



Edible Gardening What to do in Late Winter

1. Remove any weeds and leaves

In mild winters weeds continue to grow slowly so make sure you check for and remove them. Rake up any leaves that have fallen on your plot; as they decompose they'll take nutrients out the soil. You can save these in a separate heap to make leaf mould or bag them up and let them rot down in a corner of your garden. (Remember that the leaves will need to be kept moist to keep rotting down, which could take 2 to 4 years.)

2. Add organic matter to your raised beds or vegetable plot.

You need a layer of 5cm or more just laid on top of the soil. You could use well-rotted manure, leaf mould, composted bark chippings, garden compost, or off-the-shelf compost. Manure is best for retaining water in the soil and improving its structure, but compost has more nutrients.

3. Repair or build beds and supporting structures

While there's not much gardening to do you can use your time to check your beds or support structures are in good shape. Make sure you use treated wood outside otherwise it will rot very quickly, but even treated wood has a limited life. Old scaffolding planks are a good option if you can find them. If you are making new beds (raised or flat) check they are no more than 1.2m (4 foot) wide so you can reach over them to plant and weed without stepping on the soil.

4. Prune fruit bushes and trees

Now is a good time to prune any fruit, while they are dormant. But make sure that you don't do it during a frost or just before one is due. Check your pruning tools are sharp and clean then remove any dead, diseased, damaged or crossing (stems that are rubbing against each other) branches/stems first. After this initial tidy up, each type of fruit needs a slightly different pruning method, so check what yours will need at <http://www.rhs.org.uk/Gardening>

5. Plant new fruit trees and bushes

This is the best time of year to plant out your new fruit trees, raspberry canes and currant bushes. Avoid frosty, snowy periods and waterlogged ground, and add plenty of compost in the planting hole, as well as slow-release fertiliser.

6. Start planning what you want to grow this year

This is the fun bit, and it makes you think about Springtime and Summer sunshine! First, think about what grew well and what grew badly for you last year. If you've not grow any crops before, ask around any friends or neighbours who have. Certain crops will favour certain soils and conditions and if you ignore their preferences you'll give yourself a lot of work to do and/or produce poor crops. So make your life easy and your crops abundant by doing some reflecting and research and picking fruit and vegetables that will like growing on your plot. Another important factor is do you like to eat them? Please don't grow lots of crops that you can't eat, there will be plenty out there that will suit your taste. Finally, think about how much time you've got to care for your plot and don't pick demanding crops if you haven't got time to pamper them. The main brands of seed suppliers now have great information on their websites about each vegetable/fruit and their requirements so check there if you don't have any local information or speak to local seed growers.

If you've chosen your crops order/buy your seeds. If you have a local seed grower and supplier please use them, as their seeds will grow well in your area.

7. Look after your tools

They are probably lying around where you left them months ago, so give them some TLC. Give them a thorough clean and sharpen any than need it then oil those that aren't stainless steel. Check screws are tight and wheelbarrow wheels are pumped up (and not squeeking!). If you are buying new tools buy from mid-range brands as the cheapest may not last you very long. Only use your tools for the purpose they are designed for and they will last longer – spades used as crowbars will soon have a broken shaft – buy a crowbar instead!

8. Check your supplies

Once you start seed sowing and planting you'll be busy so check your supplies and equipment now, such as labels, pots, trays, seed compost, netting (crucial for any brassicas), watering equipment etc. Fertiliser is important and there are a lot out there to choose from, but I would recommend chicken pellets (you only need a small amount spread on your plot 2 weeks before planting or seed sowing) to start your plants off and then seaweed feed (sold in concentrated liquid form) for any plants that need extra food while growing.

9. Write down your planting and seed sowing schedule

If you have a lot of different seeds and plants to grow it's best to check what times they need to be sown and write down a schedule for yourself. But **always** take notice of the actual weather conditions this year. It is a waste of time planting seeds into waterlogged, cold soils just because the packet says 'March', as they will just rot. So wait for better conditions and warmer soil.

10. Clean your greenhouse and/or polytunnel

Tidy up and clean your greenhouse and polytunnel to create the best hygienic conditions for your new seedlings and plants.