

Jobs for January In the vegetable garden

January (also known as mid-winter) is a fairly quiet month in the gardening calendar. If it's mild enough towards the end of the month some seeds can be started off undercover. If you didn't have a chance to prepare your soil in the autumn months, weather *permitting (if the soil isn't frozen)* it's not too late to improve it now.



1. 'Under cover' includes unheated greenhouses, Polytunnel cloches, cold frames and mini greenhouses.

Despite having 20cm (8in) of snow outside, our Polytunnel remained frost free throughout the winter of 2010 (*although light levels were very low*).

If you don't currently have any of the items mentioned, consider making or buying one in preparation for the growing season. It doesn't have to be big or expensive. Many cold frames are made from recycled wood, glass or old window frames (see Tips below).

2. When you're planning your [crop rotation](#) don't forget to include [companion plants](#) such as marigolds and nasturtiums to help [deter pests](#).



3. November to March is traditionally the time to plant and prune Apple trees. During the first four years of your tree's life the aim is to create a strong framework of branches. The way they're trained and pruned depends upon the shape of the tree that is required (cordons, espaliers, pyramids, etc.). Apple trees that are bought as one-year old maidens will only have a single stem that is pruned each winter to create the desired shape. Beginners might prefer to buy older trees that have been partly trained. Some can be bought when two or three years old, with

espaliers up to four years old. Trees older than this only rarely re-establish themselves.

4. Once again, check that stored crops aren't showing signs of rotting or damage. If you didn't get around to harvesting root veg before Christmas, check them now and think about lifting and storing them as soon as possible before it's too late. You can always make lots of warming soups that can be frozen if you're not sure about storing veg.



5. Preparing an area for planting can be done at any time of the year but deep digging should ideally be completed by the end of the winter months.

Disturbed ground will need to settle before planting to aid moisture retention and root growth and the soil can get too warm and hard if you leave it until the warmer months. If your ground drains well and lots of weeds grow in it, you can get away with just surface cultivation for a while.



Don't attempt to dig at all if the ground is too wet or frozen as you may damage the soil structure (as well as your fork).

6. If you feel like a bit of exercise after being stuck indoors for the past few weeks, turn the [compost heap](#) over. This will help to revive decomposition and let in air. Make sure the contents of the heap are not too wet (it should be moist) and water it if it's too dry.
7. For early, sweet stems of Rhubarb you may like to have a go at forcing it. Be aware however, that forcing usually exhausts the roots so they may not crop any further. Sets can be taken from them (divided), and be replanted.

Forcing is done by excluding light and can be undertaken from mid-winter to early spring. It can be done 'in situ' by placing a large can, black plastic over a frame, dried leaves or straw over the crown. Bear in mind when covering that stems may reach about 45cm (18in) so allow headroom. Roots should be checked to make sure they don't dry out. Tender shoots should be ready within 3 to 5 weeks.

8. If you're planning to order your seeds from a catalogue and you haven't already done so, place your order now and you may still receive all the seeds you're hoping to plant. Leave it much later and they may be out of stock.
9. If there is snow on your polytunnel or greenhouse, sweep it off regularly with a soft broom.

Suggested Varieties to Sow/Plant Now...

We're not quite into the planting season yet but if you live in a mild area, you can sow under cover broad beans, radish, lettuce and peas towards the end of the month. [See the Annual Vegetable Planter for more detail.](#)

Garlic can be planted on light soils.

Tip for January

Under Cover Growing – Cold Frames

The advantage of growing under cover is that it will give you an extra three or four weeks of growing time at the beginning and end of the season.

For those of us living in colder areas this makes a huge difference to the crops we grow as it extends our growing season considerably. Once you've been bitten by the vegetable growing bug you may not want to wait until the traditional sowing and planting dates but start planting out earlier. This can be achieved by using a cloche or a cold frame.



Cold frames are not usually used for covering crops that grow directly in the soil – that's the job of the cloche. They have several uses including hardening off plants that have been started off in warmer environs prior to planting out, used as a growing area for more tender plants as well as housing plants that need a bit of protection in the winter months.

Cold frames can be placed outside on solid floors with plants being housed in trays or pots, or directly onto the ground using rich, organic, fertile soil. Crop rotation will still apply and pests and diseases can multiply quickly. Be aware that frosts can still do damage. Additional protection can be given by covering the frame with old, dry blankets, sacking or straw. Remember to remove these during the day to allow for maximum light.



Cold frames are often made with wide walls of brick or thick wood and lids of glass (this is where an old window frame comes in handy – salvage yards are often full of them). The lid must be heavy enough that they won't blow off in the wind but you should be able to open and close them – weather and temperatures permitting. The largest practical size would be about 180 x 120cm (6 x 4ft).

The back wall of the frame is always higher than the front to allow rain to drain off, giving maximum light to the plants housed within it. The angle can vary between 5° and 15°. The side walls should be draught free and not too high or they may reduce light within the frame. A 20cm (8in) front wall rising to a 25cm (10in) back wall would be a good size for a cold frame.