

Harvested in Britain



**A year in the life of
Britain's horticultural harvest**



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With more than 300 different crops grown in the UK, the year is a never-ending cycle for British growers, ensuring that whatever the season, there is plenty of home-grown fruit, vegetables, flowers and plants to choose from.

This Guide is brought to you by AHDB Horticulture – a division of the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB).

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The turn of the year

Winter into spring

It's January, the days are cold and short and, to most of us, the land seems hard. Yet from Cornwall to Scotland, in all but the worst of the weather, British growers are working to harvest a surprising variety of fresh vegetables.

Brassicas and root vegetables are the mainstay of the winter harvest. The Christmas peak is over but the supply of Brussels sprouts is still in full flow from the horticultural heartlands of Lincolnshire, Kent and the West Midlands, along with hardy types of cabbage, such as Savoy and January King.



Meanwhile, cauliflower is being cut in southern counties, including Cornwall, as well as Lincolnshire. Planning a schedule of varieties that are ready to harvest at different times and spreading production

around the regions, makes them available from British growers year round.



Carrots, parsnips and leeks are also harvested in winter. While the crops finished growing in the autumn, carrots and parsnips will keep fresh if left in the ground.

Carrot fields are covered in a thick layer of straw, to safeguard against damage from frost. Parsnips are also 'strawed', not so much for protection, as frost actually sweetens their flavour but to keep soil friable so the crop can be safely lifted. Most varieties of leek are hardy and happy to stay where they are without protection whatever the weather.

January is brightened by the first of the pale pink, sweet stems of forced rhubarb. Available for just a few weeks, the 'crowns' have already spent two or three years outside in the field before being dug up and replanted in heated sheds in November, where they are kept in the dark until harvest. Rhubarb can also be forced in the field under black plastic covers, for cutting between March and May.

Some crops are grown under protection no matter what time of year, in structures

where conditions can be precisely controlled. These include mushrooms in purpose-built growing sheds and pot herbs and lettuces in glasshouses, which are sown, grown and harvested on a continuous cycle. Under glass, some crops are now being harvested earlier than was ever previously possible, thanks to sophisticated new techniques and equipment. For instance, supplementary lighting allows tomato growers to pick every week of the year, while cucumbers are cut from January to November by replanting the crop once or twice a season. Even chilli and sweet peppers are harvested as early as March.

Nor is winter devoid of colour from British flowers and pot plants. Daffodils are in full sway, along with anemones, lisianthus and forced tulips, while pot chrysanthemums and orchids are available across the seasons.



The first fruits

Spring into summer

As winter melts into spring, the first berries of the year are ripe for picking.

Where strawberries were once the fruit of high summer, their availability and quality has been transformed by bringing the plants under cover. The crops produced in grow bags or pots of soilless substrate in glasshouses, where the temperature can be kept at a constant level, can be ready to harvest from as early as March until late December. Most strawberries, however, are now grown under temporary plastic tunnels, which shelter the fruit from rain.



The same is true for raspberries, which also need protection to prevent the fruits being damaged by the wind. Some raspberries in Scotland, grown for freezing or processing, are more often picked by machines.

The blackberries now available in shops, are picked from commercially grown varieties bred to produce larger, sweeter berries both earlier and later than their wild counterparts. The season begins in June and continues until November.

Blueberries, a relatively new crop for UK growers, are harvested over a similar period, the later picked fruit coming from Scotland.





Another fruit crop that has been moved under cover is cherries.

New varieties that don't grow as tall as traditional trees can be covered with polythene rain shelters

before the flowers emerge and until after fruit is picked. That means British cherries are now on the market from June until September.

Plenty of new-season vegetable crops make their stage entrance in spring too. One of the most anticipated is asparagus. Growers in the south of England start to harvest in early to mid-April, finishing late June to give the perennial plants the time they need to recover for the following year. Those who cover part of their crop with plastic cloches or polythene tunnels can bring the crop in earlier, by three to four weeks. This is achieved by using underground heating in a small area, which will see spears ready from early February.

Selection of a special variety and research into production systems is allowing one UK farmer to produce asparagus for an autumn harvest too.

April also sees the first of the field-grown salad leaves and lettuce, while the end of May heralds the arrival of outdoor celery.



Spring into summer (continued)


Depending on the variety and where they are grown, British potatoes are usually harvested from May. Potatoes are often categorised according to their season. For example, varieties such as Rocket or Maris Bard are 'earlies' or 'new potatoes', as they are planted in the winter, ready for harvesting in the spring or early summer and often have delicate skins.



The season for broccoli, which is also known as Calabrese, starts in May, ending with the Scottish crop in November.

Tender new-season carrots, still crowned by their foliage, are another summer treat available from June, together with courgettes harvested by British growers until October.





The harvest of Garden peas, which are specifically grown for freezing, starts in early June. The UK is the largest producer of frozen peas in Europe and once picked, they have to reach the factory and be frozen in less than 150 minutes. The harvesting machines will work around the clock until August to bring the crop in. You can also buy fresh peas during this period if you prefer to pod your own.

As the supply of daffodils starts to tail off, flower growers begin to pick outdoor tulips in April, although forced tulips will have been available since November. Some fields of daffodil bulbs will be lifted in Cornwall, starting in June. The bulbs are dried, cleaned and graded before being packed for sale to gardeners or other daffodil growers in the autumn.

Grown in glasshouses, column stocks are all set to be harvested from the end of April until August, with lilies ready from May and pinks at their peak in May and June.



In full swing

Summer into autumn

With the arrival of summer, all the vegetables that were sown or planted in spring, come into their own.

About a third of the British onion crop is grown from 'sets' that are ready to lift from mid-July. The rest, produced from seed, are harvested in late August and September.

With the investment growers have made in drying and storage facilities, by using different storage methods, British onions are available nearly all year round. Onions from ambient storage are marketed from November to February, those from cold store are sold from February to June and onions from controlled atmosphere stores fill the June and July gap.

The first of the squashes are harvested in July, in all their glorious shapes and sizes. Once their skins have hardened and cured, they can be brought into store for sale during autumn and winter.





New-season leeks are in shops by early July. They are, however, available for 11 months of the year, not by being stored as onions and squashes are but because most varieties are hardy enough to remain in the ground through the winter until they are needed.

Purple Sprouting broccoli from spring sowings can make its first appearance in July, Brussels sprouts in August and Savoy cabbage in September, all will be harvested throughout autumn and winter.

Sweetcorn is highly dependent on light and warmth to reach its best, in a good summer it's picked from July to October.

Maincrop potatoes, such as King Edward or Maris Piper, are harvested in late summer or early autumn when their skins are firm and set.

Most potatoes sold in the UK are maincrop and, with the help of modern storage techniques, are usually available from September to May.



Summer into autumn (continued)

The apple harvest gets going in August, beginning with the Discovery variety, which is in shops for just a short period. There are more than 20 main varieties of apple grown, as well as a host of heritage varieties sold through farmers' markets and farm shops. Most apples are picked in September or October. Some are chosen to be stored in carefully controlled conditions, which means English apples are now available until May.



Bramley cooking apples are harvested in August too, but are stored so they can be bought until the following July.

Half of all apples grown in Britain are, in fact, destined for the cider press. Most are of a type called 'Bittersweet' and are harvested from September to November with the aid of machines, which shake the fruit off the trees for pickers to collect.



August sees the first picking of Conference pears, the main variety grown in England, which, like apples, can be stored until May.

Plums are more of a transient pleasure. About half of all plums grown are Victoria, picked in August but later fruiting varieties make them available until October.

British-grown seasonal flowers are undergoing something of a resurgence at present, different types are more widely available than ever before.

Look out for UK-grown gladioli, dahlias, phlox, solidago and sunflowers through the summer.



The harvest continues

Autumn into winter

Autumn makes way for winter, punctuated by the orange cheer of pumpkins at Halloween. Around 10 million are grown in the UK every year, most of which are carved into lanterns for the October Festival. Harvesting kicks off in September and, if the weather has worked in the growers' favour with the right amount of rain and sun, the crop will have ripened in time.

As the last of the late summer flower crops come to an end, November ushers in the glorious scent of Isles of Scilly multi-headed narcissi. The UK grows more daffodils than anywhere else in the world. Production is split between the south-west of England, eastern England and Scotland, with the mild, frost-free climate in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly favouring early production.

The main outdoor Cornish flower crop begins around Christmas and in earnest by mid-January, often using new early flowering varieties. Flowers grown in the eastern counties of Lincolnshire and Norfolk then take over, followed by Scotland, which sees the supply through to the end of April.



Tulips make an appearance in November too, grown hydroponically and forced into flower by a combination of a period in a cold store to encourage roots to develop, before being moved into a glasshouse.

Autumn and winter are also lit up by cyclamen, grown for the windowsill or patio, while December is the month given over to poinsettias.



Left to their own devices, the bracts of poinsettia would assume their red or white colour in spring, stimulated by a period of nights that are longer than days. By using special 'blackout' covers in the glasshouse, growers are able to give the crop this period of long nights earlier in autumn, which ensures plants are in their prime in time for the festive season.



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