

The best dozen or so from each bag are kept to one side. Those are the ones that will be grown in plastic 17 litre bags for exhibition on the show bench.

Next job will be to give each tuber a wash and then pop them back in the trays in a position of good light. We want them to produce short stubby shoots. So as long as they are kept frost free they will be fine. The rest of the potatoes will be grown on the allotment where they will be sown directly into the soil. But that is still some way off. Planting out time will be from late March to Early April in my Southern location, depending on the weather conditions.



At the end of this month I shall sow an early row of potatoes for kitchen use, in the polytunnel. The variety will be the very tasty 'Charlotte'. Those were force chitted indoors to get the sprouts growing.



At the moment my allotment it is something of a quagmire. Fortunately it is on a bit of a slope, so the top of the plot is fairly free draining. It is here that I grow the garlic. If they were at the bottom of the plot they would have rotted away by now.

Once again I am glad that I got all the winter digging done before the rains came.

Thompson and Morgan seeds a bit of a hard time. I had reservations about the quality of the 'Ferline F1' tomato seed that I was about to sow. Fortunately 11 of the 12 sown came through.

I have also been really busy with early sowings of mangetout peas and broad beans.

Space is so limited in the greenhouse that the trays have been stacked on top of one another. That will only be for a few days. In the foreground of the picture is just one tray of sweet peppers. There are several more and in a month they are all going to need potting on. A gardener's life is never still.



The broad beans and the peas were soaked for 24 hours prior to potting up. The beans were sown into 4" square pots, two beans in each. The peas into 3" square pots. The compost used was my old exhibition potato compost.

Beetroot. It is now time to make the first sowing of beetroot under cover. There is only one variety that I risk sowing this early and that's the ultra reliable 'Boltardy'.

It's the only one that won't bolt from an early sowing. Growing beetroot for the house is quite easy. Using the back of my rake I make a shallow depression about half an inch deep. Sow the seed 3" apart and thin to 6" apart as they develop. The thinnings make lovely baby beets, just the right size for a salad.



For later sowings and especially those destined for the show bench I use F1 varieties, my choice is normally between 'Pablo' and 'Red Ace'. For those I bore a hole about 6" deep and fill with a decent potting compost. Space the holes 6" apart and sow one seed per station. "About half an inch deep. F1 varieties are normally monogerm, meaning that only one plant should come from each seed. Very often they will send up two or three baby plants so for exhibition purposes they will need to be thinned back to a single plant. Nip off the excess plants with a pair of scissors. In 13 weeks they should be ready for lifting.

These aubergines sown on the 13th February, germinated in just 6 days. Within two weeks this lot will also need potting on.

I was recently asked by an NVS member about Boron. This trace element is essential for the healthy development of many vegetables and in particular beetroot, cauliflowers and celery.

Boron enables other trace elements to release their nutrients. But care must be taken not to overdose as this could mean blocking the uptake of other essential trace elements.



Normally the only way to tell if your soil is deficient is to have a specific soil test.

A visible indication of Boron deficiency is if your caulies go brown on the curd, or if your beetroot develop shallow depressions at the top of the crown.

The safest way to apply Boron is to use a base fertiliser such as Vitax Q4 which contains a trace of Boron and is normally enough to adjust any deficiency.

If you do need to apply Boron, dilute 25gms in 20 litres and apply to 10 square meters of soil. This should not be repeated in the same year. And my advice would be not to reapply without doing a further soil test in subsequent years.

On the exhibition front things are looking promising. The 'Kelsae' onions and 'Pendle' leeks have been potted on. The mix for this is one 75 litre bag of Levington's M3. 20 litres of sterilised top soil. 1lb of dolomite lime. 1lb of Nutrimate and one 2 gallon bucket of fine vermiculite. I put a handful of compost in the pot, then add a scoop of Rootgrow. The plant is then placed on top of the Rootgrow. It is important that the roots of the plants make direct contact with the Rootgrow. They are then given a drink of tepid water and placed back in the growing cabinet under the T5 lights.

This is the time when exhibitors really earn their keep. Every couple of days the plants are removed from the light cabinet and the fast growing leaves are secured with the green plastic rings to keep the stems growing upright.

From now on the plants are watered from the bottom. We want their roots to go searching for moisture and nutrients and so develop a bigger root system. This is where the 'Rootgrow' comes in. It is a mycorrhizal fungi and stimulates formation of another root system.



Every week the plants get an application of SB Plant Invigorator. I find this handy little atomising sprayer is ideal for the job. It gets under all the leaves without too much run off of the spray.

Mind you it is still necessary to keep an eye out for more resilient pests. I found a few flea beetles on some of my leeks that the SB spray had failed to deal with.

I used a broad spectrum insecticide to polish those off.



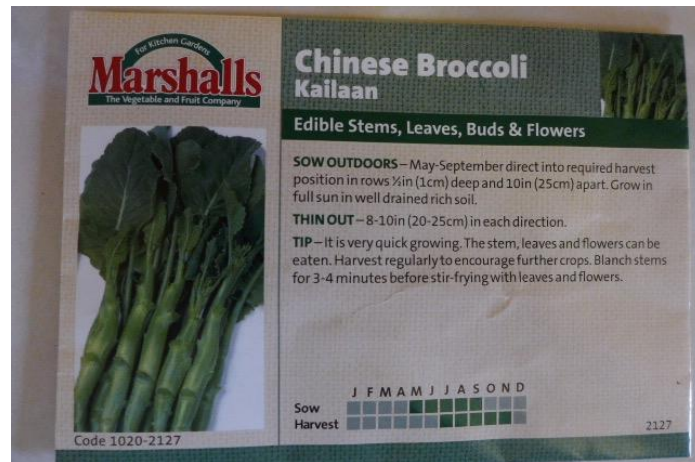
With the milder weather it is now comfortable to work in the polytunnel. I have dug over one of the deep beds and applied Dolomite lime to raise the pH to 7. In the picture I am watering the bed with a liquid fish concoction purchased from Mick Poultney. Hopefully it will stimulate worm production.

The base fertiliser for this bed will be applied a week before planting up. Which could be with leeks or onions.



The later sowings will be planted outside once they have made decent size plants. They will go under netting to give frost protection and more importantly to protect them from the birds.

On the 24th Feb I made the first sowing of Broccoli. This tenderstem variety will be grown in the polytunnel. I shall sow a dozen seeds or so every two weeks.



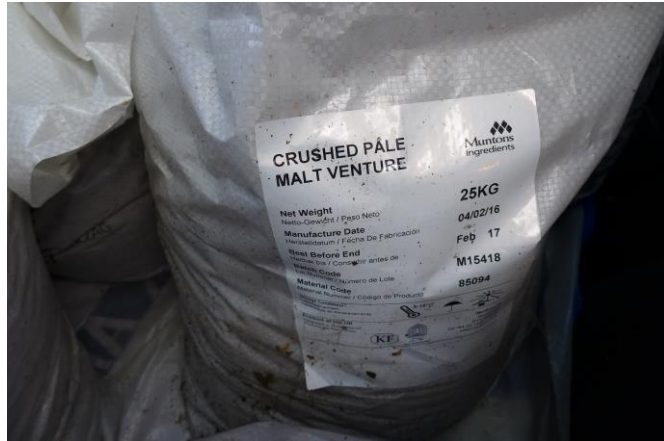
I am fortunate to have a fairly local brewery where I can obtain used hops.



The pH of the hops is 4.7 which is pretty acid and I hope that when mixed 50/50 with some sphagnum moss peat the medium will be suitable for potato growing.

Time will tell. Anyway this year I will be giving it a go, I shall report on the outcome later in the season.

Well that's about it for February. I am sorry that there was only one article from me this month. My excuse is that I was busy clearing my fathers house before putting it up for auction. Thankfully that is now out of the way.



More next month.

John Trim