

I find that early February is when the work in the heated greenhouse really starts to build up. It is imperative to get the tomatoes and sweet peppers underway to ensure an early crop. This is also the weekend to sow your celery if growing for the National Championships at the New Forest Show.

According to my allotment neighbour Ann, you can never have enough tomatoes. She sourced most of these at 50p per packet at the local garden centre end of season sale. I think the allotment holders are in for a surprise when it comes to our plant sale.

The first lot of tomatoes and sweet peppers were set away in mid January. That means we should be picking small fruited tomatoes from early May. One variety that I am looking forward to sampling is 'Sweet Mellion' from Select Seeds. That one cost a bit more than 50p a packet.



In fact 'Sweet Mellion' had 100% germination. The other small fruited variety, 'Cherry Kisses' had one seed that failed to germinate. The 'Ferline' beefsteak type had three misses. But as both of those only cost 50p a packet that was still good value.

The slow starter in the middle is the sweet pepper 'Red King'. Ideally that one should have had its own tray because they are always slower to germinate than the tomatoes.

I will leave the young plants to grow on until the first pair of true leaves form. Then they will

be potted on into small pots containing Levington M2 compost with added fine vermiculite.

Celery

Apparently the best celery for an early show is 'Evening Star'. I actually managed to get into the cards showing that variety when the National Show was held at Margam Park in South Wales many moons ago. I remember trimming the roots outside the orangery, 'in the dark' at about 4.00am in the morning.

First of all I fill a half tray with good seed compost. Stand the tray in warm water until moisture is seen at the surface. Make sure the surface of the compost is even with no ruts for the seed to fall into.



Celery seed is very fine. Sprinkle it over the surface but don't cover the seed. Some growers like to apply a very light covering of fine vermiculite. 'But I don't'.

Pop the tray into a plastic bag. Keep somewhere warm and in good light. Open up the bag each day and give a spray with warm water. Hold the sprayer above the tray and let the mist drift down onto the seed. If you aimed the sprayer directly at the seed it could be blown away.

And don't forget the label.



Pot Leeks

The pot leeks have had their first sort out. From the original 25 I received from John Soulsby I have selected the best 16 to grow on. This is a necessary process as the best will get the best conditions. These have bottom heat and I have spaced them apart so they will not get drawn too much. I have also smoothed the flags down so they hang over the pots. To do this hold the tip of the flag in one hand and run your forefinger along the underside of the flag. The leaf will then droop down without cracking. This also helps to keep down blanch length. We want to end up with a leek of up to 6" blanch to the tight button and not a smidge over.



Blanch Leeks

Pendle Improved leeks, looking good.

The leeks have now gone from the deep plugs they started life in, potted on into 3" square pots and now moved on into 1.5 litre pots. The compost used for this potting was 75% Levington M3 combined with 25% graded top soil. To this I added fine Vermiculite and Dolomite lime. 4oz of lime to a 2 gallon bucket of compost. I find it easier to incorporate the lime using a smaller quantity of compost. I fill a bucket with the compost then pop it into a barrow to mix in the lime. That way I can work the lime evenly through the compost.

I find growing for show really is a labour of love. I spend hours just looking after the leeks and onions. Every few days the leeks are lifted out of the growing cabinet and inspected. A bent blanch can be gently straightened at this stage. I am constantly readjusting the stakes and repositioning the plastic rings.



I find the exhibition onions especially difficult to look after. In the early stages they can look rather straggly. But it is even more important to keep the onions growing straight if you are to avoid bent necks. These were potted up on the 1st February using the same compost as the leeks.

The period of light for February in the cabinet will now be extended to 13 hours per day. On at 7.30am and off at the same time in the evening.

Brassicas

We are now picking calabrese about twice a week. This is a brilliant vegetable, as soon as the centre is picked the side shoots begin to sprout.



Potatoes

Any day now I expect the arrival of my seed potatoes from JBA to turn up. Before they do I shall be potting up some store potatoes that have started to sprout. I dare say the variety will be 'Cherie'. That's the variety I mentioned in the last article. I shall use some of my old exhibition potato compost revitalised with Vitax Q4. Fill a 10 litre pot and pop in a tuber making sure it is covered 4" deep with compost. The pots must be kept warm. I put mine under the bench in the heated greenhouse until they sprout. Then they are brought out into the light. 'Just right for early May potatoes'.

Back in a fortnight.

John Trim



The 'Nessie' cauliflowers are just starting to turn in. 'Nessie' is not really a winter cauli but it seems to have done well in our polytunnel. I have more brassicas growing in the cold allotment greenhouse to extend the cropping of this sowing.

