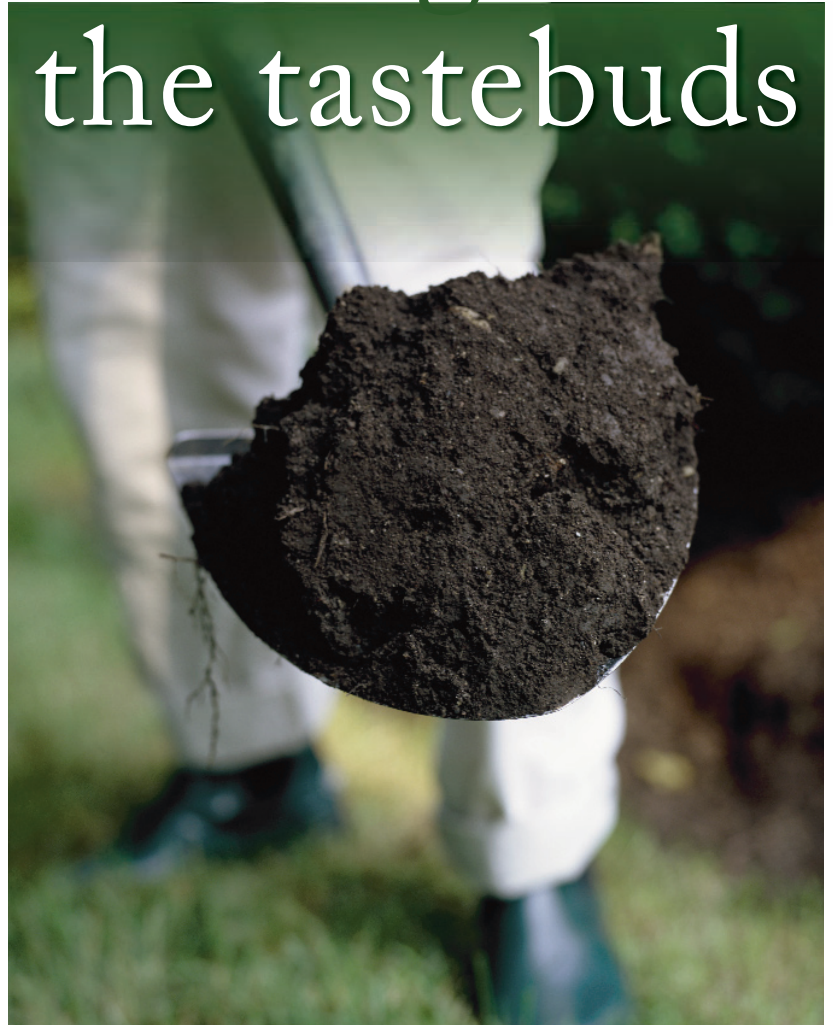




After setting up his new vegetable garden, Sir Roddy is leaving the earthworms to do much of the work

Titivating

the tastebuds



THIS is an exciting time of the year in the garden which has by this time taken on a green mantle once more. There is a danger that I might become over-excited on account of my new vegetable garden that is now as good as complete. Positioned in the sunniest part of the garden, the main structure is finished and what a pleasure it is to gaze upon. Neighbours stop to chat without fail. There is a frisson in the air.

This taste-bud-titivating food production plot is built using six inch pre-treated planks (6" x 1"), one placed on top of another to achieve the desired height of one foot. There are six beds each strengthened by 3" x 3" posts in each corner decorated a-top with wooden finials, and smaller pegs along the longer sides, all secured with long screws. I did think of using old railway sleepers, but I do not like the way they can smell of tar on hot days. Each bed is four feet wide, meaning that you never need to step on any soil or to stretch uncomfortably, and because each is raised by one foot, the necessity to bend down low is reduced. The intersecting paths, which I am planning to carpet in gravel, are three feet wide to allow easy access for a wheelbarrow. Ideally I would have chosen brick paths, laid end to end, but my budget does not run to them. A honey-coloured, rounded gravel, laid on a semi-permeable membrane, an efficacious weed-smotherer, is a good compromise.

The most important consideration when creating a vegetable plot is to ensure that your soil is free of perennial weeds in order to reduce future maintenance. So, once the beds were built I dug the soil thoroughly within each to remove any sign of the likes of bindweed and couch grass. The bottom six inches I filled with farmyard manure which I managed to source locally. This will certainly help to smother any remaining weeds at original ground level, especially as a further six inches of top soil has been added as a top layer. I have not chosen sterilised top soil because it is so expensive and, more importantly, it tends to produce poor results initially. When you have spread your top soil up to the top it is important to tread it down with the heel of your boots. You will be surprised how much more top soil you will need. Now I am going to leave the earthworms (the best friends a gardener could have) to integrate the muck into the soil.

This month I will be planting 'Kingston' F1 hybrid carrots, successive salad crops, and marigolds in trays to join, amongst others, parsnips, although the traditional time to sow them is the second half of February. It is best to choose a still day as parsnip seed is light and flat and easily blown out of the hand. Parsnips are an invaluable winter crop, easy to grow and requiring little attention. Because I have a deep, friable, stone-free soil I plan to grow a long-rooted variety such as the F1 hybrid 'Gladiator' which I will be able to continue cropping

until next February. It is just as well to plant three seeds per station so that they can be thinned. Such thinnings need to be thrown away as they seldom produce decent roots after having being transplanted. Parsnips always used to be the staple diet before the advent of the potato. They prove tastier roasted, having been par-boiled, along with the Sunday roast.

Another perfect choice for the beginner, which I also sowed in April, is 'perpetual spinach', more accurately called Spinach Beet, a type of beetroot. This is a virtually trouble-free crop when it comes to pests and diseases although small plants should be protected against slugs. Unlike annual spinach it will not bolt if the soil is allowed to become too dry. The same plants can be left in the ground year after year (for several years), and if covered with a cloche can be cropped throughout the winter during milder spells. The same goes for Swiss Chard, or indeed ruby chard which can be included in the flower border if you do not have the room for a vegetable plot. The leaves off these leaf beets are tastier if picked before they become full size. Beetroot itself, another easy crop, is also tastier if picked while the roots are small. ■