

# Beth Otway's Gardening Hints and Tips

I am so excited now that spring has arrived! There a choice of so many lovely jobs that you could do over the month ahead to set you and your garden and allotment up for a successful year ahead.

Prune Figs. The latex that figs readily emit when you prune is an irritant, so it's advisable to wear gloves whilst pruning or tending to your plants, and then wash your hands thoroughly once you've finished. So, with your gloves on, firstly remove any dead wood, and cut back any frost damaged shoots. After this, the aim of your pruning is to create an open, spreading habit, which will let the maximum amount of sunshine and light in, for the best harvest of figs. Now remove any overcrowded growth, that is blocking out light in the centre of the plant next. Then cut back any very old branches back, to leave a short stem of just one bud, about two and half inches (6cm) long. Pruning doesn't take long, and is important if you're hoping for a good harvest of figs later in the year.

Prune Cornus now, to ensure you have lots of colourful stems this winter.

It's worth feeding your hedges this month, with so many plants grown closely together to form a hedge, all taking water and nutrients from the soil, regular feeding is both beneficial and necessary. Apply Growmore or blood, fish, and bone, sprinkling it around the soil. It's worth applying feeds to roses, trees, shrubs now; you'll really see the benefits later in the summer. Follow the instructions on the pack, and don't be tempted to over feed, as this is wasteful and can cause other problems – regular feeding is the way to go. It's also a great time to apply mulches, which will help suppress weeds and conserve moisture in the soil.

This is an ideal time of year to sow a pretty meadow! Lots of specially selected meadow seed packs are available, or you can select your own seed packs of different wildflowers and create your own individual mix. As well as being delightfully pretty, meadows are also extremely beneficial to bees, insects and wildlife. Even a small area of meadow creates a wonderfully relaxing and rather charming area of the garden. There is also a lot less mowing involved with managing a meadow, compared with that of managing a traditional lawn!



Ventilate greenhouses now, and use blinds or apply shade paint on greenhouses, to prevent your plants from being scorched by the sun. To be effective at creating shade and reducing excessive temperature rises, the blinds need to be fitted to the outside of your greenhouse, so they interrupt the sun's rays before they hit the glass.

In the greenhouse: sow tomatoes, cucumbers, melon, courgette, celeriac, celery, peppers, cucumbers, onions, radish, and

globe artichokes. If you haven't already, hang up yellow sticky traps in your greenhouse – they are very effective at controlling aphids, thrips, whitefly, and other greenhouse pests. Other traps are available on brown sticky paper but these are not nearly as effective, as it's the yellow colour that attracts the pests.

Plants grown in a protected environment miss out on the strengthening effects of the breeze, this often resulting in indoor raised plants becoming weaker, leggier plants than those grown outside. To strengthen your indoor grown plants, gently brush them with your hands, or a piece of card if you prefer, whenever you walk past. This will simulate the effects of the breeze and help to strengthen your plants, making them stockier and more resilient.

This month, take cuttings from planted Dahlia tubers, Fuchsias, Heliotropes, Marguerites, and Pelargoniums.

Divide chives, garlic chives, and sorrel now.

Plant early potatoes, asparagus, and shallots now. It's also the perfect time to plant asparagus; it's always best to plant one-year old asparagus crowns. Make sure you give your asparagus crowns a good soaking in a bucket of water, a few hours prior to planting in a well prepared and thoroughly weeded bed.

Sow parsnips: maximise your row space and harvest by intercropping with radish – the radish seeds will germinate very quickly, and can be harvested before the slow to germinate parsnips need the space. Make sure you use fresh parsnip seed each year, as the viability of parsnip seed decreases very rapidly.

Brussels sprout, summer cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, kohlrabi, leeks, lettuce, onions, spinach, and turnip seeds, can all be sown outside now.

Sow broad beans now; combine sowings of broad beans with sowing of *Satureja hortensis* (Summer Savoury), which can be started off under cover now. In a month or so, the Summer Savoury can be gently accustomed to cooler conditions and planted out next to your broad beans. Summer Savoury will help ward off black fly on your beans, and when cooked together the summer savoury enhances the flavour of the beans – so it's a great little plant to grow!



If you would like to grow more plants beneficial to bees and other pollinating insects, then now is a good time to sow sunflowers, single flowered forms of *Calendula officinalis*, *Papaver rhoeas* and *Papaver orientale* (poppies), *Nigella damascena*, *Centaurea cyanus*, *Verbena bonariensis*, *Cosmos bipinnatus*, and *Machaeranthera tanacetifolia*.

Sow sweet peas outside, directly in the soil where they are to flower, or in tall pots that allow for the long roots of the

sweet pea plants.

Position supports for tall growing herbaceous perennials to support them as they grow. You can use hazel or birch to make supports that are attractive, as well as functional.

Gently rake lawns to remove leaves and surface debris. Keep the mower blades high for the first cut of the year – just aim to remove the tips of the grasses and to tidy up the lawn with the mower.

Don't forget to net fruit cages!

It's the ideal time to buy snowdrops 'in the green' as they finish flowering. If you are buying snowdrops in this form, please buy your bulbs from a reputable supplier or snowdrop nursery to ensure the snowdrops you buy are not taken from the wild.

***You find details of the best snowdrop nurseries, information on local daffodil shows and gardens, a calendar of plant sales, more gardening advice for the month ahead, and much more besides on my website [www.pumpkinbeth.com](http://www.pumpkinbeth.com).***