

AIRING CUPBOARDS TO EARLY HARVESTS

Fergus Dowding's optimistic March



Aquadulce beans 7th June a few years ago: start picking when the beans are small as you should soon have a deluge. The horrible plastic crate is over 40 years old but useful for a heavy crop.

A big battle these days is the quality of bought compost for growing tender plants. Peat has now been replaced with woody stuff that sucks out all the added nutrients in composts within a fortnight when the plants just stop growing. So I now make my own—nervously. Most important is choosing a rich vein in my compost heap that shows signs of worms in it, which I bag up in September. Mix this with scrapings of compost rich top soil, which is also rich in the all important worm poo, finished off with a little bought compost, simply because I'm nervous of success. This mix can be a bit gooey but half rotted stems in my compost help give sufficient drainage. Add perlite if in doubt, we always use it for true spinach which needs a well drained medium.

March is a time of optimism when light levels increase and every so often the sun comes out. The first sowings of early potatoes and broad beans in the first weeks are possible, wildlife permitting. Fleece is a spring thing and helps all early crops, you can now buy fleece made from plant materials rather than plastics.

Most broad beans tolerate frost if the plants are

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strong and in humus-rich soil. We prefer sowing Aquadulce in November, they ripen in June before the blackfly attack, you can then transplant winter cabbages and kale. Beans set more seed if well spaced and watered while flowering.

All seeds germinate best at 20°C, our airing cupboard is now full of celeriac, beetroot, tomatoes, peppers etc which are moved to the greenhouse the moment shoots appear. Lettuce and spinach follow the same path, fleeced over after transplanting until well established. Lettuce can put up with occasional frosts of -3°C but grow faster under the fleece.

However all this is easier in April or May, an easier life but smaller and later crops with a glut in July. Your choice! And what did the worm say to the topsoil? It's been nice gnawing you.