

Vegetable Growing - A Money-Saving Guide

By Jonathan Stevens

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Introduction

Ah, ten years ago.

There I was, twenty-four years old, not long out of university and still the proud owner of a full head of hair. My gardening-mad mother, Jan, was undergoing treatment for cancer and was becoming increasingly frustrated at not being able to get outside and dig. So one chilly afternoon my brother and I helped her make a couple of raised beds to grow some vegetables.

Mum has always loved gardening, but growing vegetables was new for her, and gave her something fresh to focus on whilst her treatment continued. We spent evenings looking at books and seed catalogues, and I became mildly obsessed with the *River Cottage* TV programmes. The summer came, and together we spent time growing vegetables and thankfully, mum kicked cancer's butt.

I realised a few things during this time: cancer is rubbish, mums are incredibly important and we should always be nice to them, and growing vegetables for your dinner is absolutely the most satisfying, glorious hobby.

The following year, mum and I took on a redundant allotment plot together. Three years later, mum stopped watching over my shoulder, and I figured I must be doing something right. A steady stream of incredibly tasty fruit and veg continued to wing its way to my kitchen and soon I was spending most weekends and plenty of summer evenings at the plot. I'd found there was something joyful about allotments, growing your own food and living within the seasons, and I longed to tell the world about this new discovery. However, I found the fussiness of cauliflowers and just how much better homegrown tomatoes taste tricky subjects to shoehorn into conversation. My football team weren't overly interested, and my mates humoured me for a minute or so before moving onto more suitable pub discussion - nothing to do with allotments.

So, like you do these days, I set up a social media account and found a hashtag. Suddenly, everything changed, and at the click of a button I was exposed to hundreds of people who loved growing vegetables! Some even enjoyed discussing cauliflowers, and some even went as far as writing about their escapades on allotments. I began reading blogs and my evenings were spent working through the feed on my blog reader rather than watching the TV.

I realised that, despite my initial difficulties finding people to talk to, allotments were becoming popular again and I'd just been looking in the wrong place. Lots of people were discovering the wonders of growing your own food, and like me, many were newcomers. We talked on Twitter and passed on tips to each other, and as I watched these useful nuggets of information gradually disappear down my feed, I developed an urge to try and save them. I wanted to collect all the great advice I'd picked up from the Internet and fellow plot holders,

and put it all in one place, whilst celebrating the marvellous, life affirming qualities of growing your own food. I wanted to help people and I wanted to show my absolute happiness at being an allotment holder, so I bought some webspace and Real Men Sow, the 'cheery allotment blog', was born.

At the same time, I embarked on a mission to find out how much I could save by growing my own fruit and vegetables on a half-sized allotment plot. By this time, I'd moved in to my own place and had become intrigued by the cost of food in the shops and concerned about the cash in my pocket. I began weighing my harvests and comparing the weight to equivalent supermarket prices.

I made a spreadsheet to calculate savings, and weighed every fruit and veg harvest for twelve months, from leafy salads to bumper butternut squashes. My lovely girlfriend thought I was nuts, but hey, I'm a man, we do these odd projects. She's now my wife, so I guess it didn't put her off too much.

My calculations told me that I saved approximately £500 growing my own fruit and veg that year. I found the project strangely fun, so ever since I've geared my allotment and veg patches towards maximum productivity and focused on those fruit and veg that I now know save me and my new family the most money.

I wrote up my monthly findings on Real Men Sow, and to my surprise, a few people started following the blog. By the end of the year, a few more were following, some had downloaded my sample spreadsheet, and I'd even been mentioned briefly in a gardening magazine. I checked my web stats and a fair chunk of people had taken the time to visit and read a few pages of Real Men Sow over the past twelve months. I asked my mum if it was her repeatedly pressing F5, but she denied this. To my amazement, I had readers...

Since then, Real Men Sow has been featured in national newspapers, magazines and on TV, and now receives over a 100,000 visits a year. My blog's popularity still surprises me, but it is lovely to know that people are reading what I'm putting up. This book is the culmination of seven years of blogging, and focuses on frugal allotmenting, including planning your plot, looking after the plants and practical tips for keeping your costs down, such as clever ways of making freebie alternatives to common growing tools.

There is also a section offering advice on which fruit and veg will save you the most money, as well as a guide on the key seasonal jobs for spring, summer, autumn and winter. The book is aimed beginners and improvers alike, and designed to offer uncomplicated advice on cultivating reliable and satisfying crops that not only save you money, but build veg growing confidence too.

For me, there is no more important year in allotment growing than the first one. The first year shapes your veg future, changes eating habits and most importantly, decides whether you're even going to like allotmenting at all. So getting off to a good start in allotment life is vital, and that's something else I'm hoping the book realises: to help beginners achieve a fruitful first year, rather than hanging up tools at the end of the summer because all that grew were weeds.

When I started out, I was lucky to have my mother. As I have said, she is a passionate, lifelong gardener, and at the beginning she watched over me, lending a helping hand whenever I

needed it. She made my first year a success, and if it wasn't for her, I'd not be loving my allotment the way I do today.

I hope in some way this book goes a little way to helping you enjoy a productive first year – a year that lives long in the memory as the springboard to many more wonderful days on your allotment plot, and saves you a few quid in the process.