

TOPICAL TIPS FOR MARCH FROM JAN :

Potatoes

Keep them chitting in a light, but frost-free place until they are ready for planting. Opinions differ about when this is but traditionally it is Good Friday.

Shallots

Very soon it will be time to plant these out into the soil, but you could try planting them into pots in a light, but frost-free place to get them started until they are planted out in a couple of weeks time.

Broad beans

Broad beans can be sown into modules (such as rootainers) under glass and transplanted into the soil later. Alternatively, you could risk sowing directly into the ground in the next week or so (particularly if you have been warming your beds up – see below).

Vegetable beds

The soil is warming up and weeds are starting to grow away and so it makes sense to get rid of these as part of the preparation of vegetable beds for the summer. Be careful weeding around overwintered crops such as garlic, as it is easily damaged by hoeing – I weed my beds by hand to avoid this. It's not too late to cover beds with black plastic to help them warm up more quickly so that sowing and planting out can take place sooner.

(COMMENT BY PHIL : I read a suggestion the other day to use clear plastic to warm your beds up, as it encourages the weeds to grow. Then when you take it off you just weed the bed and you've got a perfect start for sowing or planting your veg/flowers. Whereas under black plastic your weeds don't germinate until the soil is exposed to the light. Food for thought.

If you are following a crop rotation, it makes sense to plan what you will be growing in each place and prepare the soil accordingly (if you have not already done so). Bear in mind that root crops (like carrots and parsnips) don't like freshly manured soil (it makes the roots fork) and brassicas prefer alkaline soil. If you do lime your soil, Dolomitic limestone is considered to be more beneficial than ordinary garden lime as it is less harsh and also provides a source of magnesium.

Compost Heaps

Now is a good time to make use of all that amazing compost you have made, as it can be used for the new season. This makes room for this year's material and, if you have several bins/heaps, also allows you to turn the other compost that is not quite ready. I have three compost bins on the go and using the third year's stuff allows me to turn the compost from last year and the year before. I sieve my compost to screen out the material that has not fully rotted and this allows me to use it as part of a growing medium and as a surface mulch but Phil puts his coarse material into deep trenches for his potatoes, peas and beans.

Sowing seeds

Some vegetables such as peppers, courgettes and tomatoes, need quite a long growing season and it makes sense to sow these seeds first. They will germinate in a warm light place but a heated propagator is ideal.