

# SPRING



GATHER

A seasonal journal for  
lovers of flowers

Writing & images by  
Grace Alexander





## GATHER SPRING 2023.

Through Gather, I publish digital, bi-monthly seasonal journals, capturing the changing seasons in flowers, landscapes, food and forms. If you would like to share this journal with friends, please do feel free to direct them to my website [[gracealexanderflowers.co.uk](http://gracealexanderflowers.co.uk)], where they can sign up and download their copy.

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## AN INTRODUCTION

Grace Alexander knows a bit about the need for escapism. When she isn't packing seeds, turning a back lawn into a kitchen garden or debating the pros and cons of dinnerplate dahlias (just *too* big?), she is an expert witness psychologist in the UK family courts. The days might be a bit grim, but the weekends are filled with dogs, tea, flowers and the wondrous experience of life in a Somerset thatched cottage set within an English country garden.

She has been gardening forever, off and on. What she lacks in technical brilliance, she makes up for with experience and enthusiasm. Her growing space (about a quarter of an acre, tiny) was all developed from scratch in 2013 and has been going from strength to strength ever since. It includes an orchard, a flower field, meadows and a kitchen garden.

Grace is, believe it or not, a registered and certified seed-merchant. She has been growing flowers for sale (either as flowers or for seed) since 2013 and launched her passion project, Gather with Grace Alexander, in August 2020.

She is also the author of the best-selling book, *Grow & Gather*, and her work has been featured in places like The Guardian, Gardens Illustrated, and House & Garden.

She is not a person of half measures so she doesn't really have hobbies or interests, she has obsessions and all-consuming passions. Currently, Japanese textiles and dyeing, unusual winter squash varieties, intentionally under-exposed photography, and building hazel domes for old roses.

Always dogs though, always.









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## PREFACE

The traditional New Year is not the start of the year for me. The fresh start feeling is reserved for the moment that spring arrives. The cleansing, the rejuvenation, the very sensation of being alive that bubbles up in spring is so powerful and unique that one wonders why we ever suggested that January 1st should mark anything significant at all.

This time is all the more wonderful for those who live for the garden. There have been hints and teasers (the snowdrops and the hellebores) but this is the time for growth to surge. The ground gives for the life and all we have to do is to guide and curate it.

This journal is a love letter to this magical season.

Because it is so easy to be in love in spring.











# MARCH

*March / Finally it is March / I spy the  
white of the buds on the honesty / There  
are violets in the grass / On the bank at  
the top of the lane there is a patch of black  
widow irises / The turn of the month seems  
to mark the start of something new*







# 01

## WEEDING. OR THE WRONG SORT OF GROWTH

I am not generally one for ranting at screens, but Charles Dowding's YouTube videos can reduce me to agonies within minutes. He stands, hoe in hand, in an immaculate canvas of perfectly clean compost and tells me that I really must keep on top of the weeding. To weed before the weeds are showing.

I know that, I say. I *know* that. But there are only so many hours in the day, I am doing my best, and something had to slip, and that was the nettles and the buttercups that have slowly crept across the beds.

Most of yesterday was spent trying to remedy this, engaged in the Sisyphian task of returning my beds to something that I could actually plant into. There are some weeds that I find

really satisfying to get out; I could dig out nettles all day. But it's the little ones that have root networks that come out with big clumps of soil. Tufts of grass that leave dents and make for heavy weeding buckets.

Right now, I just have to keep going. To not succumb to despair and also to be ruthless.

One of the things that I find so hard about no dig and weeding generally is that my ground contains three things.

- a) Established plants that I intended to be there and I want to be there.
- b) Self sown plants that I know will be good and strong and earlier than my intentionally sown ones.
- c) Weeds.



I can't just put black landscape fabric or five inches of compost over everything because I have lots of things in there that I want to keep (a & b). There is nothing for it but to get in there and do it by hand. I don't howl at Monty Don and his raised bed plank to stop him stepping on the soil, but I do silently roll my eyes. If you are getting in there and weeding big areas, I defy anyone to do it without stepping on the soil.

What follows is my somewhat unglamorous but very practical guide to spring weeding.

#### BREAK IT DOWN INTO MANAGEABLE CHUNKS

Right now, there are weeds as far as the eye can see. Milli and I talked about this in our interview for Gather (if you're a Gather member, you'll find this in my library of interviews on the private blog); breaking a big area down into manageable areas means that not only is it easier to get going, but you can have a point where you stop and

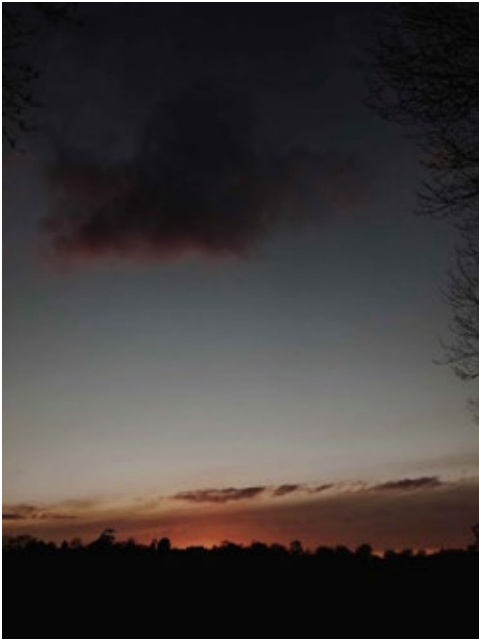
you've actually achieved something. This morning, I am going to finish the Dyer's Garden. It does have a perfect row of self sown ammi in it. Not sure whether I should dare to move that... Oh god. You see? So difficult.

#### THINK ABOUT THE PRE - AND THE POST

It is more satisfying if you are weeding when you know how you are going to get rid of the weeds. A council green bin, a trip to the tip booked, a compost heap ready to be filled. Have your favourite tools to hand. Make sure you have a solid breakfast. Weeding is a process and the physical act of getting the plants out of the ground is only part of it.

#### MAKE IT A JOY

I find that I get distracted. I am weeding and thinking. I am thinking and planning. I am weeding and I suddenly remember that I haven't sent that email, put in that loaf of bread, sown that seed. It'll take two seconds.



I'll just go and do that.  
And half an hour later I am still doing that something else, bucket, gloves and daisy grubber abandoned. I need to be focused. Audiobooks tend to work for me, but anything that gives you what you need is right will help you keep going.

Need a bit of peace and quiet? Leave your phone indoors and step into the space the repetitive act gives you.  
Need a lift? Find a Spotify playlist

that gives you cheer. Northern Soul works wonders for me, but each to their own. Look it up if you have never heard of it, and then tell me how you felt about fifteen minutes of 'A Town called Malice' at full volume.

If you have kept on top of things, then you might be able to do a bit of little-and-often, but at this time of year, I do need chunks of time in the field to get any sort of toehold. Commit. Take a cup of tea with you.





JOURNAL : MARCH

29 MARCH

A day of blessings. I wander in the field. I am torn between seeing the work and the weeds, and seeing the miracles and the marvels.

Asparagus. The first absolutely perfect spear of asparagus. The moon is huge and rises early. We walk the pig walk although the pigs have gone, and have been replaced by tiny lambs.

30 MARCH

The orchard's second mow. Carefully around the narcissi and the snakehead fritillaries which cluster around the base of the trees. They don't know that I have my eyes on that space because permaculture principles says that the ground at the base of trees is precious and I am wondering about putting vegetables there. Each blade of grass from the mow is scooped up and laid in the big compost bays. The heat that they give off kick starts the magical decomposition that makes the black gold that is compost.

31 MARCH

The sun is shining. The sky is oh so blue. I get my hands in the soil and I weed. I hoe and I pull. The difference between gardening and farming is more than scale; it is in the intimacy of the act. I touch and I nurture every inch of this ground. I know it and it knows me. I know the hard ground where we ran out of compost three years ago and it missed its deep mulching. Where the turf was lifted and the field bindweed still persists. The patch where the bronze fennel has self-sown. The raspberry that is making a bid for freedom by sending runners into the neighbouring pasture.

On a day like today, with the warmth of hope on my face, a spaniel asleep in the hammock, and the setters rolling on the daffodils, it is paradise.

# 02

## THE EQUINOX

The night and the day are equal in length,  
and the world is at the tipping point.

From this moment onwards, the spring  
gathers momentum. The light, the warmth,  
the growth pick up speed and we hurtle  
together towards this most energetic of times.

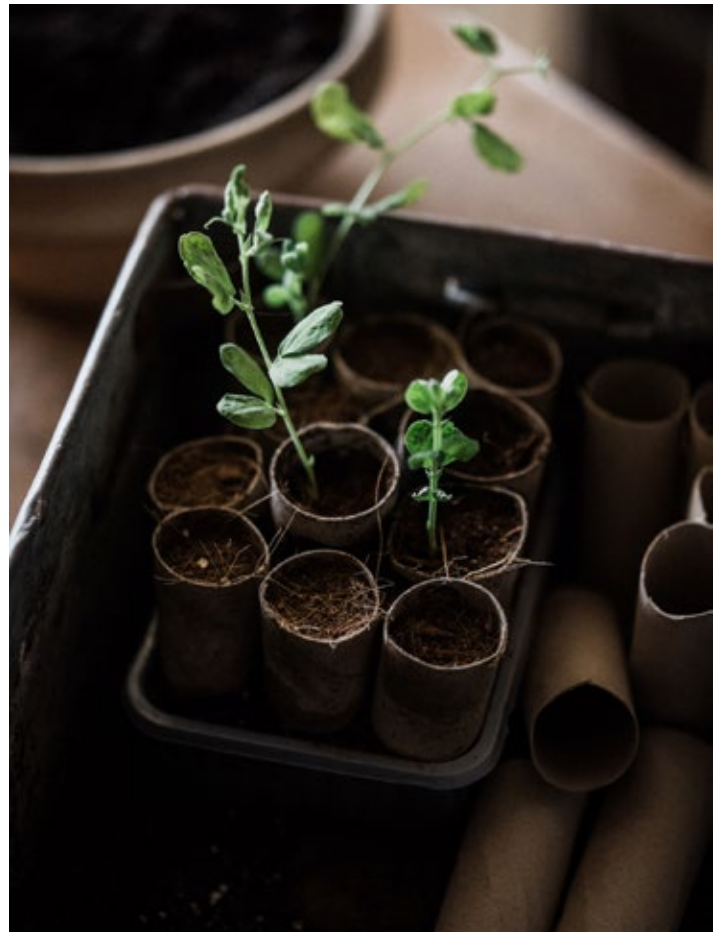
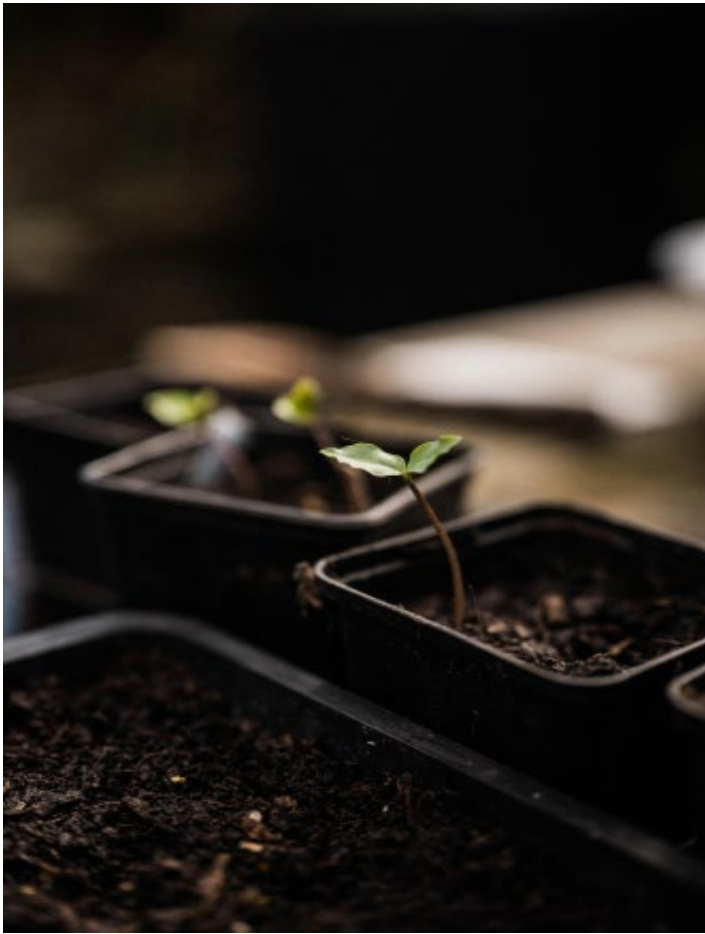
Now is the time to catch and harness the  
energy of the earth. Seeds sown around this  
time will do well, although the ground may  
still be a little cold. Take off your shoes and  
stand on the soil (the tradition is to pull  
down your trousers and sit on it, but let's  
keep a little dignity). If you feel a chill, sow  
under glass.

When the moment is right, the soil between  
your toes will suddenly feel, not cold, but  
alive somehow. If you don't want to take your  
shoes off at all, it isn't properly spring yet.

When you feel the thrill of the shift under  
the soles of your feet, sending tendrils of joy  
through your soul, you can start throwing  
seeds about with gay abandon. This is the  
moment.

Seize it.





*March is a funny month / Before the  
equinox, energy feels stored and potential,  
just waiting to be unleashed when the  
certainty of a sprung spring arrives / It is  
a month of preparation more than action  
so you could consider the following tasks /  
Always could, never should, in Gather*

## Jobs for March



## START SOWING

For every detail you need for verdant seed trays and a relaxed and successful sowing season, see my utterly comprehensive and fool-proof guide to seed sowing. It is free to Gather members, or you can buy it from the shop on my website.

With sowing this early do not put all your eggs in one basket, just a pinch here and there, and focus on the slow growers (definitely *Cobaea*), the most hardy, or those that need a bit of cold to get them going (larkspur).

## GETTING READY

Unless you are up North and/or under snow, the weeds will be growing. Glory in this, it is the earth coming back to life, but it is probably worth keeping an eye on where you are going to put your first hardy annuals. Run a hoe over it or cover it just to check the worst of the growth. Don't get obsessive over this though; those who weed early weed twice. The rate of growth in spring is so strong, it will probably need a good weed again before you actually do the sowing or planting out.

## PERENNIALS

If you took any cuttings at the end of last year, or have just been sheltering any hardy perennials from the worst of the winter weather, now is the time to get them out in the ground. If you put them out whilst they are just coming out of dormancy, they will get growing so much better that if you give them a shock when they are up and awake.



## SLUGS

Sweep any outdoor areas where you will be keeping seed trays or seedlings in pots before they are planted out. It will make such a difference to clear slug hiding places. I know that it is important to keep some perspective about the level of pain and tragedy in our modern day world, but I swear I have had my heart broken by a tray of seedlings being devoured in a night.

If you have a greenhouse, ditto. Lift pots, trays, boxes or watering cans. Slugs love damp dark corners and they are good at hiding. Get them out. On that note, get a bucket of hot water and wipe down the greenhouse glass. I was looking at mine the other day and it is positively green.

If you haven't ordered peat free seed compost, do so. I find the specialist suppliers (by which I mean Fertile Fibre or Dalefoot) to be vastly superior to anything at a garden centre. Your local proper plant nursery will also be able to give advice.

Most importantly, get up ten minutes earlier on a few days this month and just watch life returning. Winter can feel deep and long. By March, the end is very much in sight.

We've made it.



## APRIL

*Having sat on the moment of bursting for longer than is seemly, the Amelanchier is in full flower / Just a rooted twig pulled out of the edible hedge collection many years ago, it is now a beautiful multi-stemmed specimen / The ground around it is full of the rich, wine-red foliage of ravenswing, a black form of our native cow parsley / One blossom that is not out yet is the hawthorn / Even though the leaves are lush and green, the flowers are still in tight bud / It means that you cannot reliably consider spring to have sprung / There may be more chill to come*





## 03

## FLOWERS FROM SEED

The fact that something so small and so ordinary looking, some seemingly no bigger than speck of dust, can transform into something as utterly glorious as a plant smothered in blooms never ever grows old. There is such magic in this, I urge everyone to try it. There is simply no better way to surround yourself with abundance and beauty. Yet the process of getting seed to flower can feel a bit complicated until you have been through it a few times.

Firstly, whenever you feel you have a black thumb, when you think you aren't any good at gardening, look out of your window. See how many plants there are? How many weeds? Almost all of these will have grown from seed and they did it all without you. Mostly without any human intervention at all. All they did was to fall from the parent plant and land on some soil, and nature did the rest.

That said, there are slugs, there are unexpected frosts. Under-watering and over-watering. Old seed. I have had my heart broken this spring by a mouse that got into my greenhouse and took over half of my sweet peas. But there are ways of maximising your chances of success. I can't take every variable out of the equation, but I can give you the hope and confidence to at least rip open the seed packet and have a go. And without taking that step, you won't ever have the joy of a summer full of flowers.

A few things here – you will never get better germination rates or stronger plants than when the seed literally falls off a plant and grows where it lands. Lots of the flowers I grow will self-sow and pop up all over the place. I grow a huge number of opium poppies, or maybe they grow themselves, by just shaking the seed heads around.



If you want to use the direct sowing method (just sprinkling seed in the place you want the flowers, covering lightly with soil, and watering in) then make sure your soil is warm enough for the seeds to grow on strongly. How do you know when the soil is warm enough? The traditional way to do this is to pull your trousers down and sit on it with a bare bottom. If you can't feel a chill, it's time. I suggest you let nature take the temperature instead; if the ground is covered with germinating weed seeds, the moment has arrived.

If you sow too early outdoors, the seeds just sit there in the cold, wet ground. They are vulnerable to birds, slugs, rotting, and just generally being too miserable to burst into life. If you want to get a head start, or if your seeds are precious, get the seeds going indoors and put them out when the plants are strong and robust.

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## STARTING SEEDS INDOORS

For starting seed indoors, you will need:

- *Peat-free seed compost*
- *Seed trays, a module tray or small pots*
- *Labels and a pen or pencil that won't smudge or run when wet*
- *Seed*

1.

Fill the tray or pots all the way to the top (they'll sink a bit when you water them) and press down a little bit, not much, you don't want them to be compacted because the roots will need air pockets.

Sprinkle a few of the seeds on the top.

Give them lots of space. If they all germinate and they are too closely packed in, few will thrive. Can I suggest you sow only half the packet too? The chances are you won't need hundreds and hundreds of one variety of flower (there are generally a lot of seeds in a packet) and if you lose a tray to slugs or other disaster, you'll wish you kept some back for spares.



2. Sprinkle with a little bit of compost on top to cover. Very fine seeds don't need this. The rule of thumb is that seeds should be buried twice the depth of their width, so even a very fine layer of compost will be too deep for tiny seeds like *Aquilegia* or any of the poppies.

3. Label. Having trusted permanent markers and then finding that the ink has run, I now label everything twice. Once with a label stuck into the compost, and again with brown paper sticky tape on the side.

Add the date sown and source if you wish. I add a 'b' if the seed was sourced from a biodynamic supplier and sown on a flower day.

4. I always water from underneath with seed trays. Even with the greatest of care, watering from above will disturb the seeds. Fill a tray with water and put the tray in until the surface of the compost darkens.

5. If the seeds don't require light to germinate, (and it is worth researching this, delphiniums like the dark, *Nicotiana* need light for example) I tuck the trays into compost bags and put them in a warm place. The black inner keeps the seed trays warm

and moist and reduces the need for constant watering. If the compost starts to dry out and the texture goes a bit dusty, they will need watering from beneath again. Don't let the compost get soggy though, seeds can drown.

6. Check twice a day because when the first seeds start to show, they will need light. Move them immediately to a light place. Warmth matters much less now, although protect from frost. A light windowsill, a greenhouse, or a cold frame is perfect for the next stage of the seedlings growing on. Check for slugs if they are outdoors.

7. As soon as they are big enough to handle, carefully lift the seedlings out of the tray (sliding a butterknife or a pencil underneath helps, rather than tugging from the top) and put each seedling in its own 9cm pot of multipurpose compost. They will grow quite happily in this until they are big enough to put in the ground.

8. I keep a gardener's journal to keep track of sowing dates, seeds that did well, first and last frost dates and other things that I won't remember unless I write it down. I highly recommend this, not least because it gives you something to look back over when the season is done.

JOURNAL : APRIL

## 13 APRIL

Amongst the pheasants on the walk, we see wild ducks on the stream. The setters see them too but are far too slow in scrambling down the ravine to the water and the birds have long taken noisy flight by the time they get there. The girls look identical but they are polar opposites in character. They even swim differently, although it isn't really swimming given that the water is barely knee deep. Morag gets into the water and then sinks in a dignified manner so that her tummy and tail are submerged, for all the world like a hippopotamus, or a submarine in shallow water. Maud is all noise and bluster, she lives for excitement and she kicks up the water with her feet like toddler with new wellingtons, and drinks the droplets that she can catch. I think about complaining about the wet dogs, and then I remember February when they had to be washed with a hosepipe and dried in the cold every single day, and I don't.

## 26 APRIL

A heatwave. We eat pizza from the wood oven again, with shavings of asparagus. Another, with ricotta and artichoke hearts. Still another, sun dried tomatoes and pockets of slow cooked chard. Some of the asparagus spears are very thin, which I think means that the crowns need a lot more feeding. The luxurious home-made compost is a precious resource, but I mentally earmark a barrowload for them.

## 27 APRIL

Delight in indigo. My first seeds from Bailiwick have germinated. I started a few trays on a heat mat last week, sealed in a compost bag. A dark, warm and intensely moist environment which meant that many of the seeds exploded into life. However, I think the environment was a little too perfect for them and many did not survive the shock of the move into fresh air. A whole tray of malope dried up in front of my eyes. This, along with the fact that the dampness made all the ink on my labels run so I have fifteen mystery trays. However good this method is at getting seeds out of dormancy, it is all drama and no show.





*April is the busiest of busy months in  
the garden / All that waiting and now  
growth is unfurling before our eyes / There  
are fool's springs to be enjoyed, and the  
subsequent frosts to be endured but time it  
right, and the roots of a glorious summer  
are sent down in spring soil / To ensure  
success, you could consider the following  
tasks / Always could, never should, in  
Gather*

## Jobs for April

## SOW AND SOW ON

Little and often. Hedge your bets. My biggest mistake of this year has been to over-commit too early. I had packets with not many seeds in (not mine, I hasten to add) and I scattered some on a seed tray, looked at the few left in the bottom and, in the spirit of minimalism and de-cluttering, thought I might as well put them all in. We all have tins and tubs of old, half-full (half-empty?) seed envelopes filling up our space don't we? That's what I tell myself anyway. So I chucked them all on and put the envelopes in the bin.

What a mistake. You know that test for whether you should keep something you own? Asking yourself 'would I buy this again?'. I was then left with a choice of whether I was actually going to re-order a packet of *Selinum wallichianum* seed for a second time in a month as the first ones disappeared overnight in a slug attack.

But I have learned my lesson. Little and often. A pinch here and a pinch there. The added bonus here is that this is the backbone of successional sowing. If you want one week in late June where everything flowers and nothing the rest of the year, then absolutely sow everything you have in the middle of April. Lots of cut flowers have a seed to flower time of between 60 and 70 days in optimal conditions, so it figures that if you sow everything together, it'll all flower together. Your garden will look astonishing for a fortnight, and then nothing until the first flush of flowers has set seed, dispersed, and then the second generation has flowered again. Do a bit of all your hardy annuals now, and then do it all again in two weeks, and then again in a month. Throw in a few warmth-loving flowers in at the beginning of May, and you'll be sorted.

## WATCH THE WEATHER

Did you have snow? We didn't but the BBC weather app has been telling me that there is a night coming where it will fall to -2. Unless you are in Cornwall or in another climate entirely, accept that spring has not quite sprung reliably, and keep any tender plants and vulnerable seedlings in a place of safety.

## WATER

Just a side note in the weather. Have you noticed how dry it has been? No April showers here. I have some tulips in pots in the courtyard and they were showing flowers but looking a bit lacklustre. Even though everything in the ground is fine, anything in a pot will be absolutely dry as a bone. Water well, but not too often. I have also been moving lots of grasses and perennials around in the perennial beds and they will benefit from frequent watering too. Just until they have really got their roots down.

## WEED

There is no way round this. I spent yesterday with trugs and buckets, a fork and an old bread knife, and I will again today. If you don't get on top of them now, you probably never will. Even ten minutes with a hoe can make all the difference.

## HARVEST TULIPS

I have two sets of tulips. Those under glass and those in pots. The first roared into life with the early April heat and have been sitting on my kitchen table for at least ten days. My cottage is what is politely known as 'cool' because of

the thickness of the stone walls. I have to wear two jumpers but the tulips love it. Keep them out of direct sunlight and somewhere cool and they will last for ages. The outdoor tubs look like they are going to be weeks away yet but, as above, they may just need a water.

#### OTHER BITS:

Still not too late for sweet peas. Little and often for flowers that will go all the way into autumn. Also, peas for pea-tops and for eating.

If you have daffodils and narcissi in the ground, snap the heads off to stop all the energy going into seed production. If you've got them in pots, put them somewhere where they will catch the sun and wait until the foliage has died back. Dig them up and dry them off to store, and then you can put them in the ground this autumn. Or just leave them in their pots. I know which I am more likely to do.

Ditto the fritillaria that you bought on a whim from Waitrose because the field ones weren't out yet.



The Wasteland

T S ELIOT

April is the cruellest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

Memory and desire, stirring

Dull roots with spring rain.

Winter kept us warm, covering

Earth in forgetful snow, feeding

A little life with dried tubers.

Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee

With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,

And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,

And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.



## 04

## TASTE OF SPRING

There is a moment, maybe a day, maybe a week, at the turn of the season, where I feel like my soul is fizzing. The air smells different in my nose, and the sun feels different on my skin. There is no other word for it. I tingle. Sometimes it comes and goes, and then it is there steadily, and I know that it is spring. And I too am ready for anything. More than that; I am ready for joy.

Whilst the flower field is bursting forth, the kitchen garden is in limbo. The winter vegetables are over and their space being taken by seedlings of the bright summer nourishment. My carrots are sown but they are more leaf than root. The newly sown chard are still little. As joyous as I find this bit of the year, the hungry gap is tricky.

Over the years, I have found ways of negotiating the hungry gap though. Sprouted seeds and microgreens, and

my absolute favourite, pea tops. This is the time to make the most of the light outdoors and the warmth indoors, so clear the kitchen windowsill and put a few pots and trays on there.

Microgreens (salad or vegetable leaves cut at the very young seedling stage) don't really make a salad, but scattered over a meal, they add a hit of life, colour and zest to supper.

Match the seed to the meal in the same way you would use herbs. Basil microgreens on a tomato dish. Dill on fish. Coriander on a ramen. Actually, I cannot bear the taste of coriander, so that is one of the ones I am never going to grow.

If you have any of my seed left over in your tin, the bronze fennel, the dill, the black kale and the beetroot grow brilliantly as microgreens.

## NETTLE SPANAKOPITA

*Around 300g nettle tops*  
*2 tbsp olive oil*  
*1 tsp cumin seeds*  
*1 large onion, peeled and finely sliced*  
*1 tsp thyme leaves*  
*100g soft goat's cheese or feta, broken into small chunks*  
*35g pine nuts, toasted (or roughly chopped cashews)*  
*A squeeze of lemon juice*  
*Sea salt and freshly ground pepper*  
*2 eggs, lightly beaten*  
*250g filo pastry*  
*75g unsalted butter, melted*

Heat the oven to 180C/350F/gas mark 4. Pick over the nettles and wash thoroughly. Discard the tougher stalks. Bring a large pan of well-salted water to boiling point and throw in the nettle tops. Bring back to a boil, blanch for a couple of minutes, then drain in a colander.

When the nettles are cool enough to handle, squeeze to extract as much water as possible, then chop finely.

Meanwhile, heat the oil in a frying pan over medium heat. Add the cumin, cook for a minute or two, then add the onion and sauté for five to 10 minutes, until soft and golden. Add the thyme. Combine the squeezed nettles with the onion mixture, then gently fold in the cheese and pine nuts. Season with a squeeze of lemon and plenty of salt and pepper, then stir in the egg.

Brush a sheet of filo pastry with melted butter and lay it butter side down in a smallish, 1.5-litre ovenproof dish. Let any excess pastry hang over the ends. Lay another buttered filo sheet on top and repeat until you've used all but one sheet of filo. Spread the nettle mixture in the dish, fold over the overhanging pastry ends to enclose, dabbing with more melted butter to keep it together. Take the final sheet of pastry, crumple it lightly, and place on top, tucking in the edges around the side – this will give the top of the pie a nicely textured finish. Dab more butter on top, bake for 30-35 minutes, or until golden, and serve immediately.







# MAY

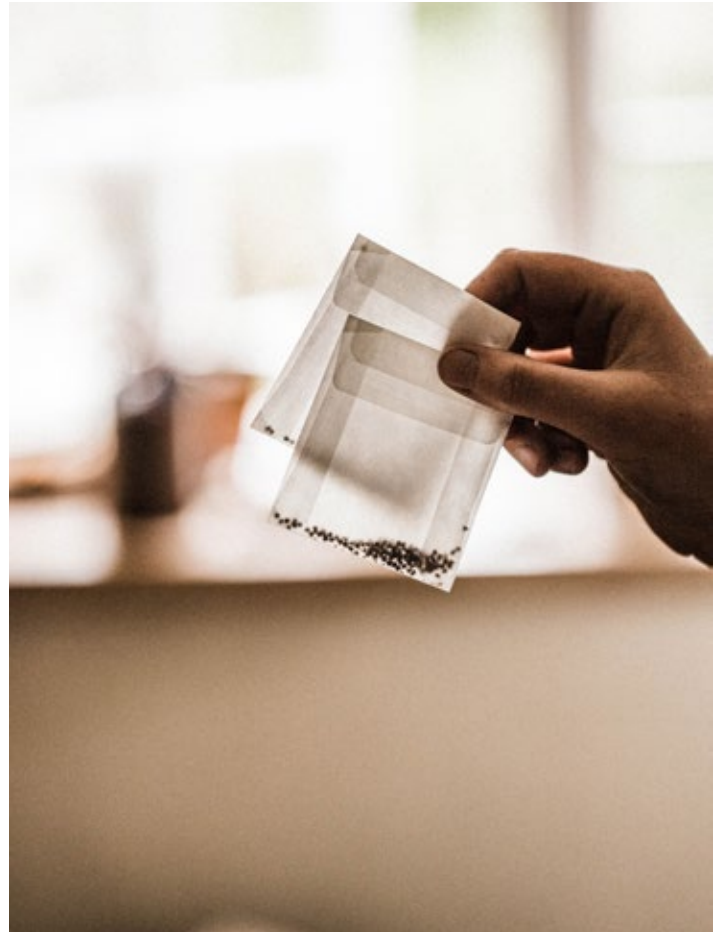
*/ oh the darling buds of may / in this case,  
may means the flower of the hawthorn  
but to my mind, may is the most darling  
of months / the earth is warm and the sky  
is blue / the showers of April are but a  
memory and it is the month of picnics and  
suppers outside and sharp green growth  
everywhere you look*

*Sonnet 18*

*William Shakespeare*

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.  
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed;  
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,  
Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to Time thou grow'st.  
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*









*May is the month for long,  
chilled drinks, for barbecues which go on  
late into the night (remember a jumper,  
the evenings are still cold) / but this is  
the month to keep on top of the rapidity of  
growth / so here are some jobs you could  
consider in May / Always could, never  
should, in Gather /  
Spoiler alert: there's a lot of weeding*

## Jobs for May

## SOW SQUASH

And that means summer squash (courgettes) and winter squash (pumpkins and the hard-skinned squashes). I have a ridiculously large and varied collection of seed but I have learned from last year that the very very big squash, although unbelievably beautiful, are quite intimidating to use and so I leave them too long before cutting into them. Unless I am sharing it with the village, which may well happen by the time autumn comes round, I am going to prioritise the onion squash, potimarrons and the like. Also, the drier the flesh the better for me. I personally think there is nothing worse than a slimy squash. Yes, I do put supermarket BNS in that category. Ugh.

Use multipurpose not seed compost. Use 9cm pots (or recyclable equivalent) and put the seed on its side. Heat will make all the difference, so a kitchen windowsill or above a radiator would be great and they will appear in days. Just a note, I never ever direct sow these because of slugs. I think you need pretty beefy plants to be able to get them out into the ground safely, all the more so if you use any sort of landscape fabric/ground cover or have raised beds where slugs like to congregate.

## PRICKING OUT

Once your flower seedlings have two true leaves, it is time to get them out of the seed trays and into pots. Firstly, they are likely to be running out of room and their roots are going sideways and getting entangled with one another, which means that you will damage them if they stay there much long. Secondly, there really isn't a lot of nutrition in seed compost, and the plant will have got as far as it has with what

was stored inside the seed when you sowed it. It is going to need more now.

Prepare your pots first. Lay them out, almost full with a multipurpose, peat-free compost. Dib a hole in the middle but don't press the soil down or compact it. Use a label, a pencil or a butterknife to get right underneath the seedling and lift it out. What I mean is, if you can possibly resist, lift up from beneath, don't tug from the top.

The advice is also to touch the leaves not the stem; they only have one stem and if it is damaged the plant won't recover. (This is harder than it sounds.) It can probably afford to have a leaf damaged and still grow on absolutely fine.

Drop the seedling into the hole you have made and give it a bit of a shuffle so the compost falls back in and fills the hole. Water from underneath. You may need to top up the compost after you have watered, it can often sink a bit.

Many plants can be dropped in so it is only their leaves above the compost and the whole stem is buried. That is, the line of where it was in the seed tray is much lower than in the pot. Lots of plants are able to grow roots from their stems if they are underground and so you get stronger and healthier plants this way. Definitely do this with cosmos and tomatoes.

## WATERING

If you have had rain, you may think that you can relax on the watering front. And you can (although I don't water anything that is in open ground anyway so this is a bit academic) but do not forget containers and anything in the greenhouse. My big pots in the courtyard are full of tulips in full flower

and their need for water far outstrips what rain would fall on that surface area. Keeping them well hydrated will make for a longer lasting tulip and I know that I added grit to the compost and lots of rocks to the pot so I am not worried about them getting waterlogged.

#### TO CUT OR NOT TO CUT

Every so often, someone says to me 'your house must be full of flowers'. It really isn't. I should cut more for myself, just for the joy of it.

I have been absolutely itching to cut the Belle Epoque tulips. Partly to have them in the house, partly because they make the best Instagram fodder. However, these are the best flowers I have seen for a while, properly double, and the colour that we all fell in love with all those years ago. Bulbs can be so variable and I think the demand outstripped supply for good quality, well bred Belle Epoque so I really want to keep these good ones. And so instead of cutting them, I am going to enjoy them in the pot, and then nurture the foliage so that I can keep the bulbs for next year. Many tulip bulbs simply do not come back year after year, but I do find more do than you would expect.

Similarly, there are deep, inky purple stems rising in one of the beds. My absolute joy and delight, *Anthriscus sylvestris* 'Ravenswing'. It is not often that I veer towards naming something as my favourite, but these do make me very happy indeed. And my appetite for them is considerable. Increasing my stock means leaving them to set seed by not cutting them, which I will harvest and distribute around and about. This is going to take some restraint; I can tell you.



## STAKING & SUPPORTING

There is a moment with climbers between the plant getting into its growth stride when it has size and weight, but hasn't yet managed to hold itself up, or entwine with an external support, or get its tendrils onto something vertical. Yes, mostly sweet peas, but also my furry brown clematis, and actually, my Mme Alfred Carriere is looking quite uncontained at the moment. Half an hour with a roll of twine and some scissors will pay dividends at this time of year. I find climbers that don't feel anchored just don't grow confidently, but once they feel that the support is there, they suddenly rush up.

Although, if we are talking sweet peas and you have only just planted yours out, don't worry if they are sitting there languishing a bit. I do find mine always take a week or so to get used to the change of scenery and they look like they are doing absolutely no growing at all. Give it time. They'll be fine.

For non-climbers, I am also putting frames of hazel around peonies and driving long tall stakes in next to the sunflowers. Although less than a hand span high now, these Hopi sunflowers are predicted to get to 8 or 9 feet tall.

## PLANT DAHLIA TUBERS AND CUTTINGS

Where I am (the mildest bit of a mild county) I can usually take middle of April as the last frost. This year has been mild in terms of the weather, but I cannot leave it any longer. The dahlias are being planted out tomorrow.



