

FEBRUARY

A short month, of short days.

SOW

Under cover (greenhouse, cold frame, window sill): tomatoes, peas, broad beans, chilies, peppers, aubergines, annual flower seeds.

Tip: sowing in rows makes thinning and weeding easier, but the broadcast method, where seeds are sprinkled more randomly over the soil gives an informal layout, especially when you are sowing in the final location.

PRUNE

Roses, shrub and patio. First cut out any dead, diseased and dying wood, then for the remainder, using clean, sharp secateurs, cut about 6cm above an outward facing bud. You are aiming to create an open-centred bush.

For hybrid tea and floribunda, tests have achieved good results by simply cutting to an even height with secateurs. Prune some shoots severely, others lightly to spread flowering over a longer period.

Clear ground of any cut material and mulch the plants.

Wisteria. Cut back the long, 'whippy' stems to 2 to 3 buds. This is a twice-yearly job. To rejuvenate a wisteria, remove any old, finished stems, and feed.

Cornus (dogwoods), which are grown for winter colour, remove any failing growth.

Hellebores – remove the leaves so you can see the flowers.

GARDEN GUIDANCE

Prepare new ground for vegetable and fruit planting, applying around a 3cm layer of well-rotted manure and compost. Check your pH again. Lay and fix down horticultural fleece to warm the ground or as a protection for a growing crop.

Winter pruning of apples and pears. We prune to restrict the amount of wood the tree develops, thereby putting more energy into growing fruit, and to achieve an open, cup-shaped form to give best exposure to the elements on all sides. Follow the three 'D's – remove dead, dying, diseased branches and any crossing over others, and cut back to fruiting spurs or fruiting tips, depending on your tree. Take out only one-third of branches in any season. Keep surrounding ground weed-free.

Chit potatoes to induce small shoots before planting. Obtain your seed potatoes (hen's egg size) and set them rose-end uppermost in egg boxes/trays and site in a light (not sunny) frost-free area for about 6 weeks

until 8-25 mm shoots are showing. Chitting is vital for earlies and useful for maincrop as it advances tubers by possibly two weeks.

What is the difference between early and maincrop potatoes? They produce tubers at different times after planting; earlies in 100-110 days; second earlies 110-120 days; early maincrop 120-125 days; and maincrop 125-140 days. There is frequently little difference between second early and maincrop. Second earlies mature in August, avoiding slug and blight damage.

JUNIORS' JOBS FOR FEBRUARY

Now's the time to get **potato tubers** sprouting so you can plant them out in a few weeks' time either in the ground or in a container. This will encourage them to grow shoots so they will get off to a good start when you plant them in the soil. You will need:

- new seed potato tubers that are labelled 'first earlies'. These potatoes have not been planted previously so we can be sure they are disease free and most likely to produce a delicious crop very early in the year so you won't have to wait too long to eat them! Seed potatoes can be bought at garden centres and from seed catalogues – read the descriptions and decide which variety to buy.
- egg boxes or another container big enough to put the potatoes in without them touching each other. Sprout or 'chit' them by putting them, with 'eyes' uppermost, in the egg boxes or seed trays and put them in the light in a cool, frost-free room. Don't forget to label each variety if you have more than one!

When the seed potatoes have sprouts about 2cm long, they are ready to plant.

- To plant them in the ground, dig a trench about 15cm deep, placing each potato 30cm from its neighbour. Cover lightly with soil, making a small mound along the top of the row. Water and weed them frequently, depending on whether it has rained or not. Over the next few weeks, as the shoots appear, cover the sprouts with a ridge of soil about 15cm high so the shoots are just buried.
- To grow them in a container, choose a very large pot (or several large pots), the bigger the better, and fill half-full with peat-free compost. Put the seed potatoes on top (about 5 tubers in a 50cm pot is a rough guide – they mustn't touch each other) and cover with another 10cm compost. As the shoots appear, cover them with more compost.
- In about 10-12 weeks they will be ready for you to eat! Turn them out of the pot carefully or dig them up from the garden using a fork – start well away from the plant so you don't pierce the potatoes.

