

Wally's Weekly News 24th JANUARY 2009
Written by Wally Richards.

WINTER VEGETABLES

Now is the perfect time to plant out seedlings of vegetables for harvesting in winter. Many gardeners leave the planting of winter vegetables too late in the season to obtain good mature produce during the cold winter months.

The idea is to plant out seedlings now while there is ample growth through warmth and plenty of day light hours (which are on the decline every day). As the daily dose of sun light reduces so does the amount of new growth will decline.

By planting out now and keeping the growing medium moist the vegetables will grow nicely reaching maturity in late autumn or early winter. The short day light hours and colder conditions will hold the mature vegetable for a couple of months or more allowing you to harvest at will.

If we leave the planting out till later say March or April what happens is the plants will grow to a degree but not reach maturity, so they sit there in their pre-maturity state waiting for better growth times.

This of course happens in the spring as the daylight hours begin to extend, but because the vegetables have had a big check in their growth, they feel their lives have been threatened and want to reproduce themselves. The vegetables immediately go to seed or as we say, 'bolt'.

A total waste of time and money.

I had a gardener ring me the other day who had purchased a punnet of leeks, he described the plants as tallish but very skinny. His question was did he grow the leek plants on in the punnet till they filled out and were of a more suitable size to plant out?

The answer is that leek plants in a punnet will never fill out as they are too crowded and can't get a decent root run. The best leek seedlings are ones that are planted in about November/December as seeds in a nursery bed in open ground with a good amount of chook manure incorporated in the soil.

The seeds will germinate, grow quickly into strong plants ready to be lifted and transplanted into rows about now and through February.

My advise to the gardener was to soak the punnet in water and then to divide the contents into small clumps of plants and plant into open ground that has been well fertilised with chook manure.

By keeping them moist they will quickly grow and fill out so that they can be planted out a little later on.

Here is what I have to say about leeks in my book, [Wally's Green Tips for Gardeners](#); LEEKS: Another heavy feeding plant that requires ample animal manure and compost humus. Chicken manure is best.

The pitiful leeks purchased in punnets should only be used if you forget to grow your own from seed.

Leeks in bundles may be better specimens but if grown in soil, the soil may carry the deadly club root spores which will not hurt the leeks but will introduce the disease into your gardens making the growing of all brassicas difficult.

A nursery bed should be prepared about November using ample compost and animal manure.

Sprinkle the leek seeds over this bed and lightly cover with sand after watering with the **MBL** drench mix.

Keep moist. You are looking to develop strong young plants that are both tallish and with trunks up to the thickness of a pencil.

In January the biggest of the seedlings can be lifted after saturating the soil with water.

These are transplanted into a row that is rich in chicken manure and compost.

Depth of mix should be about 200mm. Trim the foliage off leaving about 50mm of leaves.

To plant use a dibbler pushed into the above mix and drop the leek seedling into the resulting hole.

All of the seedling should be in the hole with just the 50mm of leaves left protruding.

Squeeze some of the mix at the top of the hole to support the plant in an upright position.

Don't try to fill the hole.

Plant about 100 to 120mm apart.

Leave the remaining seedlings in the nursery bed so that a further planting maybe done in February and once again in March with the best of what is left.

Keep all plantings well watered till the autumn rains soak the garden.

The above method should give you ample good sized leeks through winter and well into spring. End.

Silverbeet and spinach are two great winter vegetables to grow and by harvesting just the outer leaves for use, the plants will keep producing ample new foliage for future harvesting.

Brassicas such as cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, Brussel Sprouts, Swedes and Turnips are also great winter vegetables to grow.

A problem arises at this time of the year as the young seedlings are attacked by the caterpillars of the white butterfly. These hungry caterpillars can decimate a crop of seedlings in no time at all.

It is a matter of protecting them from damage. One method is to place about a teaspoon of **Neem Tree Granules** into the planting hole and after planting sprinkle some more **Neem Granules** onto the surface of the soil near the trunk. Repeat the surface sprinkling about every 4-6 weeks.

What happens is the eggs of the caterpillars are laid on the outer leaves and when the grub hatches out and takes one bite of the leaf it gets a small dose of Neem properties and is unable to eat again. (anti-feedent) Within a day or so the grub is dead through starvation.

You can also increase the effectiveness of the granules by spraying some **Neem Tree Oil** over them say at 15 to 25mls per litre. The same spray will take care of any aphids that may attack the young foliage.

If white butterfly populations are really bad you can also protect the seedlings when planting out by covering with a fine weave curtain netting, placed loosely over the bed but held in place with lengths of wood or similar. If the butterflies can't reach the plants to lay their eggs they will not be eaten up.

Later when established, the netting can be removed and the **Neem Tree Granules** applied about 2 weeks before removal.

Tomato plants that are cropping well at this time need a good supply of a good tomato food to keep them growing and cropping till late autumn. You may like to use my own

Secret Tomato Food.

If you strike some laterals as cuttings this will give you a few new tomato plants for growing to produce more tomatoes after your main crop is finishing. It is also the right time to germinate the seed of cold setting tomato plants for growing through the winter in a glasshouse or in a frost protected area.

Ideally grown in containers so you can move them around. A good one for this is called Silvery Fir Tree, (A Niche Brand Seed)

I was told the other day that seed potatoes for a late crop have already sold out so I like many other missed out.

The alternative would be to plant purchased potatoes that have started to sprout.

Happy winter planting.

Problems ring me at 0800 466464 (Palmerston North 3570606)