

GARDENING NOTES FOR DECEMBER.

With thanks to the contributor Sustainable Carlisle volunteer for their knowledge and thoughts.

December can be a horrible month. There can be little to do in the garden and Christmas overshadows everything. However, the shortest day is almost here and the days should be getting longer and lighter again at the end of the month ... if not noticeably warmer.

Now is a good time to buy seeds for the next growing season, rather than as and when you need them. Many gardening clubs and societies buy their seed through schemes direct from the supplier, at a substantial discount. Most allotment societies, if members of the National Allotment Society, buy from Kings Seeds. If you want organic seeds from a reliable and really ethical source buy on line from the small but brilliant producers Vital Seeds and Real Seeds. I suspect there are more out there as well for those prepared to search.

Find a seed swap. Here you can off load your surplus seeds to someone else's benefit and pick up other seeds for free. Many of them will be saved from plants by the gardener. You can ask the grower about the plant they came from, how they perform and the growing conditions of their garden. It's local. It brings gardeners together, builds community and undermines the monopoly of large commercial seed growers. What's not to like?



If you buy your seeds all in one go ready for the next season, it can be a wonderful opportunity to reflect on last year's growing season. What did well? What failed? Do I really want to grow that again? Do I want to try something different? Some gardeners advocate buying right at the end of the season when success and failure are fresh in your mind – apart that is, from the winter crops which you will still be harvesting or nurturing through to next spring. I usually reserve my seed buying for a bleak, wet day when I am feeling down and need a bit of cheer. I often write it on Boxing Day. It's excellent life affirming therapy.

Here are a few pointers:

- Go through last year's seeds. Keep what's in date and ruthlessly throw out anything past its sow by date. Don't waste time and effort sowing seed which may have a poor germination rate or no germination rate at all. If you can't find the date, remember

to open next year's packets carefully and not rip off this information. A knife blade is good. Feed the out of date seed to the birds.

- Note which seed packets have not been opened or used. Why is this? Can you remember why you wanted to or even thought they might be good to grow?
- Try to have a clear picture about what you need, what you want and what you can cope with in terms of time and space and capacity to preserve or store.
- Arrange what's left into alphabetical order to match the catalogue.
- Go through the catalogue systematically, comparing your existing seeds with what's on offer. This will show up what you need to order. Check the contents of your existing packets, the paper envelope may only contain one or two seeds which will not be enough.
- Decide what you want from the dazzling array available. There is probably too much choice. (Saving your own seed does away with this conundrum as well as providing myriads of other benefits.) I usually go for the older varieties – cheaper, lots of seed in a packet and knowing they have stood the test of time. Avoid F1 hybrids unless there is a good reason to spend vast amounts of money on small numbers of seeds. I buy F1 hybrid carrot seed resistant to carrot fly (minimally good) and some F1 hybrid brassicas resistant to club root (usually transformational, I have finally grown some respectable caulis and brussels).
- Make sure you're trying something new and different or something you haven't grown for a while. I'm trying tomatillos and have gone back to spring onions after a long rest.
- Write out the order "in pencil". Tot it all up and make sure you're sitting down. How much??
- Go back and remove the sillier aspirations. Then write it "in ink" or press send.
- Dream about next year's garden.

