

# JOBS FOR MAY IN THE VEG GARDEN

---



One of my favourite months of the year, May, or Bealtaine in the Celtic calendar, was known as the beginning of summer. It was the time when cattle were moved to the high summer pastures and all seed crops had been sown. Turf cutting would have begun for the winter supplies and farmers would walk the perimeters of their land after sunset, acknowledging the four directions, dropping some seed and water from a holy well, or some ash from the Bealtaine fire in each corner. The summer was also welcomed in by setting up a May bush of yellow coloured flowers, that were gathered on May Eve and made into posies, decorations for the house or tied to cows' horns.\*

Many of the old traditions have been lost, but at this time of year more than any other I seem to spend a few minutes every day walking around our garden. Noting what's starting to show signs of growth first, getting excited about recently planted shoots poking through the soil and marvelling at the range of colours as the leaf buds open on the trees May can really lift the spirit. It can also be a very changeable month.

Not wanting to put a downer on the summer, when we were looking at the hedgerow last week an old wives' tale sprang to mind *"ash before oak, we're in for a soak"*. However the oak seems to be catching up now so maybe even the trees are hedging their bets too this year.

More weather lore includes:

*"A wet and windy May fill the barns with corn and hay,"*

*"A wet May and dry June make the farmer whistle a tune"*

*"A swarm of bees in May is worth a load of hay"*

I'm watching the weather forecast as I write this and the temperatures are still variable. There's still a chance of ground frost at night so have that horticultural fleece or newspaper ready to cover up any frost tender plants overnight. It can also be quite dry so be prepared to water plants if necessary (see Tip for May at the end).

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century the date that May Day (1<sup>st</sup>) fell on was moved (causing riots, as people believed they'd been robbed of days of life) and instead it fell on what was the 13<sup>th</sup> day of May. These days in the gardening calendar May is known as Late Spring and jobs for the month include:

*\*extract taken from [Celebrating Irish Festivals by Ruth Marshall](#)*

1. Keep hoeing the weeds. Just a short time spent weeding each week will save lots of tough, hard work later in the summer.
2. If you sowed broad beans earlier in the year, keep an eye out for blackfly. They especially love the fleshy tops of the plants but can be sprayed off with a jet of water.
3. Keep thinning seedlings to prevent overcrowding. Remove the weakest, eating the thinnings as you go.
4. Make a nettle 'tea'. Nettles are full of nutrients – nitrogen and potash in particular and will give a great boost to growing plants. Tie up a bunch of nettles in an old net curtain and suspend in a rain butt or old dustbin filled with water. Leave it for about a month to stew. The resultant brew can be watered onto plants. The colour of the liquid should resemble weak tea so water it down if it looks too strong.
5. Members of the brassica family (the leafy veg such as cabbages and kale) are slow growing and take up a lot of room. Sow quicker growing crops in the gaps such as radish or lettuce (known as intercropping).



6. Cover strawberry plants with netting before they fruit to prevent birds pecking away at them. Also lay straw around the bases of the plants which will keep the fruit clean as they're kept off the soil and harder for the slugs to get to. Alternatively plant them through weed membrane fabric if you're starting a new patch.
7. If you started leeks off in seed trays, plant them out once they're pencil thickness. Make a hole with a dibber (or something similar); carefully drop the leek into the hole and water in. Avoid filling the hole with soil but let the soil fall in naturally to aid blanching of the stem.
8. Although encouraging birds into your plot is a good thing (song thrushes eat snails), we don't want them to eat emerging seedlings and fruit. Make bird scarers that can be secured around some of the beds using old CDs tied to canes – the reflections of the sun will help to keep the birds off. Prickly twigs can also be poked into soil around peas and onion sets to prevent pigeons (or cats) digging them up.
9. Earth up early potatoes by bringing soil up around their stems and remember to protect their tender shoots with horticultural fleece, straw or newspaper if there's a heavy frost warning.
10. Keep on sowing. Once a batch of seedlings emerges sow another row which will give you a steady supply over the summer months.



*What you can sow outside now...*

Lots of veg can be planted directly outside into the soil from now on including:

Broad, runner and French beans,  
Peas  
Turnips & swedes  
Beetroot & summer beat  
Sprouting broccoli  
Cabbage – summer, autumn & winter varieties  
Calabrese  
Carrots  
Kales  
Lettuce, endive, purslane, rocket  
Swiss chard  
Spinach  
Japanese bunching onions  
Cauliflowers – mini, autumn, winter & autumn varieties



Towards the end of the month if it's warm (you may need to use a cloche), you can sow into the open cucumbers, courgettes, pumpkins, squashes, tomatoes and sweet corn.

Keep potting up aubergines, peppers & tomatoes.