

12th January 2014

Like most of the country we have had abysmal weather over the last few months. Uncommonly for Scotland we have had little frost in the Central belt but plenty of rain and high winds. This has made doing most outside work difficult – plus you don't really feel like it. However if you want to get the results in September at your shows you really need to start moving. I am one of these gardeners who always seem to be chasing – unlike all the good prepared ones who have all their beds and barrels done. I have been like this for 30 years so I don't think I will change and I'm not really worried about it!

2 or 3 jobs are underway at the plot. I have dug a couple of beds in my tunnel for 250g onions and onion sets. These have had manure, trench fertiliser and spent bracken compost put into them – all mixed in and will be left for a few months. I also need to give them another good soaking as they are drying out and for those of you who read Mick's diary he too doesn't like dry soil in a tunnel – as in effect it is "dead" soil. I have decided to grow in beds again as the last couple of years I have used 7" pots which although I had cracking onions I just couldn't get them past 9 inches or so. So hopefully the beds will remedy this although I will still try some in pots as well. The 250g onions are now germinated. The difference as you can see in the 2 trays is that they are different varieties but the Toughball also had a round ball of seed coating which I think slows the germination but protects the plant later.



I have also been looking to start digging my celery bed. This is a raised bed about 2ft high which was built last year using soil, manure and again spent bracken compost. It gave me some really good celery that won at the Scottish and at Causey Inn. The only thing that will be put in this year is manure as I think there is enough bracken compost in it already. The manure will give you a good soil and also act as a water retainer – remember celery absolutely love water so you do need a bed that is going to retain it.



I have also built another row of parsnip barrels which I will use for trialling some varieties. The main barrels (20) will be the ones primarily used for any shows. The bed as I described previously is about 18 inches or so high with another couple of feet or so beneath that. Together with the barrel I have about 6ft of sand which is essential to get a good tap root. The barrels are sat on crossbars of wood to keep them level – metal is obviously better but it's difficult to source. I really need to crack on with filling them and emptying my other barrels as I will be sowing them on the 22nd February – so this job needs completed by the end of the week. Most of the parsnip barrels are plastic whereas my carrots are all metal – given the choice I would always have metal but have to make do with plastic as metal ones are even more difficult to source



Parsnips take a while to germinate and need a fairly long growing season so you need to start thinking and preparing just now for them. The mix I am using is one I have used the last couple of years which came from Alistair Gray.

2 Gallons sterilised soil
2 Gallons peat
1 Gallon silver sand
1 Gallon Fine vermiculite
All through a fine riddle.

Added is
2 oz Calcified seaweed
2oz Superphosphates
2oz Sulphate of Potash
2oz Bonemeal
4 oz Dolomite Lime
All ground finely in a coffee grinder

I have experimented with different mixes over the last 6 or 7 years but wasn't getting size on them so reverted back to this mix which Alistair uses. The funny thing is that it is almost identical to the mix that I was first given when I started growing 30 years ago. I differ slightly with parsnips from my carrots in that I will give the parsnips foliar feeding from around the beginning of August using Chempak 8 and Maxicrop 2 or 3 times - I think it just gives you some bulk in the parsnip. However too much feeding, particularly on a variety like Pinnacle will give you a "rough" 9 inches or so at the top of the parsnip (as I had this year with some of them). I have used Pinnacle for the last 2 or 3 years and although I get good size I am not convinced that the quality is there with it. So this year I am growing Duchess and Panorama to try and get better quality.

I'm not sure there is any secret tips etc - to me it's like any show vegetable - get the right seed, use a good mix, grow it in the right conditions and put plenty of time and effort into it and you should be there.