

Growing your Own

There's something enormously satisfying about growing your own food. Some say it's not worth the time and the effort, that it's cheaper and easier to buy veg from the supermarket or farm shop, that dealing with an (over) abundance of produce is frustrating. But let's face it, working on the land and with the soil connects us to this Earth in a very direct way. It's richly rewarding to know that your produce has been raised with love and care – and that's often experienced in the superior taste of home-grown veg..., and sharing abundance with friends and family is a lovely thing to do. Children also love to work in a veg patch, particularly when it comes to cropping time.



One of the best websites for information on how to grow organic veg is www.gardenorganic.co.uk. It's packed full of free advice, pdf downloads and if you become a member, you'll also have access to the Heritage Seed Library and be entitled to up to 6 packets of seed every year. A really super resource.

The Soil

One of the most important things to assess when starting out is understanding your soil, as what you have to start with will determine how you'll need to improve it. The best way to tell what type of soil you have is by touching it and rolling it in your hands.

- **Clay:** clay soil is heavy, tends to hold nutrients and water, is wet and cold in winter and baked dry in summer. It has a smearing quality and is sticky when wet. It's easily rolled into a long thin sausage and can be smoothed to a shiny finish by rubbing with a finger. If it's not a heavy clay it won't get quite as shiny and be as easy to make a sausage. Drainage can be improved by digging in grit and/or sand, and by adding compost or manure.

- **Sandy:** sandy soil is light, dry, warm and low in nutrients as the nutrients drain away easily. It has a gritty element – you can feel sand grains within it, and it falls through your fingers. It cannot be rolled to make a sausage shape. If it isn't a coarse sand and perhaps a sandy loam, it may stick together better. As sandy soil free-drains and doesn't hold nutrients, it's really important to improve it through the addition of plenty of compost and manure.
- **Chalky:** chalk soil is very alkaline and may be light or heavy, with the chalk element sometimes often sitting only 6" below the top level of soil. If soil froths when placed in a jar of vinegar, then it contains free calcium carbonate (chalk) or limestone and is lime rich. Again, improve chalk soil with compost and manure.
- **Silt:** silt soil is fertile, light yet moisture-retentive, has a slightly soapy, slippery texture and can easily be compacted. Pure silt soil is rare, especially in gardens and it's doubtful silt soil exists in the Betchworth area!
- **Loams** are mixtures of clay, sand and silt that avoid the extremes of each type.

All soils can be improved through the addition of compost (which 'conditions' the soil) and/or well-rotted manure (which enriches or adds nutrients). With annual winter applications, in time, your soil will transform itself into a beautiful tilth, full of hard-working earthworms.

Preparing the space

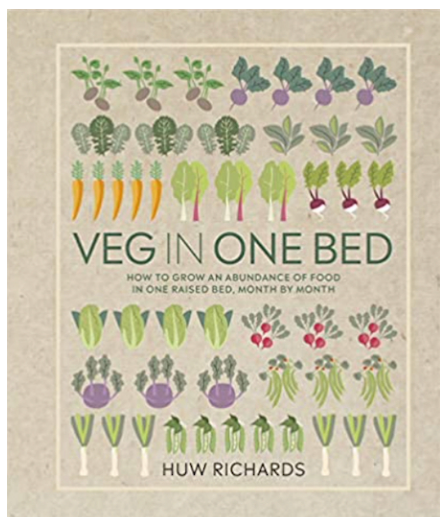
Try and plan ahead and prepare your growing space 9 to 12 months in advance – late summer or autumn is a good time. The space you've allotted will need to be cleared of weeds as weeds will compete with your veg for light, nutrients and water. Please DO NOT use weed killers such as glyphosate concoctions as these are toxic and are the very last thing you want in the soil you're going to be eating your produce from. You have other choices:

Digging: digging is an option with a small plot, but digging releases carbon dioxide from the soil which in terms of the climate crisis, is something we're all trying to avoid.

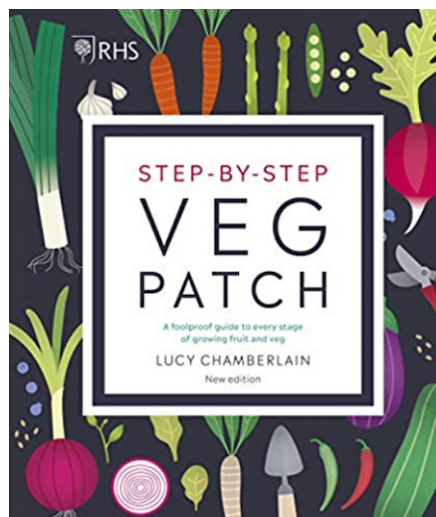
Cutting and mulching: slash/cut down weed foliage to just above soil level. Weed cuttings can be added to the compost heap as long as there are no seeds. Cover the entire area with a good, thick, layer of compost, manure or a combination of both – about 6 to 10cm deep. You'll need about one full wheelbarrow per 5 square metres. Top this layer of mulch with plain cardboard (which has no printing or packaging tape on it) and to stop it blowing away, weigh it down with bricks or another thin layer of compost. You could use black plastic membrane, but plastic is something we're all trying to use less of. Cardboard is usually free and as it biodegrades, conditions the soil. Some people use carpet but acknowledge that carpets often contain chemicals that can leach into the soil. Leave your mulched and covered patch for at least 6 months, ideally 9 to 12 months. Any remaining weeds will weaken in the dark and the earthworms will do their work to pull everything down and enrich the soil.

Planting, feeding, watering and cropping

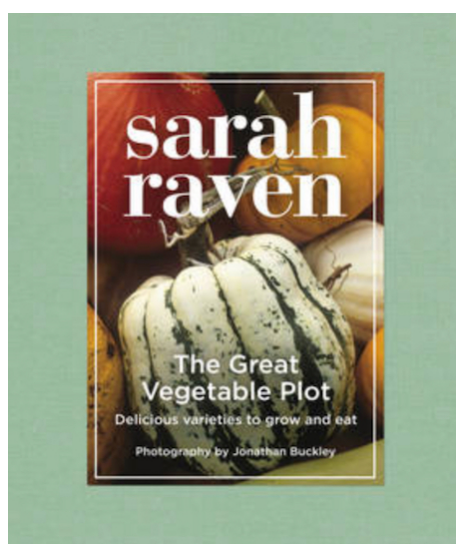
We cannot go into detailed advice here about which vegetables to grow, or the best way to go about it! Choosing what veg to grow is very personal and your best way forward is to invest in a good book or visit the Garden Organic website for advice. Some titles include:



Veg in One Bed, by Huw Richards: explores how to grow an abundance of veggies in a single raised bed. Huw Richards also posts video tutorials on YouTube.



Step-by-Step Veg Patch, by Lucy Chamberlain; an RHS publication, a fool-proof guide to every stage of growing fruit and veg.



The Great Vegetable Plot, Sarah Raven; delicious varieties of veg to grow and eat.



The New Vegetable & Herb Expert, Dr. DG Hessayon: find second-hand copies on the internet.

Some veg can be sown directly into the ground as seed, some need to be started in seed trays, potted on into small pots or root trainers and then planted out as small plants. The Garden Organic website will provide advice, as will a good book and the seed packet itself.

Once your veg plot is planted up, you'll need to keep the weeds at bay - either by hand-weeding or hoeing or - once the plants are well established - by laying down cardboard to suppress the weeds.

Make sure the veg get plenty of water, so consider installing an automatic watering system of leaky hoses, set to a timer. More advice on watering systems, water butts etc. can be found in the section, 'Water'.

After that, simply watch the veg grow, pick it and eat. If you like to grow peas, try taking a small stool into your veg patch with a glass of chilled white wine. Pick your peas, shell them and eat raw!

Maintaining soil quality

All plant life requires food and this is particularly true of veg. Each year, your crops will gobble up the nutrients in the soil and these will need to be topped up. Every year, cover your veg patch with a layer of compost, leaf mould or manure, topped with weighted-down cardboard. This will mean you'll continue to suppress weeds and improve your soil. You can do this in patches as your various crops end and have been harvested.

The Greenhouse

Certain plants such as tomatoes, cucumbers, Padron peppers, chillis and aubergines will be much happier in a greenhouse; there's nothing like standing in a greenhouse, rich with the scent of tomatoes and eating your produce straight off the plant. If you don't have a greenhouse, don't despair, try growing tomatoes and such-like in gro-bags in a south-facing, sunny, sheltered spot in your garden. During good, warm/hot summers, you'll still get decent yields.

Allotments

And remember, Betchworth does have allotments next to the burial ground, so contact the Parish Council to find out about availability.

The Cutting Garden



You may not want to grow vegetables, but you may love having cut flowers in your home. If you have the space, consider creating a raised in bed in which to establish a cutting garden, which will allow you to pick flowers from late spring into early autumn. Failing a raised bed, a few pots with flowers such as Cosmos, Verbena and Dahlias can look stunning and help insects and pollinators.

Sarah Raven is probably the best-known advocate of cutting gardens and has a book on the subject, but other books are also available.