

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 18th century the date that May Day (1st) 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 13th 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.

TIPS FOR MAY

Watering

You may have noticed how growth really takes off after a few showers of rain. Most vegetables benefit from a good soaking of the soil as water is taken up by the roots and then evaporated through the leaves.

However, too much water can result in nutrients being washed out of their reach and encourages shallow, surface rooting. Waterlogging (see picture) can result in plants dying as their oxygen source will be cut off. Generally, however, more water is lost through evaporation than through bad drainage.



As a guide water thoroughly and gently. Don't be tempted to put the hose on full blast on each plant for a few seconds or you risk damaging seedlings and young plants. You'll also notice if you check the soil (stick your finger in it) that the surface area might be wet but the area you're trying to reach (where the roots are) is still dry. So aim to keep the top 20cm of soil moist (not sodden).

Soaking the soil with about 10 – 15 ltrs per sq. metre per week will really benefit brassica crops in a drought. Water directly to the base of the plant – an upturned cut off plastic drinks bottle propped in the soil next to an established plant (especially squashes and tomatoes) is great for sending water directly where it's needed.



Watering in the evening is also the preferred method, as the plants will absorb the water rather than losing it to evaporation. In the morning the soil will be soft making for easier weeding. Make sure that the leaves are dry before nightfall however, and keep an eye out for slugs!

A few guidelines:

- ◆ Germinating seeds need water so always sow into moist soil or compost.
- ◆ One of the biggest killers of seedlings is watering incorrectly. They prefer to be watered from the base so stand them in trays and water the trays if possible. Alternatively use a

watering can with a very fine 'rose' to prevent swamping the compost or try using a mister. Once compost has dried out it's very difficult to wet it through again.

- ◆ Fruit and flowering plants such as tomatoes, beans and cucumbers need water to encourage their fruits to swell so heavy watering at this stage will increase yields.
- ◆ Root crops need a steady supply of water – too much will result in more foliage rather than big roots so only water if the soil starts to dry out, increasing the frequency as the roots start to swell.
- ◆ Crops that are grown for their leaves – spinach, lettuce, cabbages, etc. need more water than root crops.
- ◆ Plants are more prone to fungal diseases if their leaves are watered rather than their roots.
- ◆ Dig in as much bulky organic matter (compost or well-rotted manure) to increase the water-holding capacity of the soil.
- ◆ Mulch the soil surface after watering to prevent evaporation (use straw, compost or leaf mould).
- ◆ Avoid cultivating soil in dry weather, as it will bring moisture to the surface, which can then evaporate.
- ◆ Keep the soil as weed free as possible as the weeds will compete with the plants for water.
- ◆ Put up wind breaks. Wind dries the soil quickly, again increasing the rate of evaporation.