

The CITY grower



Martyn Cox writes a gardening column for *The Mail on Sunday* and *Sainsbury's Magazine*. He has a small, plant-packed garden in east London.

Martyn Cox craves the exotic as he introduces a papaya to his back garden and recommends figs. But for those with more traditional tastes there are also peppers to be sown

My garden never stands still and I'm always on the lookout for new plants that I'll try and elbow into the modest 9x4.5m (30x15ft) space that I have at my disposal. Many of these will be new or untried varieties of standard edibles, such as tomatoes or basil, but these do not give me as great a thrill as finding an unusual plant that I'd imagine very few others in this country have ever tried to grow before.

Perhaps the greatest nursery for any lover of unusual fruit to visit is Reads, near Loddon in Norfolk (01508 548395, www.readsnursery.co.uk). I have to

advise you that the nursery is not the easiest place to find, even with a satellite navigation system, but when you eventually arrive any time spent cursing your hi-tech gadget for guiding you to the middle of a bleak and empty common is soon forgotten once you slide open the door to a glasshouse and step inside.

Apart from figs and grapevines, Reads also holds the National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens (NCCPG) National Collection of citrus, with about 174 different types. Limes, grapefruit, kumquat, lemons, sweet oranges, bitter oranges, mandarins and Seville oranges can all be found here, providing flowers

and fruit all year round. Although they need protection over winter, all of them are perfect plants to place outdoors in the summer. Elsewhere I spotted guavas, different olives, edible passion flowers, pomegranates and Chinese date.

I returned home with a papaya (*Carica papaya*), which in its native Central America produces large, orange-skinned fruit. I'm not holding out too much hope of a bumper harvest this year but it's worth growing for its large, deeply lobed leaves that perch on top of the single stem. It has to be protected from frost but will be given pride of place on the patio in a few months' time.



My new papaya will certainly add a touch of the exotic to the patio

How to grow peppers



1 Scatter a few pepper seeds across the surface of a 7cm (3in) pot filled with seed compost. Use different pots if you are growing more than one variety.



2 Cover with a thin layer of vermiculite and gently water the pot. Add a plant label and pop the pot into a propagator to germinate.



3 Remove from the propagator after seedlings appear and keep the compost damp. Place the pot in a light place, such as a windowsill, porch or greenhouse.



4 When seedlings are 2cm (1in) tall, give them their own pot, using multi-purpose compost. Pot into a 12cm (5in) container when roots show through the drainage holes.



5 Support with a cane when 20cm (8in) tall. Pinch out tops when the plants reach 30cm (12in) and feed with a high potash fertiliser as soon as flowers appear.



6 Continue to feed until peppers have been harvested. In May, pot into a five-litre container, stake and put outside. Peppers can also be housed in a cold frame.



Grow sweet peppers

Sweet peppers can be expensive to buy in supermarkets but if you've got the time, try growing them yourself from seed – they are absolutely foolproof. Seeds can be sown from February to April but the earlier you can start them the sooner you'll be picking your own.

I like to sow mine in pots, which are then placed in a heated propagator that I keep on the windowsill. They usually germinate incredibly quickly but if you haven't got space for one of these bits of kits, don't worry. Simply place a small plastic bag (those used for storing frozen food will do) over the top of the pot and keep in place with an elastic band.

There are loads of excellent varieties worth

growing. Among my favourites are 'Marconi Rosso' (fat tapering pepper), 'Big Banana' (banana-shaped peppers), 'Como di Torro' (slender tapering pepper), 'Purple Beauty' (purple bell shape) and 'Topepo Rosso' (short and squat).

Pepper seed stockists

- Seeds of Italy: 020 8427 5020, www.seedsofitaly.com
- The Organic Gardening Catalogue: 0845 130 1304, www.organiccatalogue.com
- Victoriana Nursery: 01233 740529, www.victoriananursery.co.uk
- Marshalls: 01480 443390, www.marshalls-seeds.co.uk
- Thompson & Morgan: 0844 2485383, www.thompson-morgan.com

Five peppers to try



Pepper 'Topepo Rosso': It looks like a beefsteak tomato but is a pepper! It has a superb flavour and is well-suited to stuffing.



Pepper 'Big Banana': Indulge in chunky, juicy peppers up to 25cm (10in) long! Incredible yields of up to 50 fruits per plant.



Pepper 'Purple Beauty': Unusual purple bell-shaped pepper. It is an early variety and very vigorous.



Pepper 'Marconi Rosso': Mild and sweet flavoured long, deep-red peppers. This variety is highly productive.



Pepper 'Corno di Torro': Translated from Italian means 'bull's horns' thanks to its shape. The fleshy peppers ripen to yellow or red.

Heat things up

It might not be as sexy as a power tool, or invaluable all year round like a lawnmower, but a heated propagator is a piece of kit that I couldn't do without at this time of year. Between February and May my trusty old electric Sankey Growarm 100 sits on the windowsill of my kitchen, where it provides a snug, humid environment at a constant temperature for seeds to germinate really quickly. It also prevents the blinds from closing properly for a few months but who cares when I'm rewarded with lots of healthy seedlings!

If you've used a heated propagator before you will wonder how you ever lived without it. Of course, you can germinate seeds or root cuttings without one but your success rate is vastly improved with a gadget like this and the whole process is sped up. How? Well, the base of a heated propagator contains a heating element that gently warms the compost in pots from below, while the heat inside the propagator, which is covered with a clear plastic lid, creates a humid atmosphere that encourages germination and root growth.

Head to your local garden centre, DIY store or nursery and you'll find loads of different models available, in many different shapes, sizes and varying degrees of sophistication. So what should you go for? First, it has to fit on your windowsill, so don't be tempted by those fantastic looking devices that have enough room inside for the kitchen sink if you only have a narrow space available. Although mine, which measures 38x24cm (15x10in) and is 18cm (7in) high, doesn't exactly fit



A heated propagator will dramatically improve germination rates, paying for itself after a season or two

snugly on the windowsill of the kitchen, it is secure enough. Avoid those that overhang the ledge too much as they are in danger of toppling over if the weight isn't distributed equally.

There are both heated and unheated models. I would always go for a heated model as you can be guaranteed a constant temperature, but unheated models are fine if you have a

particularly warm house. It should also have some form of ventilation control to allow you to cool down the air inside if things get too hot. On most this is simply a hole in the clear plastic lid that is covered with a moveable catch. As with most things in life, you get what you pay for but you should be able to buy a fairly good propagator that will last you for years for about £25.

Plant a fig

One of my most memorable holidays was spent in Turkey, when the room I was staying in looked out onto a venerable fig tree, whose fruit I could reach from the window. Warmed by the Mediterranean sun, they were delicious and succulent.

Although there's little chance of ever enjoying the same weather here (not based on the last two summers anyway), you can still successfully grow figs. If planted directly into the ground, figs will grow rampantly and if left unpruned, will produce tiny, hard fruit that are only fit for the compost bin.

However, they are ideal for large containers, which help to keep the roots restricted and enable the branches to be dealt with easily. Simply prune back the tips to encourage bushy growth. *Ficus carica* 'Brown Turkey' (pictured) is the most commonly grown variety but my favourite is *F.c.* 'Brunswick' due its most fantastic, huge lobed leaves and delicious fruit.



Credit crunch containers

You would have to have been living on Mars not to have noticed that we are slap bang in the middle of a global recession. The economic downturn is likely to touch all of us in some way, so when times are hard it makes sense to save money wherever you can. Growing your own fruit, vegetables and herbs is an obvious way of saving £££s, but why stop there? We are moving quickly into one of the most productive times of the gardening year, when greenhouses, windowsills and just about every other space is crammed full of seeds germinating in pots. But rather than go out and buy all of your pots, why not keep hold of your dosh and recycle items you would usually discard.

It may sound like an idea lifted from *Blue Peter* but empty yoghurt cartons, toilet roll centres and old tin food cans make ideal containers for sowing seeds into. All you have to do is ensure they have holes at the base for drainage – if they don't, make a few with an electric drill.

While you're at it, make good use of large containers. Fancily decorated drums that once contained olive oil look great planted with vegetables, so head to a local restaurant or delicatessen and see if they have any going spare.



Old wooden fruit trays make ideal salad crop containers – looking great and saving money in the process

Wooden fruit trays, often left in the help-yourself pile of a supermarket or abandoned at the side of the kerb after a street market has

packed up, can be lined with plastic (remember to pierce a few holes in the base), filled with compost and used as containers for leafy salads.



Paint old tin cans and drill holes into the bottom for attractive, free containers

Quick jobs for March

- Warmer weather will bring out aphids, so keep an eye out for them and control with organic pesticides if necessary.
- Remove suckers from fruit trees by scraping back the soil or compost to its point of origin on the stem and tearing it off.
- Finish planting bare-rooted cane fruit, such as blackberries and raspberries.
- A mild spell can send the temperatures soaring in the greenhouse. Open vents to cool things down, remembering to close them again in the evening.
- Birds are ravenous eaters of pests, so spare a thought for them before plugging in the hedge trimmer. They are now nesting, so leave any trimming until midsummer to avoid disturbing them.

