



Pocket Garden Design

Top tips for timing your garden to be looking its best in early June

Gather or organise in January and February:

- Seed trays (e.g. "takeaway" food containers, fruit and veg trays from supermarket).
- Seed pots (e.g. yoghurt pots/paper cups/cardboard tubes from centre of kitchen rolls etc.).
- Small bag of peat-free seed compost.
- Protective gloves for handling compost.
- Sufficient multipurpose peat-free compost for final garden containers.
- A warm, light place for germination and early growth.
- Water can with a rose attachment.
- Water spray bottle.
- Horticultural fleece or clear polythene to use outside as plant protection in cold weather.
- Some 'generally good for wildlife' plant seeds.

Tips for choosing what to grow

Some seeds grow slowly so won't be ready in time for the Pocket Garden showcase deadline. However, there are some faster growing flower and vegetable seeds which should give you a great display within the available growing time. A few suggestions are below.

It can be tempting to use flowers of certain colours to represent certain features. For example, designs in the past have planned to use blue flowers to represent water in a river. In practice it is difficult to do if growing from seed. If you are using flowers that need to be in bloom for your design to 'work' then it would be best to speak to your local plant nursery to see what will be in bloom in early June when the built designs will be photographed. You may then need to buy these as grown plants from the nursery, as the nursery will have been growing them through the winter, instead of growing from seed.

There is plenty you can do with plants without relying on their flowers. You can use leaf colours or patterns, size, and shape. Remember you can use the appearance of fruit, vegetables, and herbs as part of your design too, although fruits are unlikely to be ready by early June. Some things like herbs, carrot leaves or leaves of pumpkins are distinctive.

You can still use plants for wildlife or edibles that bloom later in the summer. Judges will be able to recognise late-summer plants and will give you credit for them.

Here is a list of some quick-growing, insect-friendly plants that can flower after three months of growth if you look after them well. If you are going to use any of these in your design, sowing them in early March will give them the best chance of flowering quickly:

- Cornflower – blue flowers
- Nigella – blue flowers
- Poppies – red flowers
- Sunflower – choose early-flowering varieties like 'Sonja', 'Ruby eclipse' and 'Choco sun'
- Nasturtiums – yellow or orange flowers. Can be climbing or bush types. Good for pollinators and edible. Choose *single flower varieties for pollinators.
- Calendula – yellow or orange flowers, sometimes called Pot Marigolds, they have edible petals. Choose *single flower varieties for pollinators.
- Peas – if pods aren't ready for harvest, pea shoots make an edible salad crop. 'Meteor' and 'Early Onward' are early varieties. A dwarf variety for containers is 'Half Pint'.
- Broad beans – some heritage varieties have eye-catching crimson flowers.
- Salad vegetables such as 'cut and come again' lettuces or packet of mixed salad leaves.
- Rocket – quick growing salad leaf veggie and, when it flowers, loved by insects.
- Radish – quick growing edible

The following plants are great for wildlife but are best sourced as young plants:

- Sweet Alyssum
- Honesty
- Oxlip
- Aubretia

*Single flowers are better for wildlife because they have a single ring of petals with visible pollen in the centre that bees and other pollinators can get to easily.

Tips for speedy growing

- You can soak seeds in water overnight as this speeds up germination. This is especially the case for large seeds with thick coats like sunflowers and nasturtiums. Remember, only soak them for one night as they will rot if left too long in water! If you can't soak overnight, even just a few hours in water will be useful.
- Keep the compost warm until the seeds germinate. This is best done by keeping it in a warm part of the room instead of by a window which can get cold at night. Close to a radiator is good, but not on a radiator and make sure the compost doesn't dry out. You can buy seedling heat mats and put your growing containers on those.
- When seeds have germinated, it is important that they have as much light as possible. If you have a sunny south-facing window that gets light for a lot of the day then this might be enough, but you will need to put the containers right up to the window, so they get a lot of light. You can also put them in a greenhouse if you have one. Increase light levels on windowsills by putting a piece of white card or tin foil behind the seed trays to reflect light.
- Remember to water the compost before the weekends and check it when you get back the following week. Compost can usually hold enough water for 4 or 5 days but will need more in warm rooms or if put in direct sunlight near windows. So, for longer breaks it is best to ensure that someone can water them or can take them home with them during the break. You can place the compost in a container that holds water and put some water in the bottom of it, but don't add too much. If the soil stays very damp too long the plants can rot.
- Even the most experienced gardeners don't expect all their seeds to germinate. So please plant many more than you need and be prepared to resow if the first ones don't germinate - any surpluses will be sure to find homes elsewhere.

Summary of processes and tasks for growing plants from seed

PROCESS	TOP TIPS	WHY
Prepare seed trays or pots	Ensure trays & pots have drainage holes. Use seed compost. Keep it warm. Gently firm the compost down in the pots.	Think of seed compost as a sort of 'baby food'. You wouldn't give a newborn baby a roast dinner.
Sow seeds	Spread them out. A few big seeds in a pot covered with compost. Small seeds can be sprinkled on a tray of compost before covering with a very small layer of compost. Cover with clear plastic lid or polythene bag.	So the roots don't get tangled for when you put them into bigger pots
Label and water	Label the rows of seeds. Spray with a fine misting of water. Inspect daily to check surface of compost is damp.	So you know which seedlings are which. They're tiny plants and won't need much water.
Watch for germination	Increase light levels if possible and remove lid or bag. Use white card or tinfoil behind plants to reflect extra light	So the plants don't grow too thin as they reach for the light.
Potting on	Use a "dibber" or pencil to carefully lift individual plants (or a clump of seedlings if they are very small) and re-pot in bigger containers (with drainage holes) using multi-purpose peat free compost. Water, and keep them in the same place as before for a week or so.	To enable them to grow bigger
Care of young plants - hardening off	Once the seedlings are growing on nicely, they can gradually be acclimatised to outdoors. Put the young plants outside for a few hours every day until eventually they can live outside. If frost is forecast, loosely cover with a bit of horticultural fleece or even newspaper overnight.	Try and pick a mild period of weather to harden off the young plants so they don't get a shock and stop growing.

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