

GROWING ON THE WEB



Grapes are grown in most gardens in Hungary

This month we travel to Hungary and meet gardening blogger Dominika Bálint-Halas whose love of cooking led her to grow her own fruit and veg

Dominika got caught by the growing bug while visiting the UK

How long have you been growing your own food?

Having spent my childhood summers at my grandparents' countryside farm, I was infected by the love of kitchen gardens from an early age. My best childhood memories are of strawberry fields and currant plants, and I've been working on recreating that idyllic atmosphere in my own garden for more than seven years now.

What got you interested in growing your own food?

This all started with the love of cooking. Once my husband and I started experimenting with cooking, we soon realised the importance of quality ingredients and their effect on the final result of the food. Therefore, we have started building connections with a butcher, a fishmonger, a dairy farmer and a lamb farmer as

well. But we have always had problems sourcing good vegetables – they usually weren't tasty enough – so in the end we simply didn't eat that many of them. After building our very first raised bed (which was about a metre high for more comfort while gardening) our jaws dropped and we were delighted that even the seedlings had more aroma than the vegetables we could find in those days. After the first successes in growing our own crops, we realised that raised beds don't need to be one metre high, so we halved their height and doubled the growing area. That was the year when I worked for a couple of months in London and saw how much the concept of "grow your own fruit and veg" was trending, so I started reading a lot about it, without any real aims. However, after visiting Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's River Cottage in Devon and a couple of fine restaurants in the area with kitchen gardens, it became clear to me that I'd also like to be a part of that wonderful trend.

Do allotment gardens exist in Hungary?

We are very lucky in Hungary since both the climate and the soil is typically good for growing quality vegetables. Parallel to the decrease of the traditional "grandma's" allotments, a new generation are taking over and choosing to establish allotment patches in their gardens. ➤



As I see it, beginners in gardening plant more consciously than their ancestors: they are using organic techniques aimed at biodiversity in an attempt to support healthy soil life, birds, insects and hedgehogs.

Is growing your own fruit and vegetables a popular pastime in Hungary?

The idea of growing your own absolutely fits into the current trends in Hungary, since it is at the same time sustainable, local, organic, handmade, seasonal, plastic free, healthy and delicious. Many of this new generation do new-wave gardening in raised beds. This trend is popular in the suburbs of the major cities – the areas where the majority of my followers are living. You don't have to move to the countryside to grow your own crops, you can do that on your balcony too – according to my experience people love this idea! Well, of course it's rather an urban trend. I once told my grandmother that I have my own garden and that I'm writing about it and she asked "then why did you study at university?"

How does it compare with the gardening scene in the UK?

The Hungarian climate is much drier than the British climate so the biggest task here is to make sure there is enough water for the plants. We traditionally export many heat-loving plants, like tomatoes, paprika and cucumbers, and in some of the more Mediterranean-like regions of the country in recent years one can also see olives and kiwis. And compared to the majority of your readers we have

WHEN DOES THE GROWING SEASON START IN HUNGARY?

We start seed sowing in March (usually with a little fleece protection) – hopefully this year's weather will be as good as usual.

virtually no slugs and snails.

Do you tend to your allotment alone or do friends and family help?

Friends of a gardener are the lucky ones – they queue for the surplus of young plants and help me during harvest time. It's pretty well known that with gardening you often need DIY solutions, so my husband helps me out with these. And gardening with my two-year-old daughter is definitely slower, but she has helped me learn how to be super-productive.

What are your favourite crops to grow?

A gardener can be the greatest gourmet in the kitchen: we can get any veg at its optimal ripeness and freshest form, so therefore we can grow the vegetables that the top restaurants use. I prefer the colourful and not typical versions of vegetables which look attractive on the plate. The 'Tonda di Chioggia' beetroots, the 'Gold Rush' zucchini (courgettes), the 'Black Cherry' tomatoes, the neon leafed Swiss chards, and the mixed colour carrots are my favourites. I plant most of the veg more densely than specified or harvest them earlier to put the tastiest baby-sized veggies on the table, and I'm trying to use as many plants as possible from root to shoot.

What was your most successful crop this year?

As pests start discovering my garden in a more intense way, my bio toolkit of protection is also expanding. Last year was a breakthrough with cucurbits. The killer mosaic virus has been knocked off by using resistant seeds. The orange oil spraying worked perfectly to avoid powdery mildew, and I supplied them with homemade liquid fertilizer made of dandelions. It's a fantastic nutrient, if a little stinky. Zucchini's need a lot of water. Last year I used hydro gel around their roots to retain water in the soil. This worked very well and the plants' immune systems also survived the hot summer well.

Finding good pairings for the plants can make a lot of difference. Hence a crop rotation plan is important. I've prepared one for my readers for four raised beds to show what a huge variety of plants can fit into a relatively small space. ▶



A lovely bunch of colourful radishes

WHAT ARE THE MOST POPULAR CROPS TO GROW?

Root vegetables, paprika and tomato are the top three in every kitchen garden.



Roasted squash... a delicious treat



Dominika's daughter Emma helps her on the plot



Some sunflowers grown in the raised beds



Dandelions steeped in a bucket of water to make fertiliser



Courgettes, sweetcorn, beans and nasturtium flowers grown in the same bed

Is there one fruit or veg you would encourage our readers to grow?

Here in Hungary there are almost no gardens without grapes. A few vine-stocks can ensure enough fruit and home-grown grapes have a lovely and delicate taste. As far as I know, there used to be and still are vineyards in the UK. If you have a warm, sunny spot in your garden, you just have to find the right type of grapes. A large pot is usually enough, but it also looks beautiful as foliage in a walled garden. If you plant hyssop in the vicinity, it will nourish the vine and boost its taste. My favourite variety is the 'Treasure of Pannonia' which is popular and is grown in the town where we live near Budapest. The 'Winter Muscat' is also a hardy variety of grape, since it tolerates cold wet weather well and produces a lot of fruit.

How does social media help you and your followers to grow better veg?

I'm very proud of our very active online group, where kitchen gardeners share tips, post pictures of crops they are proud of and get answers to their questions. Gardeners like to share their knowledge so when one needs support on an issue, group members offer answers at an unbelievable speed. The discussions in the group also inspire me when writing my articles – in fact, one of my most popular articles "Top 10 excuses for not gardening" was written together with the members of the group ■



A stunning range of colourful toms

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