

Book Review – “How to Grow Winter Vegetables” by Charles Dowding

First published 2011 by Green Books, ISBN 978 1 900322 88 1, softback, 232 pages, £10.32 from Amazon

This is Charles Dowding's third book. He is a completely organic gardener and has grown vegetables commercially, mainly salad plants, in Somerset for over 30 years. He is also the only commercial grower that I am aware of who grows vegetables using no-dig methods. I was extremely keen to obtain and read his latest book since I also strongly believe in not letting land just go fallow during the winter months when it can be producing delicious crops. Charles and I have similar backgrounds, although we have never met nor corresponded. We have both gardened in France, we use no-dig methods, we both write articles for the News Journal of the Good Gardeners' Association (www.goodgardeners.org.uk), we are completely organic and we even have the same taste in shirts! Where we differ is that I am a complete amateur, tending my garden and allotment, whereas Charles is a commercial grower having had a much greater experience of no-dig gardening.

It was therefore of very great interest to me to go through his latest book with a fine toothcomb. Most people will read the general sections then leave reading the sections on individual vegetables until just before growing them. I went through every word, hoping to find growing tips, and making notes as I went. I made 90 notes, usually of points where I found interesting ideas to influence my own methods (I grow virtually all of the vegetables covered in the book) and to make a list of the varieties he recommends. A typical “find” was Charles' tip of mixing grated garlic with broad bean seed to put mice off the scent. Charles gives away his trade secrets and if any reader is contemplating setting up a commercial operation they could do no better than follow Charles' methods. Charles comes up with solutions which are not to be found in other books, solutions he has found by trial and error, and I found to my delight that we had come up with the same solutions in many cases.

The book goes through looking after your soil, compost making, what to grow for winter crops and gives tips on sowing and planting. He gives a sowing, planting and growing calendar for winter vegetables which are first sown in spring, summer or autumn. Some winter vegetables can take more than a year from sowing to the final harvest, for example leeks, yet others take only a few weeks, for example some salads. He covers “the hungry gap” in May and June very well, showing how to produce good crops for eating in that very difficult period. Some crops are left in the ground during the winter and spring, for example several brassicas. Others are dried for consumption later, for example several types of beans. Others are lifted and stored to avoid frost damage, for example beetroot and carrots. His mantra is “successful storage means keeping vegetables alive”. Winters differ markedly, one never knows at the time of sowing what the next winter will be like, perhaps with the soil completely frozen over, perhaps very wet. The book helps the reader cope with our very variable and unpredictable climate.

The chief enemy he identifies once more as the slug. If I could have a pound for every time he mentions the word then that would pay my allotment rent for a few years. Yes, the slug is a terrible foe and Charles even says, just once on page 135, that he recommends slug pellets at one per plant when planting-out oriental leaves. Mainly though, he recommends dispatching all slugs found, in a continual battle against Public Enemy Number One. However, one cannot eradicate slugs since there are just too many of them living underground – about 60 per square foot of soil in the UK. Charles shows his frustration at one point: “slugs are magnificently uninterested in rocket”. He is, nevertheless, honest in his choice of photographs, which do show some slug damage to leaves. He covers carrot root fly very well and how it is so difficult to avoid. Such are the problems of truly organic gardeners! But, if one is called upon to choose between the possibility of insect damage and the certainty of pesticide residues which would one choose??

The book is a delight to read, one aspect being the profusion of excellent photographs which are on virtually every double-page, plus inserts in panels in the text giving handy hints. Charles writes well with an easy-to-read style. The grammar, punctuation and spelling point to the book being very well prepared and sub-edited – I found just one spelling error. A myriad of excellent photographs are

inserted in the text and relate to that text; a nice feature which helps the reader. An altogether very professional job.

Inevitably there are points with which I disagree, although I do not wish to be churlish about this truly excellent book. The book was probably written before the revelation in a programme on Radio 4 on 8th March 2011 that modern printers' inks are based upon synthetic oils, are carcinogenic, and that the carcinogenic compounds are carried through into cardboard made from pulped newsprint. Charles advocates mulching with cardboard and black plastic sheeting; perhaps he should now drop the cardboard. On another point, he does state that soil micro-organisms have a very important part to play but I would have liked to have seen mention of the key role of the long "snakes" of mycorrhizal fungi and thus the importance of not chopping them up by digging (they do re-grow, but at only 6 inches per year, so it would take several years for them to re-colonise an allotment).

I profited from reading his earlier books and adopted his idea of starting virtually all seeds by sowing in modules rather than directly into the soil, in order to defeat the slugs which would otherwise raze germinating seeds to the ground. That method also allows plants to be set out at precisely the required spacing and eliminates the laborious and wasteful task of thinning-out seedlings. Throughout his latest book he describes the techniques of sowing in modules. He also covers growing in polytunnels and in raised beds. There is hardly an aspect of growing winter vegetables which is not covered. I would strongly recommend this book. And since spring is nearly on us, now is the time to start sowing for next winter's vegetables!

MIKE MASON