



TEN TOP TIPS FOR GROWING YOUR OWN VEG AT SCHOOL

by CHRIS COLLINS



1. WASTE NOTHING

COMPOSTING: Save your kitchen waste and pop it into the compost bin. In fact everything from your kitchen can be composted except meat and fish, as this may attract unwanted guests – vermin! Mix it all up with old newspapers and grass clippings to make lovely rich compost.

2. WEEDS BEFORE SEEDS

WEEDING: Pull weeds from ground before they set seed, as this will save you plenty of work later. If you can get at them before they seed they will make great compost too. It's also a good idea to make sure you sow your vegetables in straight lines. This way, when they are tiny seedlings, you can tell them apart from the weeds.

3. SOIL IS THE ANSWER

MULCHING: Once your compost has become nice and 'friable' (rotted down and crumbly), you can place it onto your vegetable beds around your plants. This is luxury for them, like a chocolate treat for plants! It helps keep the roots moist in dry weather, and nice and warm in cold weather. When your compost breaks down it gives your plants nutrients. And it looks great too!

4. MAGIC LIQUID

FEEDING: Plants, like people, need to be fed. Mulching is one way of feeding your plants – another is what's known as liquid feed. You can buy liquid feed or make your own. Here's how...

Put nettles into a bucket of water, leave for three weeks and then use 10ml of nettle juice to 2 litres of water in a water sprayer.

Once a month in summer, early in the morning, spray your plant's leaves. This will make your plants strong.

5. RAISING AN ARMY

SOWING: One way to get lots and lots of plants is to raise them from seed. Sow seed into trays and put them in a propagator (mini greenhouse). You can sow seed straight into the ground, as long as the soil is warm enough and well prepared.

The soil you sow seed into must be free draining – the same texture as the crumble topping on your favourite apple crumble – and patted down to make firm. If your seeds have to be covered, sieve soil over them so that it is nice and fine and easy for the seedlings to grow through.

When watering, don't wash away your precious seeds or seedlings. Use a watering can with a fine 'rose' – that's the round cover with holes in that goes over the spout. Turn the rose upside down and start watering away from the seeds, sweeping over them.

6. SAVE FOR A RAINY DAY

WATERING: Remember water is precious so rig up water butts wherever possible. Inspect your plants everyday to see if they need a drink. The 'finger test' is a good way to see if there is moisture in the soil. If the soil is slightly moist it will stick to your finger – if not your plants need a drink.

7. FEED THE BEES

FLOWERS: When growing vegetables, it's always a good idea to provide a source of nectar and pollen for visiting bees and butterflies, as they will help your plants. You can try sowing a meadow garden from seed or plant some heavy flowering herbaceous plants near your veg garden like Leopard's Bane, Fleabane or Stonecrop.

8. HEALTH IS WEALTH

HYGIENE: When checking to see if your plants need a drink it's a good opportunity to see how your plants are doing. Remember the D/D/D rule: remove any Dead, Diseased or Dying leaves from the plant, and keep an eye out for pests.

9. BIRDS AND BEASTIES

PROTECTION: Birds can be a problem on a vegetable patch, especially pigeons. Try hanging old CDs off a line across your plot. The bright light they reflect helps scare them away. If you have a problem with slugs and snails, don't use slug pellets, as they kill off other important wildlife. Try one of these natural Slug Busters...

Surround your plants with eggshells, bran flakes, old coffee granules or gravel.

Get a teacher or parent to sink half a cup of beer near the plants.

It's a good idea to physically look for slugs and snails too and remove them by hand. Finally, if you find Aphids (tiny fly-like creatures) on plants like beans and lettuce use a small drop of washing up liquid in a water sprayer. This will help check these cheekyimps.

10. ORDER IN THE RANKS

Rotation: To help prevent the build up of pests and other nasties in your veggie patch, it's good to swap your vegetables around each year. This is called Crop Rotation. Grow 'root crops', (potatoes, turnips, carrots, beetroot) in one area, 'brassicas' (cabbages, broccoli, sprouts) in another, and then 'legumes' (beans and peas) in a third area. The following year, rotate these three groups around so that you don't plant the same type of plant in the same spot two years running.

