

## THE HUNGRY GAP

It grieves me sometimes, in late autumn or winter, to see whole allotments, or parts of allotments, dug over for the winter. My grief is not just because I am a no-dig gardener. I can appreciate that dug soil in the spring will be friable and easily raked into a loose medium ideal for sowing seeds, and many of the soil nasties will have been killed off by the frost. However, those allotmenters will be missing out on all the produce which could be harvested during the winter months. For some crops such as overwintering onions, shallots and garlic, they are much better if planted out on the first of October then left to grow throughout the winter – the resulting crops are much more bountiful. Since plants generally will continue to grow if the temperature is above 42°F (5°C), and since our winters seem to be getting warmer, then winter should be increasingly regarded as a growing season for many types of crops. However, I said “my grief is not just because I am a no-dig gardener”, so what is the other aspect? It is the hungry gap.

The hungry gap is that part of the year after winter, from about the end of March to the end of June, where there is nothing much around to eat. The winter crops have finished and the spring sowings have not yet produced their crops. So how do we fill that gap? What can we grow in that period to provide the fruit and vegetables we need?

The first thing we can do is to prolong the cropping season of the traditional winter vegetables. Carrots, underground beetroot, swedes and parsnips can be left in the ground and cropped into April. I agree that the carrots may attract other diners such as slugs and muntjac deer, but hopefully there will be something left for us, especially if we have taken precautions against the other diners. Sprouts and purple sprouting broccoli should crop well into April, and there are some varieties of winter broccoli and winter cauliflower which will crop into May. Red cabbage should be available until May and is delicious raw in salads. As for salads generally, there is a large choice. Chinese mustard “green in snow” seems to survive any amount of frost, as do salad leaves (polycress), winter purslane (claytonia), wild garlic and perennials salad burnet and lovage. Watercress and lamb’s lettuce can be grown overwinter in the greenhouse and cropped in the hungry gap. Radishes and delicious early turnips should be available from mid-May. A few crops can be stored, such as garlic cloves which will keep well into July. As for spring onions, one of my favourites is ciboule, a perennial spring onion which is available all year round but is especially nice in spring. Spring cabbage is a must – but sow only a few! My spring cabbage plants this year measure up to three feet across and have been available from early June. Leeks can be cropped from autumn until early June.

The second thing we can do is to advance crops sown in, say, March, by covering them with fleece, so that they will crop early, such as various types of lettuce and radishes. This also applies to early potatoes – I plant them under fleece in mid-March and am eating my first early potatoes at the beginning of June.

The third thing we can do is to grow perennial vegetables and cover them with fleece to bring them on early, such as asparagus (available from early April), seakale (covered with impermeable black polythene sheet and cropped from April onwards) and Good King Henry. The latter is a marvellous perennial vegetable which can be brought on under fleece or even blanched and brought on under black plastic sheeting. The resulting white/pale yellow shoots just melt in the mouth and are available from early April.

And what about fruit? Here we have a few difficulties, since stored fruit such as apples have really had it by the end of February. The first fruit to crop is that old favourite rhubarb, which can also be brought on under black plastic sheeting and should be available from March. Strawberries can be hastened under fleece – I pick my first strawberries in early May. However, for other fruit one has to rely on the freezer. Raspberries freeze extremely well, as do gooseberries and cherries. Pears and plums can be bottled and consumed in the hungry gap.

What about exotics? Chicory has become my favourite. I sow them in cells in the airing cupboard in mid-March, harden them off then plant in a line across the allotment in April. I leave them to it until early October. I then dig up a few roots, cut most of the tops off and place them in a large black buckets with soil, put other buckets over the top and black bin liners over both buckets and place the buckets in the garage. By mid-November, Hey Presto! Chicory, white with yellow tinges, absolutely marvellous in salads. One can progressively dig up the rest of the row and place the buckets in the loft to ensure fresh delicious chicory right through to early May. One can treat Seakale in the same way and crop from mid-March.

Another winning vegetable is Swiss chard, variety silver chard. I have grown this for 30 years and seed is now available in the UK. One needs only a few plants since the crop is abundant. I would not choose other varieties of Swiss chard since I find them bitter. Silver chard produces a crop in the autumn – broad white stems which are prepared like asparagus and surrounding green leaves which can be prepared like spinach. However, silver chard comes into its own in the spring when fresh leaves appear which can be cropped from early March to mid-June. Silver chard is a real winner and a wonderful filler of the hungry gap.

The overwintering onions should be available from mid-May, as should early, immature garlic. Perennial Welsh onions should be available from mid-April. As for herbs, perennials marjoram, tarragon, sorrel, thyme, rosemary and sage should be available throughout the hungry gap and the first sowings of parsley should be available from mid-May. Basil, parsley and dill can also be grown on a windowsill and be available in the hungry gap.

So you see, the hungry gap does not really exist. One can eat from one's garden or allotment all year round.

Happy gardening!

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