

episode 85 show notes and advice

This week, Sarah talks to David Rowley, the Head Market Gardener at Heckfield Place. Following a beautiful restoration of what was once a Georgian family home, Heckfield is now a luxury hotel and biodynamic farm and market garden set within the grounds of a 400-acre estate in Hampshire. On a recent visit with her two daughters, Sarah was able to meet David and enjoy a wonderful tour of the whole garden and growing area. Feeling thoroughly inspired by what David and the team are doing at Heckfield Place, Sarah has asked him to share what flowers and veg they will be autumn sowing that will be coming into flower or cropping soon, and are great for winter use, as well as spring and summer. Sharing his background and journey, initially into organic farming, then biodynamics, David gives us a glimpse behind the gardening and growing scenes of Heckfield Place.

In this episode, discover:

- David's background in horticulture and journey to organic farming and subsequently, biodynamics
- Rudolf Steiner and the origins of biodynamic farming
- How and when to sow biodynamically
- Mid-September sown carrots for young, fresh multi-coloured baby carrots at Christmas
- Veg and flowers they are sowing now at Heckfield Place
- The best edibles and ornamentals to sow now in small spaces

Links & references:

Order Sarah's book: <https://bit.ly/2TWHJcz>

Order Arthur's book: <https://bit.ly/3xOov7H>

Shop on the Sarah Raven Website: <http://bit.ly/3jvbaeu>

Get in touch: info@sarahraven.com

Heckfield Place

<https://www.heckfieldplace.com/>

David Rowley

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episode 85 advice sheet

Episode description

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What is biodynamic farming?

Biodynamics is a style of agriculture / horticulture introduced by Rudolf Steiner in 1924 following farmers' concerns at the time, over the many new chemical tools available for them to use in the fields. While they were killing things they didn't want to have and seeing the benefit in their lifetime, they felt that prolonged use of such practices would threaten the quality of the soil and wildlife for future generations.

Rudolf Steiner took this information and converted it into the 'Eight Agriculture Lectures' – a broad framework to allow agriculture and horticulture to co-exist with the planet, and

encourage the forces we are somewhat sensitive to, though perhaps can't necessarily record on a scientific level.

One example of these methods is the Three Kings preparation on 6th January (Epiphany). David explains: "We're taking gold, frankincense, and myrrh, stirring them into a solution and placing around the perimeter of the farm, so that the farm has a skin - a sense of self."

Considered by Heckfield Place to be a great team building activity, they invite people from the hotel, farm and market garden to explore how far they can walk in one direction before finding the end of the farm. From a biodynamic sense, this (Three Kings preparation) gives the farm a boundary, or a skin, encouraging all visible life, as well giving all sentient beings we can't necessarily see, a nice welcoming place in which they can live, thrive and enjoy their time here.

Sarah feels it's quite challenging for those who are more science-based (like herself), and yet she admits she has always found that the produce from or on biodynamic farms, is unbelievably healthy, productive and beautiful. Kooky or not, it just seems to work.

Where is the science behind biodynamics?

During hotel tours of the market garden and farm at Heckfield Place, David is often asked about the science behind biodynamics, to which he gives a very practical comparison: "If we have an MP3 or a CD recording of an orchestra playing, it's about as good a quality as we can possibly fathom through our ears, yet when we go to an auditorium and hear an orchestra perform, even if we close our eyes, the sense - the experience is entirely different. So there are definitely some things that are not yet measurable in our scientific world, but that we can experience as people."

When applied to growing biodynamically versus organic or conventional production, it seems that there are things that are not measured, and yet we have a sense them; as Sarah has found – that the qualities the plants express in a biodynamic production scenario, are exceptional.

Planning for the Persephone period at Heckfield Place

Vegetables

Given Heckfield Place's location in southern England, they will enter the Persephone period around the middle of November, when the day length is less than 10 hours a day.

Therefore, David and his team are now planning for that period by looking to have the plants grown and ready to harvest from the polytunnel (some from outside too), so that by mid-November, they're not trying to grow things anymore, just picking what's there.

There's a golden opportunity from the middle of August to the beginning of September to grow as much as possible to fit into that fairly short window, so that things are ready to pick all the way through the winter. At the moment, they're still picking cucumbers, tomatoes, aubergines and peppers from the polytunnels, but they want to be prepared for when those crops have finished, and they've run out of temperature and daylength, so that they can remove them from the polytunnels and transplant them into the soil.

What transplants well?

A beautiful winter spinach, and even the red-veined spinaches do exceptionally well if they're transplanted into the polytunnels around the middle of October. Roughly 3-4 weeks prior to that, around the beginning of September, they put the seeds into the soil. David admits this can feel a bit counterintuitive as spinach is such a cold-loving crop and it can be warm in early September, so trying to keep it cool can be challenging.

Winter salads

There are many other winter greens that are added to the winter salad mix, which the Hotel and other restaurants absolutely love to use:

- 'Rapunzel'
- Mâche corn salad
- Claytonia
- Minutina
- Lamb cresses - for a nice fiery bite to a salad
- Tatsoi – with beautiful, almost tennis racquet-shaped leaves and increasingly popular
- Brassica salad: 'Golden frills', 'Purple frills', 'Red Giant', 'Mizuna', 'Miz America' - a spectacular red variety of Mizuna

- Salad rockets – for direct seeding towards the end of September
- 1-2 beds of carrots (3 or 4 varieties of different colours) – sown around mid-September giving ample growing time to harvest young fresh carrots around the end of November / early December, even for Christmas (particularly the multi-coloured baby carrots), instead of relying on bigger carrots grown outside.

Tip: if you allow the polytunnels to get cold enough after the cold snap, they'll be deliciously sweet as well.

Seeding veg into modules

- Pak choi
- Eskerrow
- A favourite of David's: Red-veined sorrel – so lovely to eat all through the winter and looks lovely on the plate. As soon as it gets hot in the polytunnel in April, it tends to lose some of that deliciousness, but all through the winter, the leaves are fantastic.

Flowers for autumn sowing at Heckfield Place

Ammi majus

Sarah was rather taken by the spectacularly simple, stylish and beautiful vase of 8ft towering Ammi majus in the Hotel. Having always grown Ammi, Sarah has tended to use it more as a filler, but seeing this display has inspired her to go back to the idea that there's nothing nicer than a huge vase of cow parsley. And the benefit of Ammi is it doesn't drop its petals in the same way as cow parsley does.

The Ammi's great height was due to their very late autumn sown (late September, early October), to get the seed germinated, have its first true leaves and be ready for transplanting into the poly. It can even go into the polytunnel at the beginning of February. The point is to get as much growth on it as you can before you get to mid-summer (mid-June), when it starts to sense that the daylength is changing and it moves into its flowering habit.

Other flowers for autumn sowing at Heckfield Place

Module trays and then transplant into the polytunnel early to mid-November

- Ranunculus
- Anemone

Seeding wise

- Icelandic poppies
- *Daucus carota* 'Dara' – late in the season or early next spring, as it puts on such a magnificent display and makes a great habitat for all the wildlife as soon as it flowers
- *Dianthus barbatus* (sweet Williams)
- Forget-me-nots
- *Lunaria annua* (Honesty) – harvested for its scented flowers in its first year, and for beautiful, dried displays of the moon-shaped lunaria in its second year
- *Campanula medium* (Canterbury Bells) - grown as cut flowers, so as plugs into 9cm pots before planting them out and letting them grow
- Sweet rocket
- Next year: Cornflowers are seeded in the glass houses in early February

Displays of flowers in isolation

Sarah loved the Heckfield Place Hotel displays of flowers in glorious isolation rather than mixed arrangements. Whether it was a lily or the Ammi or a foxglove (Pam's Choice – the lovely foxglove with the purple throat), in the bathrooms, bedrooms and reception areas, Sarah felt they were more stylish, more beautiful and more natural displayed in this way.

Seeds to sow now in smaller garden spaces

Edibles (covered)

- Any of the rockets – spectacular, quick and fairly easy
- Suggested preparation: Mix it with a little bit of feta and balsamic vinegar
- Red-veined sorrel – puts on a lovely display even in small pots and keeps on giving and giving

Tip: It is perennial but the flavour is best in young plants. In their second, third and subsequent years, the succulent and flavoursome leaves are less available than they are in the new plants.

Ornamentals

- Bronze fennel – as a stunning ornamental and fairly easy to grow. Plus you can eat the young foliage and the flowers.
- *Daucus carota* 'Dara' – with beautiful and long-lasting umbelliferous flowers (similar to a crimson Ammi).

Pollinators: Both the Bronze fennel and the *Daucus carota* are absolutely brilliant for bees, butterflies and hoverflies.

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Heckfield Place seasonal recipes