

I have been planting broad beans, fava beans to some. Immortalised for a generation with liver and Chianti. Delicious I'm sure, although I would choose a different species of liver. I used to plant my beans in November, as they are a crop which can stand low temperatures. They would germinate and grow an inch or maybe two then sit there doing little except turning an unpleasant shade of yellow if there was a period of prolonged cold. My second sowing in February or early March would always catch up with the November beans.

Successional sowing in general I consider to be a waste of time for all except the most ephemeral of crops - spinach, rocket, radish - or crops picked in untraditional ways. It does make sense to successively sow leeks which are picked when the size of a pencil, or beetroots no larger than golf balls. But for crops left to grow for conventional times, the lengthening daylight hours, the increasing average temperature, the stored heat in the ground, all mean that the later sowings, perhaps even six weeks later, catch up with the earlier ones. Like sowing beans in November, successional sowing looked like I was doing something positive, but really I might have been filling time, because the ground was in the wrong condition for other activities.

I have had more success with traditional varieties. Unlike modern commercial cultivars which are bred to crop uniformly at the same time, traditional varieties tend to dribble on - a slow beginning, a solid middle, a decline. I learnt the hard way. I grew dwarf French beans which came in a glut. Every other day it could take me two hours to harvest, and then someone else was faced with the task of doing something with far too many beans.

Growing a range of varieties also helps - varieties which mature at different rates ensures a supply of something. It also diffuses the risk. Every year, I grow five different types of courgettes. Last year, 2021, was cool and damp for most of the summer, even by British standards. My usually reliable and prolific 'Striata d'italia' cropped sparsely. 'Tondo Chiara di Nizza', on the other hand, gave and gave. The patty pan 'Custard White' yielded below average. And so it goes. The sweetcorn was five weeks later than expected and in the week it came good, a badger or a muntjac helped itself to half of the them. I cannot fault their taste as, however tardy, it was deliciously sweet. In a previous life, I had a similar problem with a Labrador bitch named Tosca. I needed to leave the glasshouse door open in hot weather as the windows and vents provided insufficient cooling. I would also damp down the path and gravel beds at lunchtime as evaporation causes cooling. Tosca had followed me into the glass house one day and I watched as she sniffed the trusses of tomatoes and carefully picked and ate the perfectly ripe ones. Her nose was more acute than my eye, but I was glad to learn why I had been losing my ripe crop.

I have written elsewhere, in homage to Margery Fish, that we need to garden for others as well as ourselves and I, like she, have the animal kingdom in mind. It is a good principle, but just as not all plants are welcome in the curated places we call gardens, neither are all animals. I don't wish to grow sweetcorn to feed meandering badgers, of cabbages for caterpillars, or lettuces for slugs, and I certainly don't want to lose tomatoes to Labradors, operatic or otherwise.