



The Subsistence Gardener PLANTING

The essence of subsistence gardening is working out how to spend more of one's time and energy on the most important things, and less time on things that eventually prove to have been a distraction.

One aspect of this is being able to identify the crops that form a part of the staple diet in the area in which you live, and then prioritising those crops, and doing everything that you can to ensure that they do better and better from one year to the next. In our case, in Brittany, these staple crops include rye (for bread), buckwheat (for crepes), beans and potatoes. Wheat and flax also play an important

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role, and root vegetables, such as carrots, beetroot, turnips, and parsnips are invaluable in one form or another over the winter months.

None of these crops are particularly glamorous, but when grown in a well-organised and logical way on a small scale, they combine together to create an idyllic environment. In order to be successful there has to be a combination of short-term focus on particular tasks, combined with long-term strategic planning, and this is particularly apparent in the planting season.

Potatoes

It can take several years of trial and error before you get a significant cereal crop, but even an inexperienced gardener, with a little luck, can grow enough potatoes to meet their needs for the whole year. It therefore makes sense to plant as large an area of potatoes as possible when you are starting a new garden. The more work you do over the course of the growing season – weeding the plants, and earthing up between the rows – the better. The majority of even the toughest weeds will be eliminated in a single season, and the ground will be in good condition for a crop of winter cereal, which can be sown in late summer, or early autumn.



Spring Cereals

If you have a well-prepared piece of ground, it can be planted with a spring cereal in March. Spring cereals are most under threat in the first few weeks after sowing; the young seedlings are very attractive to birds and to slugs, but if they survive they then grow quickly to give a good ground cover, and a good crop. Ideally, they should be sown in ground that is weed-free, rich in organic matter, and well-drained. Mulching over winter can help to create these conditions.

Peas

Peas are often overlooked when considering staple food crops, but they are hardy, and are good for the soil. There are a whole range of old varieties that can be planted in March and harvested in the summer, when it is still relatively easy to dry the peas for storage.

Flax

Flax was once seen as an essential crop in subsistence gardens across large parts of the world. Together with hemp it provides the most readily-available plant fibre for spinning into yarn, and weaving into cloth. It can be planted at the end of March, and needs rich soil with as few weeds as possible.

Beans and Buckwheat

There are a few frost-sensitive crops, such as most beans and buckwheat, that can be sown later on in the year – end of May, or June – when the soil has had a chance to warm up, and the nights are not so cold. Work done now to get a plot in as good a condition as possible will be repaid later on. This could involve adding an extra layer of mulch to stifle weed growth, or, if no mulch is available, the plot can be given an initial hoe; it can then be hoed again in a few weeks, and a final time before planting.

Vegetable Garden

Onions, garlic, leek seeds, broad beans and peas can be planted now, but most of the planting in the vegetable garden takes place later on. The main objective at this time of year is to stop the weeds taking over. This can be done by covering the ground with mulch, or by starting to work over the ground with a hoe: if you have well-rotted compost, it can be worked into the ground at the same time.

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When planting, one tries to give the plants the best possible conditions in which to germinate and grow. The short-term aim is for that particular crop to succeed, but you also have in mind the crop that is to follow the one that you are sowing, and the one after that. By growing crops in rotation, mulching, and working compost into the surface, the amount of organic matter in the soil gradually increases, the soil becomes more friable, it retains water better without becoming waterlogged, and growing conditions are better, particularly for the tender roots of seedlings. Individual crops might fail, particularly in the early years, but when one can see the overall objective of improving soil quality being achieved, it is difficult to feel discouraged.

