



What to do in the garden: Spring Term

Welcome to our Spring Term 'Get Growing' newsletter which will give you ideas and inspiration about what to do in the garden with children throughout the year.



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General tasks – January and February

- Try not to walk on the grass when there is a frost. Footprints will leave 'black marks' during the spring where grass has been damaged. These are dead grass stems as plant cells inside the frozen leaves explode when trodden on.
- If the ground is in a fit condition i.e. not too wet or frozen, continue to plant trees, shrubs, roses, and hedging, as well as soft fruit bushes and raspberry canes. Bare root plants (the cheapest option) are still available to buy until March.
- Now is a good time to turn the soil. This will expose insect eggs and help hungry birds but it will also help to break apart heavy clods of soil.
- Make use of your old Christmas tree. The pine needles can be used in the garden as mulch for plants that prefer acidic soil such as hollies, rhododendrons and camellias. Spread needles on the soil nearby
- Plan a crop rotation for your vegetable plot. Many pests and diseases are specific to particular families of vegetables. Moving your crops to a different area each year helps control these problems. For more information you can download crop rotation fact sheets from www.gardenorganic.org.uk or www.rhs.org.uk
- Get ready for spring planting. Tidy your garden up and wash any old pots and seed trays with a diluted disinfectant so your seedlings will get off to the best possible start. Clean your storage areas and gardening tools.
- Look out for emerging shoots of spring flowers such as crocuses and daffodils and take care when you are walking on lawns and wild areas in your garden.
- Check the condition of your homemade compost to see if it's ready. If it is dark and crumbly it is ready for you to add to your vegetable beds or use it as a mulch around trees and shrubs.
- Weeding done now will save time in the spring. Perennial weed roots thicken and can spread over the winter months, making them more of a problem if you leave them till spring.
- Start collecting plastic bottles for cloches. The cut down plastic bottles will protect individual young plants from slug damage.
- Cut down faded ornamental grass foliage. The stems of many ornamental grasses die in autumn but are often left to provide some winter interest in the garden. Now is the time to cut them right back to make way for new shoots to emerge.



General tasks – March and April

- Now spring is well and truly here let's hope we can enjoy sunnier weather. Have a look around with your children and see what flowers are out. Are there any baby birds and animals around? If there are any ponds near you have a look for frog spawn. We have some at our community garden on Loris Road, Hammersmith and Godolphin Road, Shepherds Bush.

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- As the plants start to grow stake any plants which look like they will fall over. Use a stick or cane and some string to help support the plant.
- Continue to weed the beds and make sure you pull all the roots out.
- Start planting up your containers, garden centres will have a new range of plants so you can plant up with herbs, flowering plants and shrubs. Summer bedding plants will be available towards the end of the month so brighten up spaces in your pots.
- Look out for slugs and snails amongst your plants. They are always worse if the weather is warm and humid. If you see any then put crushed egg shells or grit around the plant as it is too sharp for them to cross.
- Use a diary to keep track of which seeds you are sowing and when they were sown and planted out - it really helps later in the year.
- Deadhead daffodils, but leave the leaves alone for 6 weeks after flowering. This gives the plants time to store food for next season's display.
- First sign that the ground is warming up is the emergence of weeds. Regular hoeing will stop them becoming a real nuisance. Remember, weeds will compete with your vegetables for both moisture and nutrients in the soil.
- Try growing comfrey in a neglected corner of your garden. Comfrey is a rich source of nutrients and makes a great fertilizer.
- Prepare your vegetable beds by removing all weeds and fork in some fresh compost.
- Check your compost bins to see if there is any compost ready to use.
- If you have raised beds top them up with compost and good quality topsoil.
- Top-dress containers with fresh compost. If containers are full, remove the top 5cm of old compost and replace with new.
- Make sure bird baths and bird feeders are kept topped up to encourage birds to your garden

Vegetables:

- Continue to harvest any vegetables that are ready, such as brassicas e.g. sprouts.
- When the ground is not frozen dig well-rotted manure into the soil and leave for the cold weather to break it down. Home-made compost (from your compost bins) or leaf mould (if you collected leaves last winter and bagged them up they should have rotted down sufficiently so as to use in





the garden) can be used to feed the soil in your vegetable patch. Children can add the compost or leaf mould to their gardens and dig it in, being careful not to trample too much over the soil and compress it.

- You can start forcing rhubarb now. Rhubarb is forced by placing an up-turned bucket/pot over the plant to exclude light. The warmer the environment the quicker it will grow; you can place manure or straw over the top to encourage growth of the pale, sweet shoots.
- If you have green manures growing start digging them into your vegetable beds. It will be easier to do this if you first, cut down the top foliage and leave it to wilt for a few days.
- In January and February buy your seed potatoes from garden centres. Children love harvesting their 'buried treasure'. Even if space is limited you can still grow potatoes. Place your seed potatoes in trays to 'chit'. See below for more information on choosing and chitting your seed potatoes.
- If you want to get your vegetables off to an early start (and lengthen your growing season), warm up your soil. You can do this by covering the soil with plastic sheeting or cardboard. Or you can use fleece or cloches that you can buy from garden centres, DIY Centres and off the internet and they cost from £20.



Cloches



Mini greenhouse

- If you have a greenhouse you can sow an early crop of lettuce, rocket and radish. Sow broad beans and early peas such as Feltham First and Meteor for a May / June harvest, and cabbages such as Greyhound and Primo, as well as carrots, turnips and spinach. No greenhouse? Then get yourself a mini greenhouse. They cost around £24 and can fit into the smallest of gardens.
- Sow parsnip, carrot, pea, broad bean outdoors in January and February but it is a good idea to plant under a cloche for extra warmth and protection from pests. Remember to water seeds and seedlings under the cloche if there is no rain.
- Start sowing seeds indoors in February: aubergine, autumn broccoli, indoor cucumber, lettuce, onions and tomato.

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- Sow the following seeds outside in March and April: Broad Bean (last chance), Beetroot, broccoli, Carrot, Kohl Rabi, Lettuce, Onion, Parsnip, Pea, Spring Onion, and Swiss Chard, onion sets, summer cabbage, mangetout, leeks, spinach, radish, rocket, pak choi, cauliflower and Brussels sprouts. Seeds to sow indoors: Runner and French beans, aubergine, capsicum, courgette and marrow, cucumber and melon, tomatoes and sweet corn
- Plant out 'Second Early Potatoes' at the beginning of April and 'Main crop' from late April. As soon as the shoots appear, earth up each plant by covering it with a ridge of soil so that the shoots are still visible. You need to do this at regular intervals and by the end of the season each plant will have a small mound around it about 15cm (6in) high.
- April is also a good time of year to buy extra vegetable seedlings from garden centres and markets or swap plants with colleagues and parents.
- In late spring check if Pea, Climbing Bean and Sweet Pea plants need support yet. If they are growing upwards then use garden canes or netting for them to grow up.
- If you are planning a container garden, look out for the patio (dwarf) range of vegetable seeds. These seeds mature quicker than regular varieties so are ideal for harvesting in school terms.

Fruit

- In January and February prune apple and pear trees by cutting out any dead, diseased or crossing branches. Do not prune growth when there is a frost.
- Continue to plant apples, currants, gooseberries, raspberries, pears and plums.
- Autumn-fruiting varieties of raspberries should be cut to the ground in late winter to make way for new canes that will grow from the base and fruit the same year.
- For a successful crop, strawberries need a period of cold. However, around mid February you can bring potted plants into your greenhouse or mini greenhouse to give them a head start and achieve an earlier crop.
- There is still time to plant fruit trees and soft fruit bushes. If you want to buy bare root plants (the cheapest option) you have to get them before the end of February. Make sure there are no frosts when you plant. Why not plant a blueberry plant in a container? They need ericaceous (acidic) compost but will grow very happily in a pot. You can also buy fruit trees which are suitable for large containers. Apple trees should be grafted onto Rootstock M27 which means the tree is dwarf and will not grow over two metres tall in ten years. Try and find a self fertile apple variety such as Cox's Orange Pippin if you only have space for one tree. Ideally apples need three trees close to each other all within the same pollination group so insects can pollinate the flowers at the same time. Ask garden centre staff for further information when selecting a tree.
- In March and April stock up on Strawberry plants which will now be available from Garden Centres. Make sure Strawberries are well watered from now on as the plants will be flowering soon and then setting fruit. Plant bare root strawberries once the soil begins to warm up.

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- Apply a [slow-release fertiliser](#) around the base of your raspberry canes, fruit bushes and fruit trees to encourage good crops this season. Or you can apply a thick layer of well-rotted organic matter at the base of plants and trees
- Sow melon seeds towards the end of April for planting out in a cold frame in late May after the last frosts.
- If you have recently planted summer and autumn fruiting raspberries you should cut them back to approximately 23cm (9") from the base.

Wildlife

- Continue to feed birds and clean out any water baths. Give them a variation of food which you can buy from supermarkets, pet shops and garden centres. Make your own bird feeder with children by filling pine cones with a mixture of vegetable fat and seeds. Seeds often contain traces of nuts so make sure children do not have nut allergies. Birds will reward you by eating pests such as aphids, caterpillars, slugs and snails.
- Blackbirds and thrushes love apples. Instead of throwing out (or composting) left over apples that the children have half eaten, cut into chunks and put them out for the birds.
- Clear out your bird boxes ready for spring and keep water baths clean and topped-up.
- Tidy all corners of the vegetable garden to eliminate any plant pests sheltering over winter. Leave areas with stones and wooden blocks so insects can hide and children can turn them up to hunt for bugs.
- Scoop fallen leaves out of garden ponds with a net.
- Keep looking out for birds' nests around your grounds or on walks out to parks.
- Make a wildlife corner by putting logs and clay pipes and pots in an area. Get children to check under them once in a while to see if any bugs are living there.
- Look out for frogspawn in ponds. Why not visit our ponds at Loris and Godolphin gardens.
- Snails and slugs love the warmer and wet weather, and before you know it you will be overrun. Hedgehogs, frogs, toads and thrushes prey on these pests, so make sure you encourage these creatures into your garden.

Flowers

- This is a good time to move shrubs or flowers to a new position if they have outgrown their site.
- Sunflowers can be sown in early spring in pots indoors or direct sown into garden borders. If you sow seeds now you can repeat sow in a month or two to ensure that you have sunflowers in your garden all summer long.

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- Make sowings of hardy annuals such as cornflower and nigella direct in their flowering positions
- Nasturtiums can be sown in pots now. For the best flowers plant out after all risk of frost has passed. You can sow marigold seeds and sweet peas undercover, in pots, for planting outside later.
- Sow pots of basil, coriander and parsley.
- Bring a touch of the countryside into your garden along with the butterflies, bees, insects and birds. Sow a wild flower seed mixture (available to buy in Garden centres, Pound shops and online stockists-see below) in the garden or in containers. They are easy to grow and very undemanding.

Inside tasks

- Plan your garden for the year ahead and order all your seeds now before they run out!
- Start a gardening scrapbook with your children for the season ahead. Get them to colour in the front cover. Each page should have room to stick in photos and pictures about tasks which the children have been doing and what the weather was like. Cut up old seed catalogues and magazines to stick on this collage.
- In April and March sow the following vegetable seeds inside: French Bean, Courgette, Cucumber, Pumpkin, Squash, Sweet Corn and Tomato. Also continue to sow the following flowers: French Marigold, Nasturtium and Zinnia.
- If you don't any outdoor space, don't despair... Continue to sow the following seeds in pots and trays on your window sill so you can still have a good variation of plants growing: Dwarf French Beans, Salad Leaves, Tomatoes, Beetroot, Onions and also herbs such as Coriander, Chives and Basil.

CHOOSING YOUR SEED POTATOES

This can be confusing if you are unfamiliar with the terms, 'earlies' and 'maincrop'. These terms describe how long the crop takes to reach maturity. Earlies (and 'second earlies') mature first, in mid summer. Maincrop potatoes are ready in September.

Earlies take up less room (so are more suited to growing in small spaces) and mature in time to be harvested before the summer holidays. If you grow maincrop potatoes then you will have to consider how to tend and water them outside term times.

CHITTING POTATOES

The reason for buying your seed potatoes in January and February (even though planting doesn't take place until March) is so that you can chit your potatoes. Chitting is the process of encouraging the seed potato to grow before

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they go into the earth. If you chit your potatoes first, you are gaining extra growing time before they go in the ground or container.

Place your potatoes in a cool, light place, out of direct sunlight, and leave them to sprout shoots. Old egg boxes are ideal or any small trays will do. When placing the potatoes, look for the end with the most 'eyes' (this is where the shoots will grow from) and make sure these are pointed upwards. After 4-6 weeks these potatoes will be ready to be planted outside.

Buy your seed potatoes from garden centres. If you have limited space then grow potatoes in containers e.g. dustbins and bags rather than the ground.

The range of potato types you can buy are:

Potato type	Planting time	Harvest	Information
First Early (or new potato)	January - March	May - June	Quick to mature, good for small spaces.
Second Early	February - May	July - October	Good for small spaces, less susceptible to pest and diseases.
Main Crop	March - May	September - October	Require lots of space, good storage qualities.

The potato council website has a list of the most popular potato varieties which are worth a read: <http://www.lovepotatoes.co.uk/potato-varieties/>. There is also a lot of general information on growing potatoes.

PLANNING AHEAD

January is the month to plan the year ahead. You can buy seeds online or from garden centres. Start thinking about which plants you would like to grow in the upcoming season. Show children pictures of suitable flowers, vegetables and herbs and ask them to choose their favourites.



Before you order any seeds you might find it useful to draw a plan of your garden. An easy way to do this is take photos of the garden and enlarge them. Once enlarged, you can trace over them and make a rough plan

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Check through seed packets left over from last year (and any seeds you collected from your garden) to see what you can use to sow next season. Most seed will keep for at least a year and a lot longer if your seed has been kept in a cool, dry spot.

Make life easy!

When planning ahead its worth remembering that children can lose interest in gardening if they get disappointing results. Here are some suggestions for plants that are easy for little gardeners to grow from seed.

- Sunflower, marigold, cornflower, cosmos, nasturtium, pansies, poppies and sweet pea are great first flowers for children's gardens.
- Tomatoes, beans, pumpkins, radishes, carrots, peas, lettuce and spinach, beetroot, potatoes, mangetout and courgettes are good choices for a children's vegetable patch. Perfect for encouraging children to eat their vegetables!
- Herb gardens offer a wonderful sensory experience for children and are great for use in the kitchen, the following herbs are suitable for children to grow from seed; sweet basil, chives, coriander, oregano, sage and parsley.



CONTAINER GARDENING

All of these veggies & herbs can be successfully grown in containers, even pumpkins! And if space is really tight try growing "baby" or 'mini' vegetables. These are either smaller varieties that can be grown a lot closer together or they are varieties that are bred to be at their sweetest and most nutritious whilst still small in size. They are ideal for gardening in small spaces. See below for online seed stockists.

Remember try not to plant the same vegetable in the same place two years in a row.

Moving your crops around helps to stop the build-up of pests and diseases, which are found in the soil.

Keeping a chart of what you planted and where will help ensure that crops are rotated the following year.

How Do I Know If My Old Seeds Will Grow?

There's nothing more frustrating than sowing seeds, then waiting, and waiting for germination that never occurs because the seeds are no longer viable. If you're not sure how old your seeds are or if you saved seeds from your garden last year, take the time to test them to see if they are still good.



- Make a blanket of two or three paper towels, and spray them with water to moisten. Sprinkle 10 seeds or so on the towels, then cover with more towels and spray again.
- Place the blanket in a plastic bag, perforated to provide air circulation. Put the bag in a dark place-indoors.
- Check the seeds regularly to make sure the towels haven't dried out; spray again if necessary. Most vegetable seeds will start to germinate in a week.
- Remove the seeds as they sprout, noting how many have germinated. By the end of the second week, you will have a good idea of how viable the seeds are.

SOME TIPS ON HOW TO WATER AND HOW TO CONSERVE WATER

The health of plants very much depends on how much water they have access to. Healthy plants are better placed to withstand the attacks of pests & diseases and can cope better with periods of drought. And, now that water restrictions are in place and we are officially in a drought zone, it's more important than ever to make the most efficient use of the water we use. Here's some info on how to do that.....

- The best time of day to water is early morning before the temperatures begin to rise. This gives the plants a good supply of water to cope with the heat of the day. The water can reach the roots of the plant without too much excess water lost to evaporation.
- When you need to water, make sure you water thoroughly. Children often offer a light sprinkling which only wets the surface of the soil and isn't very helpful for the plants. It's much better to soak your plants every 3 /4 days rather than watering little and often.
- The same advice applies to containers: give them a thorough soaking every few days. Saucers underneath your pots will help retain water, but remove these in prolonged wet weather. Grouping container plants together will increase humidity around them, which helps reduce the amount of water needed.
- When watering very dry soil, the water can run off the surface rather than penetrating the soil. If you use a rose the thin streams will soak into the soil better than just pouring. Apply a sprinkling of water to the area, let it sink in and then repeat with a thorough soak. The second time, the water will be absorbed.





Watering can rose.

- Cover the soil around plants with a thick (5cm-7cm) layer of organic matter (mulch) to prevent water loss through evaporation. Ensure the soil is thoroughly moist before you apply the mulch. Suggested mulching materials (which can be bought at Garden Centres): straw, bark chippings, leaf mould and well rotted compost. For containers you can use gravel or grit or decorative pebbles.
- Choosing containers: Plastic containers hold moisture better than clay or terracotta. You can line hanging baskets with plastic to retain moisture. Avoid planting in small pots as they will dry out quicker.
- Collect rainwater off roofs into water butts.
- Water-retaining granules can save on watering. Mix them in with your potting compost. They are especially useful to use in hanging baskets, tubs and containers. When planting, incorporate some into the planting hole. Check packet for instructions.



Wildlife needs water too- Tips for helping wildlife in a drought

- Make sure you provide bird baths or containers, both for birds to drink from and use for bathing. Bird baths and drinking containers can be purchased from bird food suppliers, garden centres or you can make your own. Use water from a water butt or other water harvesting container for filling up bird baths and clean them regularly. <http://www.allfreecrafts.com/nature/bird-bath.shtml>, <http://www.rspb.org.uk/youth/makeanddo/activities/birdfeeder.aspx>
- Rotting apples and pears are a moist snack which will be appreciated by blackbirds and thrushes in particular.
- Adding some mulch such as leaf mould or well rotten manure around your plants will help retain the moisture and also provide extra worms and insects for the birds.
- Cut your lawn less or let the grass in some areas grown longer. This will lock in the moisture, leaving your lawn greener and helping the birds to find food.



MAKE YOUR OWN ORGANIC FERTILISER

Collect Comfrey or Nettles from the garden and make a very effective liquid plant food. Children will enjoy making this stink mess.



Comfrey



Nettles



making fertiliser

To make a liquid feed:

- Fill a container with as many comfrey or nettle leaves as it will contain, and top it up to overflowing with water. The leaves soon turn into a very smelly sludge.
- After two weeks the mixture will be like greeny-brown soup and ready for use. Strain it through a fairly fine mesh such as a garden sieve, then put the sludge onto the compost heap and use the liquid as the base for home-made fertiliser. Keep it well diluted - 1:10 is about right. You should feed your plants every 2/3 weeks during the growing season.
- Wear gloves to protect against rough surface of comfrey leaves and nettle sting.

Hammersmith Community Gardens Association has been delivering educational sessions for over ten years. We have a team of school gardeners who provide environmental education sessions in schools on a weekly basis. These include formal curriculum-linked activities as well as lunchtime and after school clubs. Our staff are highly trained in environmental education, food growing and wildlife gardening.

We have built up a collection of activities and have worked with many schools and nurseries in the borough, running one-off workshops, short-term projects and longer-term contracts around growing, food and environmental art. We also guide groups on how to make their premises more environmentally friendly and give technical growing advice. We have designed growing and wildlife areas in several local schools and our teams of volunteers have undertaken the landscaping work during school holidays.

We have been awarded the Learning Outside the Classroom Quality Badge for our educational work on-site at our community gardens.

For further details about arranging one-off or regular sessions please contact info@hcg.org.uk or 07890 514 050