedlings will germinate and continue to grow in this nursery environment for 4-6 weeks before they are transplanted into a prepared garden bed. Onions prefer to germinate out of direct sunlight and enjoy cooler temperatures as they

grow. Once onions have germinated in a warm room you can move them to a cooler, sheltered spot where they will get good sunlight. Keep them watered well.

3. **Water seed trays with warm water.** This helps to keep the soil temperature up and mimics a warm day in late spring.

4. **Plant perennial crops like asparagus & strawberries.** Plant one year old crowns now and you will be eating asparagus in two years. Fresh asparagus is a crop worth waiting for! Other early spring perennials are rhubarb, sea kale, globe artichokes, and herbs: sorrel, fennel, chives, garlic chives, thyme, oregano, sage, and rosemary. Strawberries are the first fruit of the season ripening late November, followed by raspberries in early December. Plant strawberries and raspberries now.

5. **Plan to over-winter crops for next year's hungry gap:**
    - Purple sprouting broccoli will produce in early spring but needs to be planted in February along with other winter brassicas.
    - Keep your winter producing broccoli sprouting for longer by never letting it flower. Give it a good prune to thin out crowded branches in order to get bigger sprouts.
    - You will get an earlier crop of broad beans if you sow them in autumn.

6. **Enrich your garden beds with compost, lime and organic fertilisers** (blood & bone, seaweed, fish, composted manures, comfry tea). If you did not do this in Autumn, then do it before you plant your spring crop. Have some mulch on hand to place around your growing plants for when they are up and big enough to manage it.

7. **Pre-warm the soil in your garden beds.** Increase the temperature of the soil faster for early germination of direct sown crops of broad beans, carrots, peas, radish and onions; and get your freshly planted seedlings off to a running start.
    - Remove any mulch from the bed to expose the dark soil. Dark soil absorbs heat better without a mulch cover. Reserve the mulch for placing around your plants later.
    - Make sure your soil is moist, not dry. Water acts as a thermal mass.
    - Lay a sheet of plastic directly on top of the soil and pin it down well at the edges. You can use black plastic or clear plastic. Clear plastic lets the light in, which has the added benefit of stimulating the germination of early weed seeds. These weeds can be cleared from the bed before sowing/planting your crop.
    - Leave the plastic in place for two to six weeks. The soil will heat up with expanding day length and warmer weather.
    - You can test the soil temperature in two ways: by feeling the soil with your hand. If it feels too cold, then it probably is; or place a thermometer in the soil at approximately 10cm deep. Leave it there for 15 minutes before reading. Ideally your soil temperature needs to be at or above 10°C.
    - Keep the soil warm and protect your newly sown or planted crops by covering them with a cloche of frost cloth and/or greenhouse plastic. Make sure you vent plastic on sunny days.

Rise and shine Malvern and enjoy an abundant spring garden. Gardens strengthen our resilience and nourish our communities. Gardens are the gift that keeps on giving. For your local Nourish representative or to register your interest in local gardening information and resources please contact:

Darfield: Bronwyn Adams-Hooper: adhoop@icloud.com
Springfield: Dorothy Innes: dorothy.innes@gmail.com

How to make a seed raising mix at home.

Find an old council recycle bin and a plastic seed tray. The seed tray acts as a sieve and sits perfectly on the inside ledge of the bin. If you don't have a recycle bin, any large container will do. The seed trays can be purchased at The Warehouse.

Spade some dry to moist (not wet) well composted compost from your heap onto the tray. Slide the tray back and forth along the ledge of the recycle bin to sieve the compost into the bin. If the tray does not fit your bin, use your hand to push the compost through the sieve.

Add a cup of lime and a cup of blood and bone to the mix and combine well. The idea is to get a fine, nutrient rich soil, ideal for germinating small seeds.

Unlike the commercial potting mix you buy, this is not a sterile mix. It will contain all the microlife that are killed in the sterilisation process. It may contain weed seeds (depending on what your compost heap is made up of). If you are concerned the weeds will be a problem, you can let their seeds germinate first by leaving the mix for a week or two before you sow your desired seed.

To store the seed raising mix, lay a folded plastic stock feed sack over the mix to keep it from drying out.

Happy seed raising!

16 April 2020
Dorothy Innes