



Bushy red chilli plants ready for planting

Grow it, pick it, cook it

Grow your own is the trend of the moment – from TV chefs to everyday cooks, everyone seems to be turning home producer. And if you're yet to join the ranks of the green-fingered, this easy guide shows you how to get started...

FRESH HERBS AND TENDER SALAD LEAVES, succulently ripe strawberries and hard-to-find delicacies such as pea shoots and purple basil – there's only one way to have such desirable ingredients readily to hand, and that's to grow them yourself.

If you've grown nothing more than a few shrubs, killed off your share of houseplants or fear it sounds way too much like hard work, then think again. Here, we'll show how anyone can grow some of their own produce at home. Even growing a pot of herbs or some salad leaves in the garden is a great start.

You don't need masses of space, or to spend whole muddy weekends on an allotment. Just a few pots on the patio, a small veggie bed or the odd spot in an ornamental border can make all the difference to your cooking...and your budget.

You'll notice less tangible benefits, too, like the satisfaction of serving up seasonal ingredients you've grown yourself.

We've outlined ways you might set up your own mini kitchen garden, and highlighted a few easy crops that you can sow now. We'll be covering more in the following months. Try as many or as few as you like – you'll soon harvest the rewards.

WORDS **SUE STICKLAND**



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Get ready to grow!

WHEN THINKING ABOUT WHICH CROPS TO GROW, it's important to remember that the best value comes from crops that are expensive to buy in the supermarket, difficult to find, or simply have more vibrancy and taste when picked fresh.

Surprisingly, these aren't necessarily the most difficult to grow. Often these crops are not grown commercially because they're time-consuming to harvest, and difficult to transport or keep fresh. Such problems don't apply at home. It's a pleasure to nip out of the door, pick a few basil leaves or a handful of tiny currant tomatoes, and scatter them straight over your salad.

Where to grow

IN CONTAINERS A whole range of useful herbs, salads, and vegetables grow well in containers, on a patio or balcony, backyard or alongside a path – and they look attractive, too.

VEGGIE BED A small, neatly edged vegetable bed can be amazingly productive. Why keep looking at that tired flower bed or mowing that odd patch of lawn when you could be harvesting your own vegetables instead?

AROUND THE GARDEN Many herbs will fit into ornamental borders, need very little care and can supply you with a range of aromatic leaves for the kitchen.

ALONG A FENCE Fences and walls used as screens or boundaries can be covered with berried fruits such as cultivated blackberries, loganberries or redcurrants – they're no more difficult to look after than ornamental climbers and use up very little space.

Seeds or plants?

Seeds are the best value for growing large quantities of closely-spaced crops, such as salads, carrots and beetroot. However, if you only want to grow a few plants, such as tomatoes and peppers, it's not much more expensive to buy seedlings. The same applies to herbs and fruit that are perennials (that is, they grow year after year).

Where to buy

With grow your own back in fashion, seeds and plants of edible crops are increasingly easy to find at supermarkets and garden centres. Alternatively, order from garden catalogues and have them delivered – this is where you'll find the more unusual varieties and greatest choice. Take a look at our directory, below.

Fruit, vegetables and herbs directory

Thompson & Morgan 01473 695225; thompson-morgan.com

Agralan 01285 860015; agralan.co.uk

Jekka's Herb Farm 01454 418878; jekkasherbfarm.com

Ken Muir 01255 830181; kenmuir.co.uk

Harrod Horticultural 0845 402 5300; harrodhorticultural.com

Welsh Fruit Stocks 01497 851209; welshfruitstocks.co.uk

Mr Fothergill's 0845 371 0518; mr-fothergills.co.uk

Suttons 0844 922 0606; suttons.co.uk

The Organic Gardening Catalogue 0845 130 1304; OrganicCatalogue.com



WE GROW OUR OWN...

Anne and Phil Lythe have been growing veg for about three years, with some help from their son Sean, seven, and daughter Katie, four, in their garden in Kinnerley, near Oswestry in Shropshire.

Anne says: "When we moved into our house, our back garden looked much like anyone else's – a lawn with a swing on it, that kind of thing – but over the last few years the veg patch has taken over. Phil started growing potatoes, which are a brilliant, easy crop for beginners; they'll grow almost anywhere, and the plants actually clean up bad soil. We've had a few slip-ups, like the three tonnes of old horse manure Phil bought that turned out to be infested with weeds, but overall it's been brilliant.

"We started growing our own

because we were fed up with spending so much on supermarket fruit and veg that our kids wouldn't even eat. Now, we pay nothing for our veg, we know exactly what goes into it, and the kids wolf it down. Katie will eat cucumbers from our garden like they're sweets. It's the same at dinner – the kids really notice the difference.

"The best thing about it is the time we spend together. Sean and Phil have competitions to see who can grow the best veg – Sean won the carrots last year; he grew sweetcorn, too, although when he tried it, he didn't like it! I think the runner beans are our favourite because they have nice flowers, and they grow so quickly – Sean likes to measure them to see when they've outgrown Katie, then him, then me, then Phil."

Planting in pots

The most convenient way of growing a few crops is in pots or containers – no digging needed, nor much space. With luck, they'll fit just outside the kitchen door. Good crops for pots include:

- Baby salad leaves, basil, oregano, peppers, rosemary, sage, strawberries, thyme and tomatoes.

In this month's feature, we're focusing on how to grow baby leaf salads, strawberries and oregano. Next month, we will cover tomatoes and peppers.



Here's how...

● You will need

Containers, bagged compost, a trowel, and a watering can with a 'rose' (spray end).

● Choosing containers

These can be anything from plastic pots to decorative troughs or old sinks. The only rules are that the containers must be at least 20cm across and more than 15cm deep, and they must have drainage holes.

● Where to put them

Most veg, herbs and fruit do best in sunny, sheltered spots, but summer salads do well in semi-shade. One great advantage of pots is that you can move them around to suit the season and the crop. Watering will be the main task, so make this easy by positioning your pots near a tap.

● Filling containers

Buy 'multi-purpose' or 'container' compost, and fill the container to within 2-3cm of the rim, firming it lightly but not ramming it in. Don't use garden soil – it packs down too hard and also contains weed seeds.

● Watering and feeding

The roots of plants in containers can't go far to search for food and water, so make sure the soil stays moist, which can mean watering daily. Quick crops such as salads won't usually need feeding, but other vegetables will. Use a 'liquid feed' or a 'slow-release' fertiliser. Both are easy to find in garden centres. Mediterranean herbs don't need much watering, and feeding established plants in spring should suffice.



What to plant now... BABY LEAF SALADS

Home-grown salads can have an amazing variation in colour, texture and taste. Try familiar ones such as lettuce or rocket, or experiment with packets of 'salad mixtures' – such as the one that is free with this copy of *delicious*. and contains pak choi, rocket, mizuna, mibuna, cima di rapa, green mustard and red mustard. You'll find that one packet goes a very long way.

- Sow seeds over the surface of the compost in the pot (see top tips, p108), allowing roughly 1-2cm between seeds, then cover with a thin (0.5cm) layer of compost and sprinkle gently with water.
- Now keep the surface of the container moist. When the seedlings are tall and strong enough, take the 'rose' off the watering can and water under the leaves using the spout.
- Start harvesting when the leaves are about 8-10cm tall – in summer this can take as little as six weeks. Harvest just what you need straight away, either picking off individual leaves or cutting across patches with scissors leaving stumps 2cm high. Keep watering, and the plants should regrow once or twice more.
- Once you have made your first harvest, start off a second batch of seeds in another pot. You'll need three or four sowings to ensure a continual supply throughout the summer.

VARIETIES TO TRY In addition to your free seeds, try 'Crunchy Lettuce Leaves', 'Continental Salad', 'Bright & Spicy Salad' (Thompson & Morgan, see stockist info, opposite).

TROUBLESHOOTING Holes in your salad?

Slugs and snails can demolish seedlings and eat holes in larger leaves. Keep them away by using bands of copper tape or standing pots on copper-coated mats (from Agralan or The Organic Gardening Catalogue, see stockists info, opposite). Slugs and snails hate crossing copper as it gives them a mild electric shock.





What to plant now... **STRAWBERRIES**

Strawberries are the easiest fruit to grow in pots and, picked really ripe, they're likely to be the sweetest you've ever tasted. Choose 'everbearing' types (crops that produce throughout summer and early autumn) so you can keep picking odd handfuls.

- Grow strawberries in individual 20cm pots (or buy a special strawberry planter which stacks plants upwards and makes better use of space) and

make sure you give them a sunny spot. You'll need five to 10 plants for a worthwhile crop – buying by mail order is generally best and cheapest.

Strawberry plants will usually have bare roots, so you'll need to plant them straightaway. Afterwards, water the young plants just enough to keep them moist – don't overdo it, they don't like to be waterlogged.

- Once the plants form fruit, water more frequently and feed with a tomato liquid feed (from garden centres) once a week.
- When you see berries that are red all over – wait, don't pick them quite yet. Give them one more day to develop their full flavour.

VARIETIES TO TRY 'Mara du Bois' has the aromatic flavour of alpine strawberries (Ken Muir, see stockists on p106). 'Tarpan' and 'Pikan' have attractive pink flowers (Mr Fothergill's, see stockist info on p106). Or try 'Albion' (Suttons, see stockist info on p106).

TROUBLESHOOTING **Birds after the berries?** Blackbirds are the worst offenders – they love red berries. A net supported away from the fruit (so they can't peck through it) is the answer and some strawberry planters come with nets and supports. However, this problem occurs mainly with midsummer crops. The fruit on everbearing strawberries, which ripens later, is often not attacked, because the birds have so much else in the hedgerows to eat.

Top tips

CAN I PUT DIFFERENT CROPS IN ONE POT?

You can, but it's often simpler to grow them separately, then you don't have to worry about one crop swamping the other, and as one goes past its best, it can easily be replaced.

THE BEST WAY TO SOW SEEDS

Don't shake the seeds directly out of the packet. It's easier to put some seeds in the palm of one hand and take pinches to sow with your other hand.

HOW TO POT PLANTS

Use a trowel to make a hole large enough to take the roots of your plant. Hold the plant in the hole while you firm the soil around it. For most plants, the stem should be sitting at the same level as it was in the original pot.



What to plant now...**OREGANO**

This useful aromatic herb is easy to grow and has pretty flowers which bees and butterflies love. One or two plants are all you need, and they will regrow year after

year, so it's simplest to buy them as young plants from a nursery or garden centre.

- Look carefully at the label, as there are several types. 'Oregano' (also called wild marjoram) and 'Greek oregano' are said to have the best flavour, but 'Pot marjoram' is similar in appearance and can often be used in the same way.

- Make sure your containers are well-drained. It can help to put a layer of small stones or broken up polystyrene in the bottom before you fill them, and to add a few handfuls of grit to the compost.

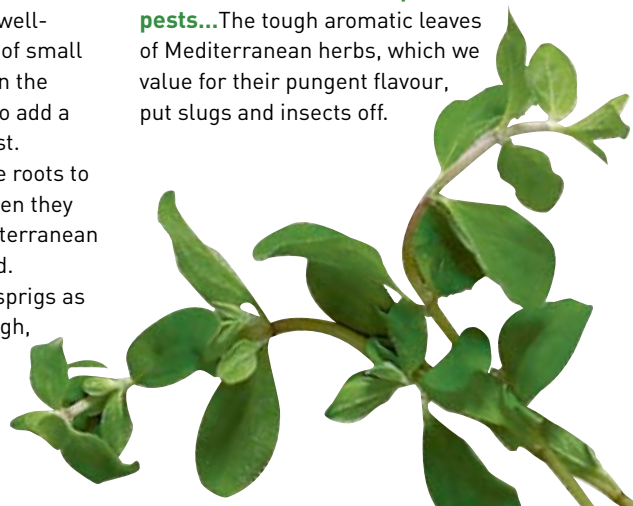
- After planting, water around the roots to settle the plants in and repeat when they get dry, but don't overdo it – Mediterranean herbs don't like to be waterlogged.

- You can start harvesting small sprigs as soon as the plants are large enough, and carry on throughout the

summer and autumn, as long as you leave more shoots to regrow than you pick. In autumn, cut back straggly stems to within 6cm of their base.

VARIETIES TO TRY Greek oregano, Oregano (wild marjoram), 'Hot and spicy' (Jekka's Herb Farm, see stockists on p106).

TROUBLESHOOTING **No problems with pests...**The tough aromatic leaves of Mediterranean herbs, which we value for their pungent flavour, put slugs and insects off.



Plot to plate

BABY SALAD LEAVES

The variety of salad leaves means they go with just about any flavour. Peppery rocket and mizuna complement strong flavours such as oily fish or chilli. Subtle, grassy lamb's lettuce works well with roasted meats, while the sweet, earthy flavours of young spinach complement blue cheeses, bacon and avocado.

- Don't use a knife on salad leaves – leave them whole, or tear before serving.
- Pour the dressing into the serving bowl and gently pile the leaves on top, and toss together when ready to eat.

STRAWBERRIES

Strawberries are good with cream, basil, mint, black pepper, meringues, raspberries, custard, sponge, chocolate and balsamic vinegar.

- Pick strawberries when they're very ripe. If you don't eat them straight away, chill but serve at room temperature.
- Try this, halve some strawberries, put into a bowl, sprinkle with a good glug of Cointreau and leave for 20 minutes. Serve with vanilla-flavoured whipped cream.

OREGANO

Oregano (and marjoram) goes with tomatoes, grilled fish, chicken, lamb, lemons, aubergines, beans and peppers.

- Oregano and marjoram are brilliant summer flavours, but they are hard to buy so it's worth growing your own.
- Oregano or marjoram will transform a home-made pizza into an Italian delicacy.

Buffalo mozzarella, broad bean and young leaf salad [v]

Blanch 300g podded broad beans in a large pan of salted, boiling water for 1-2 minutes. Drain, plunge into cold water, then drain again. Squeeze the beans gently with your thumb and forefinger to remove the tough skins (you don't have to do this but the beans are a spectacular green underneath) and set aside. Mix together 2 garlic cloves, crushed, the juice of 1 lemon, 5 tbsp rapeseed oil, some chopped fresh mint and some salt for a dressing. Arrange 100g young salad leaves, the beans and 500g buffalo mozzarella, torn, on plates and pour over the dressing. Serves 4.

For more recipes for strawberries, salad leaves or oregano, visit deliciousmagazine.co.uk

Buffalo mozzarella, broad bean and young leaf salad



I GROW MY OWN...

Philip Saunders is a partner in an optometry practice in Basingstoke, Hampshire. He started growing his own vegetables in January 2008, after buying a small plot of land from his local district council.

Philip says: "One day I was looking out of the window and I noticed a chunk of 'verge' – basically, some unused land in between my garden and the footpath. I asked the local council if I could buy it. After two years of negotiations, they agreed, and I had 100 square metres of vegetable patch. My first lot of broad beans were eaten by mice, but in the last 18 months I've grown turnips, peas, sweetcorn, cabbages, French beans and all different kinds of squashes and brassicas.

"One of the best things about having a vegetable plot is that you can grow things that are difficult to find in the supermarkets. One of my favourite plants to grow is a kale called *Couve galega* – I'm half Portuguese, and this kale is an essential ingredient in *calde verde*, a traditional Portuguese soup.

"As an optometrist, I have to work in a windowless room all day, so gardening is a way for me to get some much-needed fresh air. My dad's a keen veg grower, too – he has a plot of land in Portugal. We swap plants, seeds and tips with our friends, and we've always got plenty of fresh produce to eat."

Planting a veggie bed

A small, narrow veggie bed isn't nearly as daunting as a large vegetable plot. Packed full, it can be amazingly productive and an attractive garden feature in its own right. Crops that grow in containers will usually do equally well – if not better – in a bed. Good value for space and taste are:

- All sorts of salads, pea shoots and edible pods
- Baby root crops such as beetroot and carrots, or long tapering shallots
- Short-lived leafy herbs, such as parsley, chervil, dill and coriander.



Here's how

● You will need

All the tools you should need are a trowel, small 'border' fork, hoe, and a watering can with a 'rose'. To set up the bed, you'll need a garden spade and fork, and carpentry tools if you are edging them with wood.

● Where to put it

Choose a sunny, sheltered spot. You could convert an existing flower bed, sacrifice a strip of lawn, or build a raised bed on poor soil or a gravelly surface.

● How big?

A maximum width of 1.2m makes the centre of the bed within most people's reach, and a length of no more than 3m makes it easy to walk round. It doesn't have to be rectangular – curves and triangles can make better use of an existing space.

● Bed edges

Mark out the bed with string and pegs. Raised beds are essential if you're building on poor ground. There are easy-to-construct kits in a range of sizes (from Harrod Horticultural, see stockists on p106). Edges 15cm deep will be enough to keep a ground level bed tidy; beds built up on poor ground should be 45cm deep.

● Preparing the ground

If the ground's been cultivated before, you just need to fork over the bed to a depth of 15-20cm and remove any weed roots. If you're converting a lawn, dig the bed and bury the turf at least 15cm deep (worth the hard work, as it will feed your plants as it decays). If you're building up a raised bed on poor ground, buy topsoil to fill it. In all cases add a soil improver (from garden centres) and spread in a 3-5cm layer over the bed.



What to plant now...

PEA SHOOTS AND EDIBLE PODS

Tender, sweet-tasting pea shoots with their curly tendrils are not difficult to grow. Any pea variety will give shoots, but if you buy seeds of a dwarf mangetout, you can let some plants grow on to give a few edible pods.

● Sow any time from mid-March to the end of June, but early sowings grow best. Rake over the soil to break up any clods and level the surface. With a trowel, make small holes, 2cm

deep and 15cm apart, along a row and drop 3 seeds into each. Two or three rows 15-20cm apart should give you a good harvest. Water if the soil's dry, and once the seedlings emerge, remove any weed seedlings by hand or with a hoe.

● Once the plants are 20-30cm high, start pinching off (harvesting) the top 5cm of the pea shoots. Keep watered in dry weather and you should be able to pick for one month. Shoots you miss will flower and give you a small harvest of pods.

VARIETIES TO TRY 'Dwarf Sweet Green', 'Delikata' (Mr Fothergill's). See p106.

TROUBLESHOOTING Peas seeds disappeared?

The culprits are probably mice. Put out covered mousetraps, so birds don't get caught. If you don't like using traps, sow the seeds in pots on a windowsill (three or four seeds to a 4cm pot) and plant the clumps out across the plot.

What to plant now...SHALLOTS

Expensive to buy, but almost foolproof to grow, shallots have a crisp texture and distinct flavour. The long slender types are particularly flavourful.

● Buy a bag of shallot 'sets' (these look just like the bulbs you buy to eat, but will be free from disease and suitable for growing in the UK).

● Rake over the bed, make a slit with a trowel and push in a 'set' so that its tip just protrudes. Space them in a block about 20cm apart each way. Soon each set will start to sprout from the top, and will go on to divide into a clump of up to a dozen shallots. All you need do is remove the weeds from between the clumps, and water them in dry weather.

● You can harvest them as soon as they are large enough, and use them fresh together with their green stems. However, for the traditional shallot bulbs, wait until their tops have died down, lift them with a fork and leave them in the sun to dry.

VARIETIES TO TRY 'Hative de Niort' (Suttons), 'Pesandor' (Suttons and Thompson & Morgan). See stockists info on p106.

TROUBLESHOOTING Rotting roots

Don't plant shallots in the same place on the bed year after year – this encourages a disease which rots the roots.

What to plant now...

BABY BEETROOT

Freshly pulled young beetroot are sweet and tender, and you can try varieties with yellow or white flesh, or amazing rings of pink and white. Beetroot leaves are edible too – small young leaves add colour to salads, larger ones can be steamed.

- Sow any time from April to early July. Rake over the soil until flat, fine and crumbly. Make a small slit 1cm deep across the bed with the corner of the hoe or trowel. Dribble water along it if the soil is dry, then space the seeds out about 1.5cm apart.

- Put in a label to mark where and what you've sown, cover the seeds with soil and firm it gently. One row in a 1.2m bed yields about 25 baby beet.

- Once the seedlings have emerged, thin them out until they're 3-4cm apart (you may find them in clumps, because the 'seeds' are actually seed casings containing several seeds).

The beets will be ready to harvest after 12 weeks, but you can leave them to grow larger for a month or more.

VARIETIES TO TRY 'Pablo' for red (Suttons and Thompson & Morgan); 'Burpee's Golden' (yellow), 'Albina Vereduna' (white) and 'Chioggia' (pink stripe, all Thompson & Morgan). See stockist information on p106.

TROUBLESHOOTING Beet seedlings nibbled? Slugs or snails will be to blame. Pre-empt them by laying slug traps, starting before the beetroot seedlings emerge.



Beetroot and mint jelly

Plot to plate

BABY BEETROOT

Beetroot goes with soured cream, chives, garlic, cumin, potatoes, mint, horseradish, carrots, anchovies, lamb, smoked sausages and burgers.

- For roasted baby beetroots, cut off the tops leaving 2.5cm of stalks, then wash, but be gentle so as to not break the skins. Put in a roasting tin and drizzle with olive oil and season. Bake at 180°C/fan160°C/gas 4 for 1 hour.

- Wear rubber gloves when peeling raw beetroot, as the juice will stain your hands.

- Summer salad – mix grated raw beetroot with grated raw carrot, sliced spring onions, crushed walnuts and toss together with a French dressing.

PEA SHOOTS AND PODS

Pea shoots are delicious in many salads.

Pea pods go with ham, bacon, leeks, onions, mint, cream, prawns, white fish, Parmesan or Grana Padano and baby spinach.

- If you pick pea shoots and they look a bit tired before they make it into a salad, put them in a large bowl of iced water for 1 hour and they will perk up.

- Summer salad – toss together a handful of pea shoots, rocket and baby spinach leaves with a lemon dressing and shavings of fresh Pecorino.

- Young fresh pods are tender, sweet and delicious raw. Halve them lengthways and toss through a crisp green salad before serving.

Beetroot and mint jelly [V]

Peel and grate about 450g (3-4 medium) beetroot into a bowl. Finely chop 4 garlic cloves and stir into the beetroot. Transfer to a large pan with 250ml cider vinegar, 250ml apple juice, 200ml apple pectin (or 1 tbsp of the powdered version, from Tesco or Sainsbury's), 250g granulated sugar and 1 tsp salt. Bring to a simmer and cook for 40-45 minutes. It should be thickened and coat the back of a wooden spoon. Remove from the heat. Roughly chop 50g fresh mint leaves and stir into the pan. Transfer to sterilised jars and cool. Eat immediately or keep in a cool place for up to 6 months. Makes 600g.



For more great recipes for beetroot, shallots, pea shoots and pods, visit deliciousmagazine.co.uk

Herbs around the garden

Perennial herbs (ones that carry on growing from year to year) are simple to grow and terrific value. They're also an ideal grow-your-own crop as the volatile oils in herb leaves are easily destroyed by handling and storing, so they're at their best when picked fresh. Those that are easy-going enough to fit in a flower border, or the corner of a garden, include:

- Shrubby herbs, such as thyme, rosemary, sage and oregano. A warm border alongside the house or a path can be ideal, they also do well in pots (see p107). In spring or summer they have flowers, which the bees love.
- Leafy herbs, such as fennel, tarragon, sorrel, chives and lovage die down in winter and produce clumps of shoots from ground level each spring. They need more fertile soil, and can do well in a flower border – tall ones such as lovage and fennel at the back, chives along the edge.



Here's how...

● You will need

A spade, fork, trowel, watering can for planting; secateurs for trimming.

● How much space?

You need to allow at least 60cm by 60cm for large herbs, and at least 30cm by 30cm for smaller ones – the plant label should give their height and spread. If you're planting among existing plants, allow a little more space.

● Preparing the ground

Prepare the ground by forking over so that the soil is loose to 15-20cm depth, and remove all weed roots. If you find this hard work, it is a sign that the herb's roots will struggle too. Add a soil improver (from a garden centre) for leafy herbs, and grit for shrubby ones.

● Planting

One plant is often all you need, but three small plants placed in a closely spaced group will give a quicker harvest. After planting, water around the roots to settle in, then keep watering in dry weather until growing strongly. Herbs grown in pots can be planted from March to September, but spring is best. Those planted in summer will need regular watering until autumn.



What to plant now... FENNEL

Fennel is a tall (1.2m) elegant plant with feathery leaves. It forms domes of tiny flowers that will produce strong-flavoured seeds in autumn – a bonus for the kitchen.

- A sunny spot and reasonably fertile soil are all fennel needs to thrive. You could put it towards the back of a border, but its architectural qualities also allow it to stand alone – by a door or gatepost, or as a focal point. Allow it at least a 60cm by 60cm space.

- Once established, it needs little care. You

should be able to pick a few feathery leaves before the end of the summer, but don't ravage it – leave more shoots to grow on than you take to eat. By the second year it should produce seeds, which can be harvested when the heads are dry.

VARIETIES TO TRY The common fennel has blue-green leaves, but those of 'Bronze Fennel' are strikingly burnished. Both are easy to find in garden centres, or mail order (from Jekka's Herb Farm, see stockist info on p106). The fennel bulbs used as a vegetable are a different plant entirely, and are much trickier to grow.

TROUBLESHOOTING Sticky shoots and leaves? Greenfly love fennel. The insects usually start at the shoots tips first, so try to catch them before large colonies build up. Pinch out the affected parts or knock the insects off with a jet of water.



What to plant now... ROSEMARY

Finding space for rosemary in the garden is easy as it grows into such a well-behaved and attractive bush.

- It likes a sunny, sheltered, well-drained spot – a bed alongside a wall or on the edge of a patio can be ideal. Allow at least a 60cm by 60cm space. Once established, it needs little care and you can pick sprigs all year round.

VARIETIES TO TRY The common rosemary has pale blue flowers, but varieties with darker blooms are good in the kitchen, too.

Growing along a fence

Home-grown fruit tastes incomparably better than fruit from shops because you can pick it when it's really ripe. It doesn't have to survive on the supermarket shelf – it only has to make it up the garden path!

Boundary walls and fences make ready-made supports for soft fruit (such as berries and currants), or you could train plants over an arch or up a trellis screen. Some types are not too fussy about soil, and they can look stunning when in flower and fruit. Good value for space and taste are:

- Loganberries and tayberries (which look something like large raspberries), cultivated blackberries (ones without thorns), and the exotic Japanese wineberry with its decorative stems and aromatic fruit.
- Redcurrants, white currants and gooseberries can all be trained against a fence (although not blackcurrants because of the way they grow).



Here's how...

● You will need

A fork, spade, secateurs, wire and ties for training the stems.

● Where to put them

Most fruit gives the best yields and sweetest crops in a sunny spot, but redcurrants and blackberries will cope well with a shady spot. Avoid ground that is prone to getting waterlogged.

● How much space?

Allow a 60cm width along a 2.5m length of wall or fence for cane fruits (such as raspberries and blackberries), and choose the least vigorous varieties. Redcurrants, white currants and gooseberries can have as little as a 1m spread, and are better behaved so can be grown alongside a path.

● Preparing the ground

Dig over a 60-90cm square patch to remove weed roots. Fork in soil improver (from a garden centre).

● Where and when to buy

Garden centres often stock some soft fruit in containers. However, mail order seed companies and specialised fruit nurseries have a much better range, and they send plants out in late winter or early spring when it is the best time to plant.

GAP PHOTOS/PAUL DEBOIS, PHOTOLIBRARY



Plot to plate

BERRIES

Redcurrants, blackcurrants, gooseberries and blackberries are fantastic in creamy summer and autumn desserts, pies and tarts. Also tart or sharp berries go well with lamb, game, mackerel and smoked fish.

- Fresh berries freeze well, simply open-freeze on baking trays until solid, then pack into plastic boxes.
- Berries are great to have growing as you can just pluck a handful to decorate desserts and cakes.

Blackberry and currant compote

Wash 500g mixed berries (we used blackberries, redcurrants, blackcurrants and white currants) and put in a large, heavy-based saucepan with about 40g caster sugar and 3 tbsp crème de cassis. Slowly bring to the boil, then gently simmer, covered, for 7-10 minutes. Carefully taste the syrup – it should be just sweet enough but not too sweet. Cool and serve over ice cream. Makes about 750g. Also freezes well for up to 3 months.

Blackberry and currant compote



For more great recipes for summer berries, visit deliciousmagazine.co.uk