

expresshomes &amp; gardens

To advertise in this section

020 7098 2913 class.property@express.co.uk  
www.dailyexpressproperty.com

# A hobby that's growing on us

**ANDREA WATSON** is among the increasing number of people using their plot as a veg patch

**H**AVING foolishly declared to members of the family that I was going to be entirely self-sufficient in vegetables this autumn, it was with a sense of real purpose that I visited the RHS's Horticultural Halls in London for its pre-spring garden show.

After years of trying to raise nothing more complicated than a few potatoes and some lettuce, the challenge of striving to live off my home-grown produce was an ideal way to focus the mind. Instead of the usual slapdash approach to preparing the soil, germinating and planting out, it would all have to be done properly. Every seed was going to count.

At the RHS event a significant number of exhibitors were showing products that could help with the challenge. Thankfully I'm not the only nut in the village. Growing your own has become the nation's latest obsession.

You'll note, for example, that Gardman ([www.gardman.co.uk](http://www.gardman.co.uk)) has devoted the first pages of its gorgeous 2011 catalogue to the subject, while seed specialist Unwins ([www.unwins.co.uk](http://www.unwins.co.uk)) places fruit and vegetables right at the top of its website menu alongside flowers.

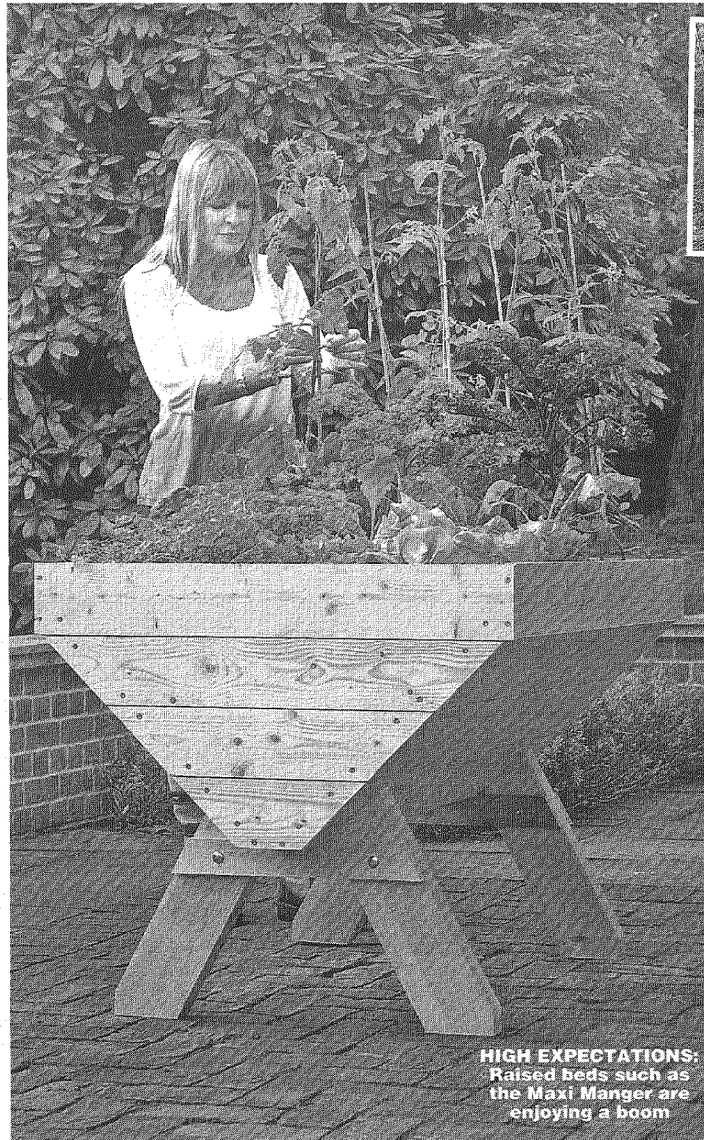
It's a remarkable change from the time when allotments lay bare, gathering weeds while the nation's green-fingered gardeners lavished their attention on specimen shrubs and fancy flowers. Now we're busy going back to the land, there are waiting lists for allotments as hard-pressed households see growing your own as a good way to get the recommended five a day at a discount.

I don't like to dampen anyone's enthusiasm but the plain fact is that in the early stages it may not be cheaper to grow your own at all, however enjoyable and healthy it may be.

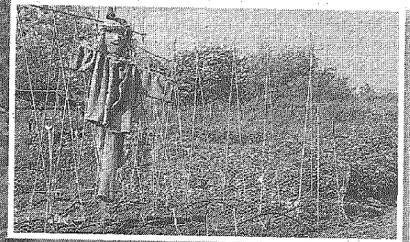
One enthusiast admitted investing some £40 in containers that produced a handful of potatoes at the end of the season. There is all sorts of eye-catching equipment out there to tempt consumers but the fact is that it's probably best to learn to grow before investing too heavily.

One of the more practical stands at the RHS event was that of Harrod Horticultural ([www.harrodhorticultural.co.uk](http://www.harrodhorticultural.co.uk)), one of the top specialists in essentials and accessories for successful growing, from fruit cages and pest control to tools. It has a good line in raised beds, which are enjoying a surge in popularity, offering the advantage of growing tricky customers in suitable soils, extra height to allow deeper rooting and, of course, the chance of working at a comfortable height.

Its Maxi Manger raised planter, standing 2ft 7in off the ground, is not only an attractive way



**HIGH EXPECTATIONS:** Raised beds such as the Maxi Manger are enjoying a boom



**TAKING ROOT:** Don't be scared of growing veg

to bring on your greens but a real boon to anyone with a bad back or those who are wheelchair-bound. The idea is to plant salads and shallow-rooting crops round the perimeter and the plants that need depth, such as carrots and parsnips, in the centre.

All very well but even this investment will be useless if you don't get the basics right. As an experienced destroyer of all but the most robust vegetable species, I was interested to come across Pippa Greenwood's stand ([www.pippagreenwood.com](http://www.pippagreenwood.com)) offering a foolproof grow-your-own system.

The way this works is you choose the crops you want to grow and they're delivered to your door at planting time. This is followed up with weekly emails from Pippa, with advice and tips on the crops you've selected, including pinching out, watering, pest control and feeding.

## Basics

Among vegetables that are top of most home-growers' wish lists is the versatile tomato. Marshalls ([www.marshalls-seeds.co.uk](http://www.marshalls-seeds.co.uk)) has grafted plants, ideal for smaller gardens because they can be planted in the same spot year after year.

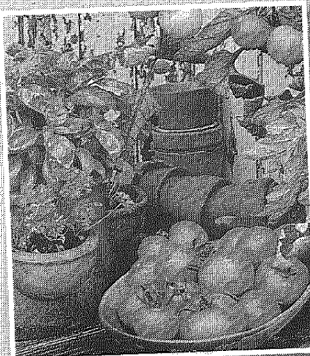
The plants are grafted onto a hardy base plant that is highly resistant to soil-borne diseases, which are the bane of small gardens. The plants also give a higher yield and they are particularly recommended for growing in greenhouses.

Suttons ([www.suttons.co.uk](http://www.suttons.co.uk)), whose stand made the mind boggle with the sheer variety of seeds, has noticed that many novice vegetable growers find the whole thing just too daunting. Its new growing-to-eat catalogue aims to conquer their fears.

For extra help, Suttons offers beginners an essential vegetable starter pack, which contains potato tubers and onion sets and a selection of plants including beetroot, lettuce, spinach, tomato, courgette, peppers and cucumber. Also included are carrot and parsnip seeds and runner beans.

If you can't raise these from scratch, you might as well give up the whole idea of growing your own and go for flowers.

I do believe that nasturtiums, which are dead easy to germinate, are quite tasty in salads.



## Top tips to make sure that you reap what you sow

MARTIN FIDDES, of Harrod Horticultural, explains how to grow vegetables from seed.

**Choose seed-sowing compost and let it warm up slightly in a garage, shed or greenhouse before you use it. This reduces both the shock to seeds and germination time.**

Fill seed trays or pots and firm the compost before

sowing the seeds. The more soil that the seed is in contact with, the more chance it has of germinating.

**Water the soil gently from above or, better still, stand trays or pots in water to allow the soil to take up water from beneath.**

After sowing your seeds cover them with a layer of fine compost or vermiculite.

**Place pots or trays in your chosen location. Sunny windowsills, propagators or under a special grow light are all ideal. Cover with a propagator lid or clear polythene to help create the humid conditions that seeds really love.**

Don't let soil dry out. It's surprising how quickly compost in a propagator or on a sunny windowsill can become parched.

**Once the seedlings have emerged and their leaves are visible, remove polythene or the propagator lid for maximum exposure to light. Move them to a window if necessary.**

When seedlings are large enough to handle,

transplant them into bigger pots or outside. Handle seedlings by their leaves, never the stem, and fill their home with John Innes No.1 potting compost for best results.

**Remember to keep the seedlings well watered and fed and hoe between lines to deter weeds.**

