

Episode 122 show notes and advice

Episode description

Over the last 30 years, Sarah has been trialling and testing the most efficient ways to harvest and condition the plants, flowers, and vegetables she's grown at home. Listen along to discover her secrets for increasing productivity in the Kitchen Garden, and top tips for improving the vase life of your favourite cut flowers.

In this episode, discover:

- How to get the best from your sweet peas
- Top techniques for a prolific harvest
- Arrangement ideas for your own cut flowers

episode 122 advice sheet

Salad leaves and herbs (1:37)

Sarah has been trialling and testing growing herbs and salad for as long as she's had her garden at Perch Hill. From mustard, mizuna, and winter purslane, to the cut-and-come-again salad leaves, and everything in between.

In terms of hardy herbs, Sarah also grows flat-leaf parsley, chervil, and coriander, as well as perennials herbs such as mint, tarragon, chives, and fennel.

Sarah likes to take a large catering colander and elastic bands, carefully snipping the stems of the plants with a pair of scissors or a sharp serrated knife.

Sarah says that until we get into the main growing season in May, when light levels increase and growing curves really take off, it's important to leave the heart intact, and carefully remove the outer leaves instead. For the heart to regrow, it takes a lot of resource and energy for the plant, so this is much a quicker and more effective way of getting more from leafy salad.

Sarah secures small bunches of each herb with a rubber band and places them in the colander. At some point, there might be visible signs that the plant is beginning to bolt. If it has a thick and chunky stem about the size of your little finger, this will bring an end to your harvest. At this point, cut the stem down to the ground and consciously water the plant to stop it from bolting.

Next, Sarah takes the bunches and submerges them in water for around two hours. Like flowers, they will absorb water through their whole leaf surface area. Doing so helps to make them less floppy and improves the texture when dressings are added.

Carefully roll in a tea towel or use a salad spinner, to dry the herbs and salad off. Make sure you take a slow and gentle approach to drying your produce, so you don't re-saturate your leaves. A dry salad will mean the dressing sticks and doesn't slide off.

In April, and then from September to August, use the 'picking round' method, and then when it gets warmer between August to October, you can use a harsher picking method, as the plants will be more likely to bolt. The same method applied to picking spinach, perpetual spinach, and chard is also incredibly effective, even in the cold months.

Picking sweet peas (7:48)

Although definitely not for eating, Sarah likes to use the same harvesting method for picking sweet peas in the summertime.

Bunch mixed or single colours and move on to the next variety, taking 15 – 20 stems at a time. The sweet peas must be submerged in water immediately. At Perch Hill, Sarah uses old milk pails to hold the water, as they have useful handles, unlike florist's buckets.

Sarah likes to arrange them with the rubber bands on, if she's making a low table centrepiece. This is a super quick and easy approach to flower arranging and saves you creating the arrangement stem by stem.

Towards the end of the season, the stem length of the sweet peas, particularly the scented varieties get shorter and shorter, which can make them quite difficult to use in arrangements.

Sarah also uses an alternative sweet pea picking system, in which they allow the stems to grow to about five or six foot. Once they start to have shorter stems, Sarah removes the top third off. They might look sparse for a week or two when cropped above a set of leaves, but this will encourage axillary buds to form, and the growing process will start again.

If you choose to feed your sweet peas with a potash-rich feed, such as comfrey pellets, they will go on again, producing yet another healthy yield for another three or four weeks. They will produce cascades of six or seven flowers that look gorgeous and elegant trailing from a vase. Deadheading often can also extend vase life to around 10 days.

Sarah's top tips for later flowering varieties

The importance of conditioning (12:29)

As we move from spring into summer, you might find that freshly picked flowers will flop down in the vase if they are newly picked. To combat this, Sarah suggests searing the stems for much-improved vase life.

Start by stripping two-thirds of the plant's foliage, placing the waste it into a bucket and adding it to the compost heap. Next, boil the kettle and pour the water into a coffee mug or a heat-proof jug, and plunge the bottom section of the stem into the boiled water.

Rest the seared stems in cold water overnight and then arrange. Avoid just picking and plonking, as this will make your cut flowers flop in the vase.

Caring for summer flowers

Picking lilies (16:15)

Sarah is always careful not to pick too many lilies, as they are beautiful in the borders, but if doing so, removing the anthers enables single stems to last up to 10 days or so in the vase.

Peonies (16:30)

Peonies have a very large petal surface and have evolved to absorb water across the whole petal. Similar to the hellebores, put them in the bath overnight and they can last up to 10 weeks in the vase. The same method also applies to hydrangeas.