

Autumn is the perfect time to plant vegetables that will continue to feed us through the shorter days of winter. In this fact sheet we provide a basic guide to growing the most common cool-season vegetables.

### POTS OR GARDEN BEDS?

Many vegetables, especially fast-growing salad greens such as lettuce, rocket, baby spinach, are suitable for growing in pots. Silverbeet, kale and full size spinach are also good in larger containers. Always use fresh, premium potting mix for new plantings.

Peas, broad beans, carrots, leeks and all the brassicas (the family of veggies that includes cauliflower, broccoli, cabbage, kale, etc) are best grown in the ground. If the soil is poor, enrich with garden compost, Surecrop soil conditioner or aged manure (not suitable for all crops) before planting.

Whether in pots or garden beds, all vegetables do best in a bright, sunny position.

### SEEDS OR SEEDLINGS?

For beginner gardeners, or those in a hurry, the easiest and fastest way to start a veggie garden is with established seedlings sold in small punnets of around 6-8 seedlings.

Remove the entire block from the punnet, then gently break the seedlings apart, retaining as much of the root ball as possible. Use a trowel to make small holes according to the spacing on the label (can be a little closer together if growing in pots), pop the plant in, draw the soil back around the roots and press down gently to firm. Water in well with Seasol and check regularly to ensure your new seedlings do not dry out.

For keen gardeners, a much wider choice of vegetable varieties is available from seed. It is also more cost-effective to grow from seed, which is something to consider if you have a very large garden. Specific sowing instructions can be found on the back of the seed packet, but as a general rule, seeds need to be sown as thinly as possible, and at a depth ranging from as little as 5mm for fine seeds like carrots to 5cm for large seeds like broad beans. Water in well and ensure the soil does not dry out. Once germinated, seedlings will need to be thinned out so that the remaining plants have room to grow to their full size.

### FEEDING, WATERING AND WEEDING

All vegetables benefit from a watering in with Seasol at the time of planting, and regular applications of both Seasol and Powerfeed when in growth.

Vegetables require moist soil, so check them regularly and pay particular attention to pots, which tend to dry out very quickly. Mulching with pea straw, sugar cane or garden compost can help to retain moisture and also reduce weed growth. Try to remove weeds as soon as they appear, otherwise they will compete with your crops for water and nutrients.

### VEGETABLES TO GROW NOW

#### Leafy Greens

#### **Lettuce, Rocket, Spinach, Silverbeet, Kale, Asian Greens, Beets**

For the quickest harvest, choose fast-growing salad greens like lettuce, rocket and baby spinach. Regular watering, and a fortnightly application of Powerfeed is all they require. They are perfect for growing in pots and also highly decorative, with many different coloured and shaped leaves available.

Loose leaf or 'cut and come again' types are the most popular lettuce varieties, as individual leaves can be harvested as needed over an extended period. Hearting lettuce such as Cos, Romaine and Butterhead take longer to grow, and must be harvested in a single cut.

Asian greens, spinach, silverbeet (swiss chard), rainbow chard, tuscan kale and red russian kale require a longer time to harvest, but are equally easy to grow. Watch out for caterpillars on your kale though!

Beetroot (normally grown for the root) can also be grown for it's leaves and is often recommended as another nutritious option for salad greens (see root vegetable section for growing tips).

### Legumes

#### Peas & Broad Beans

Peas are available in seedling punnets, but as a lot of plants are needed to provide a decent harvest, many people prefer to grow them from seed. Choose from shelling peas, snow peas and sugar snap peas. Dwarf growing varieties are also available.

All peas require some sort of support. Options include chicken wire or netting strung up between stakes, and wigwams of bamboo stakes wound with string or netting. Twiggy prunings from the garden can make an ideal support for dwarf peas.

Broad beans are great to grow over winter. Not only are they fast growing, the whole plant is edible, they have pretty flowers, and they fix nitrogen in the soil. So plant these where you are planning to grow your summer crop of tomatoes.

Broad beans are generally only available to grow from seed (soaked overnight) and they require quite a lot of space. Plants may need support in loose soil as they can become top heavy and fall over in the wind – short bamboo stakes are ideal.

### Brassicas

#### Broccoli, Broccolini (Baby Broccoli), Cauliflower, Cabbage, Brussels Sprout

Brassicas are widely sold as seedling punnets as well as by seed. Mini varieties of broccoli, cabbage and cauliflower are also available which require only half the space and can be grown in large pots.

Brassicas prefer a rich soil with a top dressing of lime if slightly acidic. Seedlings need to be planted deeply (up to the second set of leaves) to keep them stable and prevent rocking in the wind. Brussels sprouts are particularly top heavy and may need staking for support.

Broccoli and cabbage benefit from regular applications of nitrogen-rich fertiliser. However, too much nitrogen can cause leaf growth at the expense of flower curds in cauliflower, and cause individual brussels sprouts to become 'loose' rather than tight and compact.

Caterpillars are a significant pest of all brassicas. See the Vegetable Pests section at the end of this fact sheet for control methods.

### Root vegetables

#### Carrots and Parsnips

'Baby' carrots are available in seedling punnets. These are generally the small round or finger types, which are very popular with children. However, most traditional carrot varieties are best grown from seed, as they are prone to forking (splitting of the root) when transplanted.

Carrot seed is tiny, and it is a good idea to mix it with sand which helps with sowing more thinly. Alternatively, carrot seed is available in a 'seed tape' form, where the seed is impregnated into the tap at the correct sowing interval.

Grow carrots in a very light, well-drained soil, and avoid the use of high nitrogen manures as this can also cause forking. It is essential that carrot seed is not allowed to dry out. Thin out seedlings a few weeks after sowing to a spacing of about 10cm.

Carrots can be harvested as baby carrots in a couple of months, or left in the ground for longer to reach their maximum size.

Parsnips require similar growing conditions to carrots, but should be allowed to mature to full size which takes about 4-6 months. They benefit from a long, cold winter to maximise flavour and sweetness.

Beetroot can be ready for harvest in around 10 weeks. If growing from seed, soak them overnight to improve germination. Protect them in the early days from snails and slugs. Regular watering is important for nice juicy beets.

#### Tuberous Potatoes

Potatoes should be grown from small, specially certified seed tubers, which are guaranteed to be disease-free (unlike the ones from the supermarket). They are frost-tender, so although they can be planted in most areas of metropolitan Melbourne during mid-late winter, in colder areas it is best to wait until Spring.

In garden beds, plant potatoes about 15cm deep and 30cm apart with the 'eyes' (shoots) pointing upwards. As the shoots begin to grow, keep drawing soil up around the plants to ensure that any potatoes developing near the soil surface remain covered, otherwise they will

turn green and inedible.

If growing potatoes in large tubs such as a half wine barrel or rubbish bin, remember to drill some drainage holes, fill the base with around 15cm of potting mix or compost & straw, cover the tubers with another 10cm of soil, and continue to add more around the stems as the shoots grow.

The first small, new potatoes are particularly delicious and will be ready to harvest once the plants have flowered and the leaves start to yellow. For larger potatoes with thicker skins and better storage life, wait a few weeks longer until the foliage has died down before harvesting.

### Alliums

#### Spring Onions, Onions, Shallots, Leeks, Garlic

Spring onions are the easiest of all the alliums. They are fast growing, and can be grown in containers, or in the ground, where they are often slotted in amongst slower growing crops if space is limited.

Onions, shallots and garlic prefer a light, well-drained soil that is rich in organic matter and dressed with lime if slightly acidic. However, avoid the use of fresh manure, as too much nitrogen can cause stem growth at the expense of the bulbs.

Onions are available in seedling punnets or as seed. Regular watering is essential for good bulb growth, as onions have a small root system, but too much water or poor drainage can cause fungal problems such as mildew and rot. They are ready for harvest when the stems turn brown and collapse. The bulbs should then be dug up and allowed to dry for several weeks before storing in net bags in a cool, dry location.

Garlic bulbs are available for planting in autumn. Break the bulb up into individual cloves, and plant about 5cm deep with the pointy end upwards.

Leeks like a neutral soil that is rich in nutrients. To promote the development of long shanks leeks are traditionally grown in a trench, which is gradually filled with soil. Alternatively, hay or straw can be piled up around the shanks, which avoids the problem of grit getting between the leaves. However, many leeks will still produce good shanks even without blanching.



### COMMON VEGETABLE PESTS

**Slugs and snails:** These are a common pest of lettuce and other leafy greens, causing holes in the leaves and often eating away entire seedling plants. Search them out at night and remove by hand; eliminate hiding spots, set traps, or spread coffee grounds on the soil around the base of the plants. Chemical control is available as slug and snail bait. Baits containing Chelated Iron / Iron EDTA are considered to be safer for use around children and pets but may still be toxic if consumed in large quantities.

**Aphids:** These sap-sucking insects causing mottling on the leaves of many vegetables. You can try squashing them or hosing them off. Natural sprays include insecticidal soaps and eco-oil. Pyrethrum and Mavrik are chemical alternatives.

**Caterpillars:** Caterpillars are the larvae of the white cabbage butterfly and the cabbage moth, and the most common pest of brassicas. If not controlled, they can cause holes in the leaves and can quickly eat away entire leaves. Prevention is the best method of control – keep the butterflies and moths out by covering your crops with fine mesh netting, often sold as insect exclusion netting (bird netting isn't fine enough).

If this is not possible, check the undersides of the leaves regularly for tiny yellow dots. These are the caterpillar eggs and you can squash them! If caterpillars are already present, try picking them off by hand, although this can be difficult as they are often tiny and the exact same colour as the leaf under which they are hiding.

Biological controls such as Dipel and Success Ultra are very effective and much kinder to the environment than chemical sprays. Chemical treatments include Derris dust, Pyrethrum, and synthetic pyrethroids such as Mavrik.

**Birds, mice and rats:** If your freshly sown pea seeds fail to germinate, there's a good chance they might have been 'stolen' by one of these pests. Cover with chicken wire, tucking the edges a few centimetres down into the soil to protect them and remove once the seedlings have germinated.

Good luck with your autumn/winter vegetables! For more detailed information, or for advice about varieties not listed, please ask one of our friendly horticulturalists in store.

### Rhubarb

Rhubarb is available as dormant, bare-root 'crowns' for planting during winter. Although very hardy and easy to grow, it flourishes in moist, rich, organic soil. Dig in plenty of manure and/or compost before planting crowns just below soil level. Apply mulch in spring, keep well-watered, and feed regularly with an organic fertiliser throughout the growing season.

Only the rhubarb stems are edible and they must be cooked; the leaves and roots are poisonous. Harvest the thickest stems by gently pulling them off at soil level, and avoid taking more than half of the stalks on each plant in one season.

### COOL SEASON HERBS TO GROW NOW

It's time to grow your coriander! This herb is so difficult to grow at other times of the year because of its habit of bolting straight to seed, but it loves the cooler soil temperatures, and will thrive over autumn and winter. Try to plant when it's not too warm. If it does go to seed, not to worry. Harvest those seeds for cooking, or for later planting.

Other herbs to grow now include most perennial herbs such as parsley, mint, chives, oregano, rosemary and marjoram.

