

RACHEL DE THAME



By now, the satisfying thud of seed catalogues landing on the doormat will have resounded across the land. I relish this time of year — eagerly scanning the pages for inspiration while jotting down lengthy lists of must-grow plants. The excitement and anticipation heralded by the arrival of the seed packets themselves is on a par with anything one might experience from far pricier retail therapy.

In the past, I've flicked through the pages offering plug plants (tiny, post-germination plantlets), feeling that it would in some way be cheating not to start from scratch with the seed itself. There are, however, advantages to growing plugs. Many highly desirable flowers, fruits and vegetables struggle to reach maturity in our climate. The long, slow, unreliable build-up to really warm weather — this year, we are several weeks behind recent springs — means a relatively short growing season. And, thanks to our track record of washout summers, it was hardly surprising that exotics, such as my aubergines, were less than impressive last year, or that my sweet peppers ripened a full month later than expected. Plugs can help you to get ahead of the game.

Newcomers to gardening, who need the confidence boost of success with their first foray into the soil, and busy people looking for time-saving ways to feed their family home-grown veg will find everything from herbs to potatoes in miniature, ready-to-grow form. I trialled celery plugs — it is a tricky plant for beginners — and had good results, although my husband felt the flavour could have been better.

Mail order offers the widest range, but garden centres have latched on to a great marketing opportunity, especially given the current craze for grow-your-own. Many stock a good selection of popular favourites, with rows of little pots containing every kind of vegetable, as well as annual and tender perennials.

Emma, my five-year-old daughter, pleads to be taken to our local garden centre for these little plants, which have a cluster of leaves and colourful labels showing the flowers. This type of pestle power is surely to be envied. I let her choose a handful and grow them in our greenhouse until they are mature enough to be hardened off in the cold frame, then transferred to her own little flowerbed near the swing.

When it comes to flowers, nothing impresses my youngest children more than full-on colour. Their beds are a glorious clashing cacophony, whereas, in the rest of the garden, I tend to use subtler tones.

I don't go in for bedding plants, which would look out of place in rural Oxfordshire, but, when done well, they can be both effective and impressive. Plug plants are invaluable here, and can often be bought in huge quantities



Rachel de Thame, Marianne Majorus, Gap/BBC/Graham Strong
Rachel's daughter Emma by her own flowerbed of annuals and plug plants

Child's play

It might be cheating, but plug plants — ready-grown seedlings — are just the job for giving spring a head start



These 'ready meals for gardeners' can help you get more out of Britain's short growing season



at low prices. Containers are another obvious home for them. Pub landlords with hanging baskets to fill should be delighted by the cheery mixes on offer. Thompson & Morgan does a collection of 16 basket-ready plants for £15.99.

Potential vegetable growers with limited space are also catered for: My Greener Home has several options, including an Organic Window Box Vegetable Garden with 76 ready-to-plant seedlings (£24.95).

The appeal of plug plants, especially for beginners and those in a hurry seems obvious, but not everyone approves. The purists dislike these horticultural equivalents of the ready meal, and there is the question of what the seedlings are grown in: the National Trust came under fire last summer for giving away 50,000 tomato plugs donated by B&Q and raised in peat-based compost as part of its grow-your-own campaign, even though it eschews the stuff in its own gardens and greenhouses.

My personal bugbear, though, is lack of choice. While this is improving, it is still hard to find single varieties or colours of popular plants such as pelargoniums, sweet peas and petunias. These tend to be sold in collections, which often include colours you don't want. Then there's the cost. Even when you factor in the initial outlay for extras such as seed trays, propagators, compost and labels, growing from seed is still more economical.

That said, the cost issue isn't black and white. Certainly, seed is cheap by comparison, but you may not want or be able to start from scratch. If you're the type of gardener who heads straight to the garden centre at the first sign of frost-free temperatures and splurges on tender perennials, you'll certainly save money by planning ahead and buying plugs. There are bargains to be had. Suttons, for example, is offering a garden full — 270 mini-plants, including begonias, busy lizzies and petunias — for £17.95.

Price aside, the crux of it is that few of us are sufficiently organised to sow everything we hope to grow. The beauty of plug plants is that they're ready to go when you are.

PRACTICAL TIPS

Plugs of varying sizes come in trays of between five and 100 plants. The smallest plants are very young and will need potting at least once in a protective environment as they grow. Medium-sized plants will also need looking after, but the largest of these can be popped straight into the bed or container. I would still suggest a brief period of hardening off in a cold frame to take the edge off the shock of transplantation.

It is in the interests of mail-order companies to keep your custom, and most make great efforts to get the plugs to you in good condition. Being enclosed in packaging and bumped through the post is a tall order for young plants, but they travel surprisingly well, and I found that any that did look a bit sad on delivery perked up pretty quickly.

Ideally, you should unwrap them as quickly as possible, although I had miraculous results from some that sat on the doorstep for three days. Whether you're potting them in the greenhouse or straight into their final position, water prior to transplanting.

Aim for moist compost, but don't saturate it, otherwise they will be difficult to remove and too mushy to transplant without damaging the roots. A gentle

squeeze with your fingertips will coax any reluctant plugs from the tray.

Use a dibber to make holes in the compost, and aim to plant so the stem remains at the same level in relation to the compost — drizzle a bit more into the hole if necessary. Rewater lightly once in situ and make sure the plants don't dry out as they develop. Once you're ready to move them to their permanent home, a few days in a cold frame, with the lid open by day and closed at night, will help them to acclimatise.

RECOMMENDED ORNAMENTALS

Antirrhinum majus: Copper leaves and two-tone rosy flowers (Thompson & Morgan, 84 for £12.99).

Carex 'Sweet Marmelade' [sic]: Warm burnt-orange flowers that pale as they age (Mr Fothergill's, five for £12.95).

Cosmos bipinnatus 'Sonata' mixed: Gorgeous daisy shapes in pastel pinks, with feathery foliage (Blooming Direct, 16 for £12.95).

Dianthus 'Silver Star': Dwarf variety, 6in tall, with burgundy-centred white flowers (Mr Fothergill's, 10 for £13.90).

Fuchsia 'Alice Hoffman': These perennial fuchsias have smaller, simpler flowers than their ballerina-skirted cousins, but that is precisely the appeal (Thompson & Morgan, three for £7.99).

Lobelia 'Crystal Palace': Intense deep-blue flowers above bronze foliage (Marshalls, 40 for £7.95).

RECOMMENDED EDIBLES

Aubergine 'Black Beauty': Classic oval-shaped fruits with glossy, inky-deep skin (Marshalls, six for £6.95).

I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE CHEATING TO USE PLUGS, BUT MANY PLANTS STRUGGLE TO REACH MATURITY IN OUR CLIMATE. THEY LET YOU GET AHEAD OF THE GAME

Brussels sprout 'Crispus': Resistant to clubroot, but will be hard to source this year, as crop failure has resulted in a dearth of seed (Suttons, 16 for £5.95).

Leek 'Carlton': Long, tightly packed stems — and tasty, with an Award of Garden Merit (Mr Fothergill's, 30 for £4.95).

Pepper 'El Denver': Early-maturing sweet peppers (Suttons, five for £7.95).

Tomato 'Gardener's Delight': Cherry tomatoes of a good size, with excellent flavour (Mr Fothergill's, 10 for £9.90).

SUPPLIERS

Blooming Direct: 01534 857160, www.bloomingdirect.com.

Marshalls: 01480 443390, marshalls-seeds.co.uk.

Mr Fothergill's: 0845 371 0518, mr-fothergills.co.uk.

My Greener Home: 020 8133 9002, mygreenerhome.co.uk.

Suttons: 0844 922 0606, suttons.co.uk.

Thompson & Morgan: 0844 248 5383, thompson-morgan.com.

SEASONS CHANGE

As spring approaches, get the most out of your garden with tips from timesonline.co.uk/gardens

