

Last year I was very fortunate to be tipped off by one of my NVS colleagues Simon Smith, that there were still a few packets of 'Cedrico' tomatoes to be had from Shelley Seeds. This variety is tops on the show bench. I am now sowing those very sparingly to make the seed last as long as possible. In fact as long as you store tomato seed cool and perfectly dry it can potentially stay viable for up to twenty years. The 'Cedrico' seed I have is just three years old so I still expect close to 100% germination.



By doing an early sowing the plants will be perfect for taking cuttings from April onwards. That's why it is only necessary to sow a few seed early in the year.



After four days all four 'Cedrico' had germinated. Unfortunately I could not say the same for the 'Akron' from Thompson and Morgan. To start with there were only seven seeds in the packet, when it said the average content was eight. If they are only going to give me eight seeds then I expect eight seeds. And then the germination was lopsided. Three came up a day after the 'Cedrico' and then it was another four days before three more appeared. 'One failed to germinate'.

I hope the 'Ferline' manage to do better than that as they came from the same seed supplier. I must admit that I normally buy most of my seed from the smaller seed companies like 'Select Seeds' or 'Shelleys'. I feel I get better quality from them.

Soil Samples.

Before I retired from the estate where I worked I had the full range of gadgets to test soil samples. One of those was a professional soil conductivity meter which measured the

build up of salts in the soil mainly left behind by the addition of dry fertilisers. If conductivity gets too high it will inhibit the uptake of moisture and nutrients. So it something worth keeping an eye on. No longer having the right equipment for the job it was time to send off a soil sample for testing.



When I was teaching, the students were taught to mark out a 'W' on the soil surface and take several samples along the 'W' at a depth of 4 to 6 inches. The sample was then put through a sieve and then dried in a clean seed tray before testing.

Soil testing is expensive, it cost me £18.00 for one test and on top of that £3.30 in postage. When the result came back it told me under the heading of conductivity that my soil was suitable for healthy growth but no figure was quoted. There was a breakdown of the NPK and fertiliser recommendations to correct any deficiencies.

But the bottom line is if you want to do a number of tests it is worth spending a few pounds for a decent test kit and do it yourself. With a bit of care and practice this is not a difficult thing to achieve.

The best bit of advice I can give you to keep your soil in good heart, is if you are growing undercover, is not to overdose with dry fertiliser.

My tested soil sample indicated a pH of 6.82 and very little correction of NPK was required. My normal regime of adding 4oz of Vitax Q4 per square meter seems to be doing the trick. Then any further feeding I do with a soluble fertiliser. As usual this means a higher nitrogen one in the early none flowering stages, moving to a higher potash feed as the plants produce fruits.

Early Potatoes.

Bottomless 20 litre buckets are used in which to grow an early crop. The buckets are filled with my old exhibition potato compost. When half full mix in a small handful of Vitax Q4 or potato fertiliser.

Plant one or two tubers per bucket and top up with more compost so that the tubers are buried to a depth of at least 4". Keep warm and move into a position of good light once they germinate.

Towards the end of the month these will be sprouting.



My Pendle leeks are coming along very well. The ones on the right have been under the T5 lights. You can see the difference in the depth of colour in the leaves compared to those on the left of the picture. Even the stems are thicker. This year I am not pushing the leeks along too fast.



The **Kelsae** onions are also doing well. I have 60 on the go and these will shortly be reduced to the best 30 plants. The others will be passed on to lucky friends.



Don't worry if you don't have access to all the specialist sprays to ward off the pests. Spray once a week with SB Plant Invigorator and you will avoid most insect related problems. Combined with a weekly calcium nitrate spray your leeks and onions will do fine.



My last sowing of winter lettuce '**Rosetta**' are looking good. I have now made a sowing of the perpetual lettuce '**Mazur**' to follow them. Those are great, because you can pluck off a few leaves as and when you want them and the plants just keep on producing.



My **Ferline** tomatoes from Thompson and Morgan once again failed to impress me. The seed was quite

variable in size. I hope they perform better than the **Akron**.



They are sharing a half seed tray with the lettuce. No sense in wasting good seed compost.

Also sown this month, sweet peppers **Bell Boy** and **Meteor** broad beans.

Next week I will be sowing Aubergine **Money Maker** and the early pea **Douce Provence**.

More from me in February.

John Trim

