

# Salad days

**Rachel de Thame's** vegetable garden is already producing a bumper crop — and clever planting will keep the harvest going for months. Here's how to fill those gaps

I'm vaguely aware that in parts of my Oxfordshire garden, the magnificent velvet petals of *Rosa 'Charles de Mills'* have unfurled and the border is a glitter with astrantias, penstemons and cushion scabiouses. There's no time to smell the flowers, though, for I am a slave to the vegetables.

Every spare moment is spent hoeing, weeding or harvesting in the kitchen garden. My goodness, nobody warned me about the harvesting. I keep picking, but the plants keep producing. Never mind "cut and come again", it's again and again and again. We are drowning in salad leaves.

Gerard, my husband and the cook of the family, turns what we cannot eat into soups, but the freezer compartment is already groaning with cartons of rocket soup, spinach and nutmeg soup and the speciality of the house, Gerard's Green Soup — a variable recipe containing anything leafy and left over. With vats of beetroot soup, tomato soup, leek and potato soup and, finally, parsnip soup in the offing as the year progresses, we're starting to panic about what to do with it all.

As we hardly know one end of a horse from the other, we're planning to turn one of our unused stables into a storage facility, kitting it out with second-hand catering freezers and stocking them during the summer glut. Thus, we shall spend the coming winter in thrifty style, well fed and feeling smug, if a little oversouped.

It starts off gently enough. Fizzing with enthusiasm and impatient for things to grow, we veg-growing enthusiasts sow steadily as spring sunshine warms the soil. Seeds germinate, and there is the promise of good things to come, but all is under control. Then June arrives.

The ensuing horticultural chaos is enough to test the most laid-back gardener, and those of us who like a little order in our beds can find the speed and abundance of nature's generosity somewhat stressful. Where only a fortnight ago lay neat rows of steadily developing seedlings, there is now a free-for-all of giant leaves, radishes popping from the soil like inflamed pimples and Triffid-like weeds.

When the weather is amenable — warm sunshine, followed by a good dosing of heavy rain — you can almost see the crops growing. The rocket more than lives up to its name, soft-leaved herbs threaten to bolt (flower and run to seed) and the beetroots jostle for space. I've deliberately not thinned these at all this year, but pulled out the first golf-ball-sized baby beets on the first weekend in June, which allowed the rest to ease out into the surrounding space. Gerard used them in a salad with a fresh young goat's cheese on top of a mound of home-grown mixed leaves, topping

the lot with a drizzle of balsamic dressing. The beetroots were sweet and tender, their juice bleeding into the salad, staining the milk-white cheese crimson heaven on a plate.

Such simple pleasures are what growing your own is about, but you can have too much of a good thing. If I've learnt anything this year, it's that single rows of lettuce and other leaves, sown at three-weekly intervals through spring and summer, are more than sufficient to keep a family of four in fresh salad. Little and often is my new mantra, but it's easy to get carried away after a long winter.

Back in March, I sowed two rows of cos-type lettuce and two with contrasting red leaves, two rows of mixed salad leaves, three of rocket and two of Red Frills mustard (*Brassica juncea crispifolia*

'Rubra'), the surprise culinary hit of the season, which I had started off under glass in February. Added to these were three rows of spinach. The result? Far more produce than we can consume.

Despite the glut, I'm already thinking of what I can grow next. Though I've been picking since May, the beds remain pretty full, but we have now reached the tipping point and spaces are opening up. Radishes have long since been harvested, as have several rows of rocket. The Red Frills flowered in the hot weather and, after picking the last of the leaves, I took them out, creating an opportunity to grow something else.

Every gap can be resown, either with fast-growing crops to follow on from those that have been cleared, or with long-term vegetables for harvesting during the autumn and over winter.

The trick to getting the most from every bit of soil lies in having something ready to take over when the first gaps appear. French beans are an excellent second crop if you sow them in small pots or modules under cover and harden them off in a cold frame while early-cropping salads are being harvested. The strong young bean plants can then be planted in their place, with a head start on those sown directly into the ground.

Further space-saving relies on a bit of advance planning — combining crops that complement each other in terms of growth habit and cultivation requirements. A stand of sweetcorn grown in a bed with pumpkins is a classic combo: the stems and leaves of the pumpkin can ramble at the feet of the corn, which, being pollinated by the wind, benefits from being planted in a block, rather than in long rows.

It can be useful to choose crops that mature at the same time and can be harvested and eaten together. Many seed companies have realised this and are supplying packets of mixed seed, so you get the whole salad bowl in a single sowing. Herbs are also available like this, as are packets of mixed edible flowers — ever the adventurer in the kitchen, my husband has just put in a request for a row of these.

Alternatively, grow something speedy — rocket and radish are among the quickest — alongside something on a slow burn. When one has fizzled out, the other will just be getting going, and will need the newly available space. With this in mind, I've put the celeriac just a little too close to the tomatoes, hoping that by the time the tomatoes are finished, their neighbours will be able to spread out into the extra room.

If you favour the intensive approach, it's important to put something back into the soil between sowings or plantings. Enriching vegetable beds with an organic slow-release feed or incorporating home-made compost will ensure a good second or third harvest.

Deviating from your crop-rotation plan mid-season could scupper subsequent sowings; keep brassicas, legumes and roots in the sections of the garden that have already been assigned to them for this year. That said, I try not to grow exactly the same crop in the same place straightaway, as this can promote disease. Instead, I resow further along the bed. Salads and herbs can be fitted in anywhere.

The juggling in my plot continues with reasonable success. It's hugely challenging, but great fun, to see how much you can get out of your square footage. Next for the chop are 250 onions and almost as much garlic. This year, I'm determined to learn to plait their strappy leaves into neat strings. In the meantime... soup, anyone?



Adrian Sheratt/Marcus Harpur



**Rachel de Thame's** vegetable garden keeps her family in soup and salad all year; below left, kohlrabi, below right, broad beans

## SEEDS TO SOW NOW

**Radish 'French Breakfast':** With elegant, elongated roots, this is my husband's preferred radish — and what the cook wants, the cook (occasionally) gets.

**Lettuce 'Dazzle':** A deep red, glossy-leaved variety that contrasts beautifully with green lettuces in an ornamental vegetable garden or potager, and adds instant pizzazz to the plate.

**Rocket:** Several types of rocket seed are readily available, with rounded or finely cut leaves, both large and small. We favour the punchy flavour of the small, wild form, but whichever you choose, few salad leaves crop as quickly.

**Beetroot 'Cylindra':** With long roots and a sweet flavour, this will keep growing through mild winters, though it benefits from a protective mulch as temperatures drop. Alternatively, the plants store well, so can be lifted and brought into a cool but frost-free place.

**Swiss Chard 'Bright Lights':** I'm growing this for the first time this year, so we'll see what Gerard makes of its culinary value. I would give it space regardless, as the colourful stems — shades of orange, magenta and gold — are so decorative in the autumn garden.

**Chicory 'Variegata di Castellfranco':** Another new crop for me, this chicory (available from Seeds of Italy) was recommended to me by someone at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show this year. Its leaves are mottled with dark red splashes, so it should look cheery in the middle of winter.

**Kohlrabi 'Delicacy Purple':** I'll be putting in another row of these in the next few weeks. They take about eight weeks to mature, so should be perfect for harvesting when I return from holiday at the beginning of September.

**Carrot 'Autumn King 2':** Sow these late-crop carrots now and the large roots will be ready for lifting in the autumn. Alternatively, they will be left in the ground all winter without suffering ill effects such as splitting.

✦ **Suppliers:** Thompson & Morgan (0844 248 5383, [thompson-morgan.com](http://thompson-morgan.com)); Chiltern Seeds (01229 581157, [chilternseeds.co.uk](http://chilternseeds.co.uk)); Marshalls (01480 442390, [marshalls-seeds.co.uk](http://marshalls-seeds.co.uk)); Simpsons (01985 845004, [simpsonsseeds.co.uk](http://simpsonsseeds.co.uk)); Franchi Seeds of Italy (020 8427 5020, [seedsofitaly.com](http://seedsofitaly.com))

✦ **Further reading:** *Vegetable Growing Month by Month* by John Harrison (Right Way £5.99)

**FRESH IDEAS**  
For more tips on growing your own, visit the garden section of [timesonline.co.uk/property](http://timesonline.co.uk/property)



Rachel's patch flourishes with beetroots, radishes, parsnips and lettuce