



JOBS FOR FEBRUARY IN THE VEG GARDEN

When can I sow my seeds?

February can be a tricky month in the vegetable gardening calendar.

In past years we've often had a few beautiful, sunny days that have tempted us into the garden. The soil has warmed up and become less sticky and so with great enthusiasm we may have planted some of the new seeds that have arrived in the post or we've picked up from the garden centre. Fantastic. Job done - we can relax for a few weeks! **BIG MISTAKE!** Three weeks later it's snowed heavily and all our little seeds have been lost. February is still considered to be Late Winter (although it can be hard to put a name to our seasons the way our climate is changing) so we have to be cautious with our sowing.

Sometimes one of the hardest things to learn about vegetable gardening can be patience.

Most seeds will not germinate outside until the soil has reached a temperature of about 7°C (45°F) for at least three consecutive days.

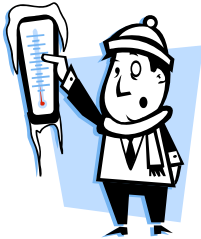


It is possible to start crops off a little earlier but this may seem daunting to new gardeners. It's worth trying out though if you have the time and like the

idea of having earlier crops than your friends and neighbours! It's also a great way to extend the growing season.

Covering the ground with clear or black plastic will help to warm it up quicker. The plastic can be laid directly onto the soil about three weeks before you plan to sow your seeds and weighed down to prevent it blowing away. When you're ready to sow, remove the plastic and sow directly into the prepared soil. The plastic can then be used to make a cloche (see TIPS below) to protect the seedlings from cold snaps.

Vegetables that can be started off this way include broccoli, cabbage, carrots, kale, lettuce, peas, onions, radish and spinach.



In Ireland Met Eireann (see www.met.ie) have a section Climate Averages and Extremes that show 30 years of average weather patterns, including number of Frost Days.

Your soil type will also determine how early you can start planting out - clay soils take longer to warm up than others. Once they have however, they are very nutritious and your crops should thrive. Sandy or light soils will warm up quickly, making early planting much easier but they are likely to dry out and become less productive later. The soil often warms up much faster in raised beds too.

If you didn't have a chance to dig over your soil in the autumn months it's not too late, and in fact spring is the best time for preparing sandy soils.

However, avoid digging if the soil is too wet and sticky or frozen as the structure of the soil can be damaged.

Although double digging is the recommended way of starting off vegetable beds (see [Glossary](#) for explanation) sometimes time (or fitness!) may prevent us doing this. So dig over the soil to a depth of about 37.5 - 45cm (15 - 18in) or about a spit (the depth of a spade) and incorporate organic matter (see [Glossary](#)) as you go. If you have a large area to prepare, divide it into smaller sections - it won't seem as daunting and you're less likely to cause yourself an injury!

When possible you should aim to leave the soil for about six weeks before planting or sowing which will allow it to settle.

Keep A Diary

If you keep a Vegetable Diary it can be a great help when you're planning crops in the future. Include the weather conditions and temperatures as well as the dates you started propagating, sowing or planting crops and the varieties chosen. It's surprising how quickly you can forget and the notes you make this year will help you with your planning next year.



Planting & Sowing

From mid-February onwards greenhouse-grown tomatoes and cucumbers can be sown in a heated propagator or a warm room, ready for potting on and growing undercover.



Seed potatoes are available now in garden centres. If you're chitting them (see Glossary) it usually takes about four to six weeks for them to produce buds. They can then be planted out as soon as the soil is workable, usually at some time during March and April.

Garlic and shallots can be planted out in light soils - it will still be too cold for heavier soils.

If you're eager to get things growing and you have the space, towards the end of the month seeds can be planted in pots or modules under cover of broad beans, early beetroot, spinach, summer cabbage and lettuce. Peas can be sown in old, clean guttering undercover ready to plant out.

Companion plants can be sown into modules now too - Marigolds, Nasturtiums & Sweet Peas can all be started off undercover.

Tip for February

Under Cover Growing - Cloches



Cloches come in all shapes, sizes and materials and are used to give crops an early start or a late finish. They're placed over the soil or crops, protecting them from frost, rain and wind.



It's important to remember to water plants when under a cloche and that the leaves don't touch the structure (in warm weather they may burn).

It's also recommended that cloches have end pieces to prevent them from becoming wind tunnels. Remember to ventilate them too as the weather gets warmer - temperatures can get very high, very quickly. Before they're erected the soil will need to be thoroughly prepared.

To make your own mini cloches, cut the bottoms off clear plastic bottles and push the top part into the soil. These will also protect seedling from slugs, birds and mice.

