

Rachel de Thame,
a late convert to
veg-growing, is
making up for lost
time — producing
47 varieties in
her first season

Top of the crops

There's no going back — I'm a fully fledged vegetable-growing fanatic. This time last year, my plans for a kitchen garden were in their infancy, the site nothing more than a strip of rough grass abutting the edge of a field. Today, the scene is transformed. Ten raised beds — each one 20ft x 6ft — are laid out shoulder to shoulder like a regiment of toy soldiers.

My timing couldn't have been better: while I started with thoughts of eating organically, saving food miles and a general awareness of all things "green", the credit crunch has placed the more mundane imperative of thriftiness at the top of the list of reasons for growing our own.

I don't want to gloat, but it's been more successful and fulfilling than I'd dared hope. With the help of Darren Long, my part-time gardener, who kept the whole thing ticking over during my absences, we have grown 47 kinds of crop in the first year — and, thanks to Gerard, my husband, who is a brilliant cook, have been dining like kings on flavoursome, organic produce.

There can be few sights as pleasing as an orderly kitchen garden full of produce. It has not all been plain sailing. I don't feel I've got to grips with brassicas yet — our broccolis was a complete non-starter. The spinach failed, too, or rather I failed to harvest the leaves before the plants bolted. Some disappointments were hard to explain: our beetroot 'Bolthardy' produced specimens worthy of the show bench, while 'Burpee's Golden', alongside, never appeared at all. A few things cropped well, but were a letdown in terms of taste: Gerard was not impressed by the celery and has insisted that I grow a different variety this year. Our courgettes struggled in the cool, wet excuse for a summer, while the outdoor tomatoes never really got going. Thankfully, those in the greenhouse thrived and cropped well, though the flavour of some was unimpressive.

On the plus side, we suffered remarkably few problems with pests or diseases; even the rabbits and muntjac deer I was about to spend untold sums rebuffing with high-netted fences didn't materialise in the kitchen garden, settling instead for a steady nibble through my roses. We protected the brassicas and, although we didn't take steps to deter carrot root fly, the carrots — 'Early Nantes 5', 'Columbia F1' and 'Nantes 2' — remained unscathed. Perhaps the flies were simply doing a recon, in advance of a big offensive this year.

Our two cats were the biggest nuisance, taking full advantage of the crumbly top soil in the new raised beds — unquestionably the most despicable latrine in Oxfordshire — but slugs and snails were curiously absent in this part of the garden.

I do need to work on timing: our pumpkins stalled in the cold weather and were a bit tiddly come Halloween. Some crops we started off a bit late, so



Here's some she grew earlier: Rachel de Thame in her vegetable patch



Rachel's raised vegetable beds and some of their bounty



Adrian Sheratt



I need to get on top of sowings and perhaps give the seed trays a bit more heat in the early stages. I also learnt that there's little point in growing something you are not around to eat. We should have harvested an excellent crop of kohlrabi — best eaten young, raw, thinly sliced and sprinkled with sea salt — as well as French and broad beans in high summer, but were away on holiday. On our return in early September, the beans were stringy and the kohlrabi looked like purple space ships.

Thankfully, we had the presence of mind to make the most of what could still be gathered in on our return. We stripped the tomato plants of their fruits and Gerard made vats of pureed passata, which he poured into small containers for freezing. Darren lifted the remaining 'Charlottes', which by then bore little resemblance to a new potato, but are delicious nonetheless, and put them in hessian sacks to be stored in the cool, dry darkness of an empty stable. Likewise, the carrots and beetroot were packed into cardboard boxes, with sheets of newspaper between each layer.

The 'Countess F1' parsnips are still in the ground and we have to dig deep to remove them when we need them. This is tricky, because the foliage has now rotted off and you can't get a grip on the slippery blighters. The root reaches well into the heavy clay below the friable soil in the raised bed, and they don't give up without a fight. My efforts became particularly comical during the recent big freeze as I tried to hack out the parsnips, slipping on my backside in the process. Yet I'm assured it's best to keep them in the ground over winter, as a sharp frost improves their sweetness.

'Celeriac' 'Giant Prague' is another root vegetable to take you through to spring — it's delicious grated and mixed with mustard and mayonnaise to create a remoulade — but, unlike the parsnips, it can get mushy left in frosted ground and is best lifted and stored. Kale 'Nero di Toscana' is one of Gerard's favourites. We continue to cut the dark, pitted

leaves from the main stem and enjoy them steamed and slathered in butter.

So, what of the coming year? I'll be repeating some of the most successful varieties, broadening the range, and I'll be a bit more adventurous. Gerard also has his list of specific requirements. It's been wonderful watching him — a complete non-gardener —

become engrossed by the whole veg-growing experience. With a decent meal at the end of it, he can suddenly see the point.

Equally thrilling has been the children's hands-on involvement. True, my teenage son's contribution began and ended with helping to build and fill the raised beds last spring, and my eldest daughter rarely ventures into this part of the garden, but the youngest are at it constantly. Digging, watering, picking — there's no end to their "helping".

Overall, the kitchen garden has been an unqualified success and we're now preparing for next season. Darren has added our home-made compost and leaf-mould mix to the empty beds, although I'm using some as temporary nursery beds for juvenile perennials that I raised from seed and will move to other parts of the garden in the spring.

For now, I'm champing at the bit. Reading the seed catalogues is a pleasant January pastime, as is planning what we'll grow in which bed — crop rotation is the key to a healthy vegetable garden. What I'm really looking forward to, however, is hiding myself away in the greenhouse and starting all over again.

✦ Suppliers: Marshalls (01480 443390, www.marshall-seeds.co.uk), Johnsons (0845 658 9147, www.johnsons-seeds.com), Suttons (0844 922 0806, www.suttons.co.uk), Mr Fothergill's (0845 573 0518, www.mr-fothergills.co.uk)

VEGGING OUT

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Stop the rot: our tips for a perfect plot

- When positioning your plot, make sure there is a tap or water butt nearby to save you traipsing back and forth with a watering can or tripping over long hoses.
- Veg that need plenty of warm sunshine for a successful crop, such as outdoor tomatoes and courgettes, can be offputting for the novice. Stick to unfussy classics, such as radishes, parsnips, salads, beetroot, onions and beans, for reliable crops.
- To prolong the harvest, sow quick-growing plants — salad leaves, radishes, carrots — little and often at regular intervals through spring and summer.
- You can make a lettuce and kale last for ages by cutting off the leaves you want for each meal, rather than putting up the whole plant.
- Don't worry about thinning carrots when they're seedlings. I was too

- busy to do it when I should have, but I found that by harvesting fairly evenly along the row, little and often, we could enjoy fresh baby, young and mature carrots all season, without losing a single one. And they were all lovely and straight.
- Make an improvised chopping board near the vegetable beds — we use a sliced-off tree stump — to cut unwanted leaves and roots from celery and leeks straight after lifting, and put them on the compost heap. This means less to carry into the house and back to the heap later.
- Check stored vegetables from time to time and remove any that are damaged or showing early signs of rot before they affect the rest.
- Write everything down. You think you'll remember what you sowed or planted, when and where, but it's impossible to keep track. It will be useful for future years.