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Opening Extract from...

On the Plot with Dirty Nails

Written by Joe Hashman

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April Week 2

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- Leeks & lettuces
- Jobs to do this week
- Sparrowhawk
- Jobs to do this week

April Week 3

- In the greenhouse
- Turnips
- Lettuces
- Squash
- Celariac
- Hoeing
- Jobs to do this week

April Week 4

- Dwarf French beans
- Sowing climbing French beans
- Tending figs
- Jobs to do this week

April Veg on the Menu

May Week 1

- Forget-me-nots
- Baby blackbirds
- Nettle soup
- Sowing swedes
- Jobs to do this week

May Week 2

- Asparagus
- House martins
- Weeds (1)
- Jobs to do this week

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- 42 Planting out leeks
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June Week 3

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- Hummingbird hawk moth
- Jobs to do this week
- Kohl rabi

June Week 4

- Asparagus beetles
- Weeds (2)
- Jobs to do this week

June Veg on the Menu

July Week 1

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- Aaron's rod
- Cabbage white butterflies
- Jobs to do this week

July Week 2

- Last of the spring peas
- Mrs Nails' potato and pea salad
- Onions & artichokes
- Jobs to do this week

July Week 3

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- Butterflies
- Birds
- Leaf beet
- Jobs to do this week

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February

WEEK 1

Dunnocks

Spring is in the air. You can see it in the burgeoning green tips of daffodils, dangling hazel catkins releasing little yellow puffs of smoky pollen when rustled in the breeze or knocked by a passing gardener, sprouting seeds in pots and trays, lengthening days and changing light. The birds can feel it too. During a lull in the icy blasts of late-winter Easterlies they are

thinking about breeding.

Dunnocks are the classic little brown jobs of birdwatchers' lingo but far more interesting than that description suggests. They are sparrow-sized with discreet brown bodies and grey heads. Their fluid, bubbling song is delivered in short musical bursts with no preamble and stops as suddenly as it starts. I've been watching a courting

pair over the last few days. She sits on a branch, he alights close-by. They engage in mutual wing flickering as he sidles along towards her. Suddenly she is off and he is right behind. They play 'tag' amongst the tangle of branches, never far apart, as if joined by an invisible thread, communicating through delicate movement and dance.

Asparagus

The ideal time to plant asparagus crowns is March and April. To dovetail their arrival through the post with that period, ordering should be done now. I purchase mine from one of the many reputable dealers found in the classified section of specialist gardening magazines. There is a selection of varieties to choose from. Asparagus has only a short harvesting season in May and June. However, with careful attention paid to the cropping period of different strains, it is possible to extend the picking time slightly.

I suggest plumping for two-year old crowns of Connover's Colossal which, all being well, should yield stalks for cutting in two years' time. This is an early, thick-stalked asparagus which tastes fabulous. Crowns of this age will transplant readily if put into a properly prepared, well drained, sunny and sheltered bed immediately upon arrival. Bed-making, on previously enriched ground, is a job for the coming weeks.

The only consideration left at this stage is how many crowns to buy. They require plenty of room, 40cm between plants and 75cm between rows. Each fully mature crown will hopefully provide a couple of dozen stalks annually for the next fifteen or so years. All my family adore asparagus, so I've allowed for a considerable number of plants in my plans.

FEBRUARY WEEK 1
JOBS TO DO THIS WEEK

IN THE GREENHOUSE

- Check over all crops and newly-sown seed trays.
- Cover seed trays with fleece or newspaper at night if temperatures are really cold.
- Light a long-burning candle and place in a safe position under a clay pot at night to keep off frosty chill.
- Sow F1 Market Express turnip in trays.

ON THE PLOT

- Check over all areas.
- Adjust frost protection on globe artichoke crowns to keep them snug.
- Trim privet and other hedges.
- Split Marco garlic bulbs and plant each clove individually.
- Tidy Westland Winter kale by removing tattered, brown and yellowing outer leaves to the compost heap.
- Use a swan-necked hoe to draw soil up into ridges over dormant asparagus crowns on established beds.



Artichokes

Last autumn I potted on some globe artichoke chards (sprouting side-shoots). After being over-wintered in the greenhouse, they have thrown up handsome clutches of deeply serrated, silvery grey-green leaves. To make much-needed room for seed sowing, and to

harden them off, the young plants were placed outside in a sheltered sunny spot this week. They will stay there until planting into their final positions during March. Each evening a double layer of fleece is secured over their tops as they acclimatise to life outdoors.



FEBRUARY Week 1: SOWING LEEK SEEDS



1. Fill a plastic tray with loam-based seed compost or multi-purpose alternative. Use a flat board to level and gently firm.



2. Sow the small black seeds thinly. Tap them out of the palm of one hand as evenly as possible.



3. Sprinkle a 3mm covering of compost through a sieve.



4. Dribble water to thoroughly moisten without soaking. Insert a label stating variety and date. Keep in the greenhouse or on a window sill.