

# gardening

by Vanessa Rainbow

## 'ethically sound' seeds

One of the joys of this time of year is choosing and gathering seeds. The little grains hold the sweet-shop promise of heavenly delights. Here are some tips for ethical seed gathering...

**Buy organic.** Crops grown for the seed industry are heavy users of synthetic agricultural chemicals. Buying organic is the best choice for the environment and the seed is more suited to organic growing methods.

**Buy 'heirloom' or 'heritage'.** These seeds have two main advantages. They are non-hybrid which means that you can save the seed from some of your crop to grow again next year, thereby saving money and reducing carbon footprint. In addition, many are old varieties which we are losing at a rapid rate. Growing them saves biodiversity and, in the case of fruit and vegetables, aids food security. Garden Organic ([www.gardenorganic.org.uk](http://www.gardenorganic.org.uk)) is a charity which supplies organic heirloom seeds and there are specialist companies on the internet who sell them.

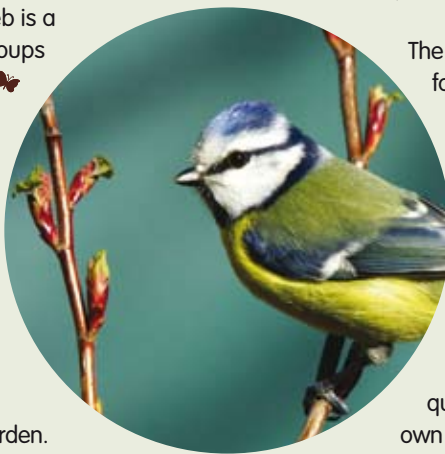
**Swap.** If you have seeds left over then you can swap them for something else. Joining a seed swap group means you can swap for just the cost of postage. It also puts you in touch with like-minded gardeners. The web is a great way to find a suitable seed swap groups or events ([www.gardenswapshop.co.uk](http://www.gardenswapshop.co.uk)). 🦋

## feathered friends

Blue tits are colourful, fun and lively gardeners' companions and some of the easiest birds to attract. They look for new homes from mid-February, so now is the ideal time of year to entice them to settle in your garden. Bird boxes, feeders and baths can be purely functional, but they can also add to the aesthetics and design of your garden.

Make or buy a box with a hole approximately 25mm across. Shelter the box from strong sunlight to prevent it overheating and position at least 1.5m off the ground for safety from predators. A peanut feeder is suitable for blue tits, who perform nimble acrobatics while feeding.

A bird bath will most certainly be appreciated by your feathered friends. Beautiful baths can be bought but recycling scrap to make your own can be equally satisfying. It needs to be less than 10cm deep, have a comfortable surface for the birds to perch on, and sloping sides. A suspended frisbee, large terracotta saucer, or upside down bin lids are inventive possibilities. Pedestals can be fashioned from scrap wood, tall chimney pots or even old lamp stands. A prickly bush or thorny cuttings around the bath can deter an ambush of the feline nature! Consider making the bath both easy to clean and to refill, and tuck it in the shade so the water doesn't evaporate. Finally, don't forget to find a comfortable spot to sit and enjoy the entertainment once these enchanting friends have moved in. 🦋



## the Cuban connection

An amazing story from across the ocean, in Cuba, has inspired urban people in the UK to get growing. The Soviet Union's withdrawal of support to Cuba in the 1990's led to an economic crisis as well as a lack of food, fertiliser and pesticide. Serious food scarcity ensued, especially in the cities. The solution was creative, organic and led by the city people who simply started growing. The term *organopónicos* refers to the initial use of disused concrete hydroponic units by filling them with compost and using them to grow produce organically. The units had previously grown vegetables in water, a process needing fertiliser. However, their success led to the Cubans using areas such as vacant parking lots and abandoned building sites in a similar way, as deep containers filled with compost can be placed anywhere. The *organopónicos* not only provide healthy food but have transformed the aesthetics of urban areas, created employment and re-enforced community spirit. Apartment blocks overlook rows of lush crops and customers fill their bags with freshly picked harvest. In Cuba, the government now provides land and support; in return asks for about one fifth of the harvest to use in schools, hospitals and state centres.

It's an inspirational trade that benefits everyone.

The Cubans have shown us that the responsibility for food lies in our own hands and that we can all use the most unlikely spaces to grow wonderful food, cheaply and organically, simply by using containers. Even a concrete yard or roof terrace can be turned into a vegetable garden. Containers can be plant pots, grow bags, potato barrels or deep raised beds. The challenge is to maintain regular watering and good soil. A water supply can be helped with water butts off drain pipes. Buying good quality compost to start and then making your own with a wormery will enrichen your soil. Herbs, salad, tomatoes, potatoes, beans and carrots all flourish in containers and are fun to grow.

Another important lesson from Cuba is community spirit. The project Organoponico UK ([www.organoponico.co.uk](http://www.organoponico.co.uk)) has taken the Cuban concept and applied it here, adapted to our climate. Founders Andrew Joel, a skilled and passionate grower, and Dr Jed Long of Nottingham University have gathered volunteers to metamorphosise a grotty area of council wasteland in Nottingham into an abundant vegetable garden for community benefit. The site acts as a hub to the community, offering free advice, seeds and, most importantly, hands-on support to those wishing to start growing at home. In its infancy the project has already attracted interest from schools and government organisations. Cuba has proven that growing organically can become a major solution rather than a lifestyle alternative, and one in which we can all take part, benefit from and enjoy together. So, collar a pack of seeds, kidnap a tub and participate in the *organopónicos* solution! 🦋