

# A venture into planting by the moon

Liz Ware

Mention today that you plant by the moon and there is a fair chance you'll be gently ridiculed. But it hasn't always been the case. Turn the clock back just 200 years and the response is likely to have been completely different. The lunar calendar was just one of many factors that would have been taken into account by anyone working with the soil. To fail to do so might have seemed like madness, rather than the other way round. So, should we gardeners of the 21st century be considering the moon's position as we tend our gardens? Or is it just the kind of mumbo-jumbo that is best left in the past?

Two years ago, after a decade of gardening organically, I found myself diving head first into a completely different way of thinking. I'd been looking for a blog subject for the website of our county's newly formed Gardens Trust. The Trust's first event had been a visit to a wonderfully diverse and very healthy-looking biodynamic garden, so having a go at planting by the moon and reporting on the results was an obvious choice.

I decided to focus my efforts on my vegetable garden where the typical combination of annual flowers and vegetables would give me a good range of fast-growing plants to observe and on which to report. I bought myself a lunar sowing and planting calendar, and determined to follow it to the letter.

Maria Thun's *Biodynamic Calendar* notes the lunar cycles and planetary movements. She divides plants into 4 groups: leaf, root, flower, and fruit. Seeds are sown, cultivated and harvested on days allocated to their group – days which give the optimum conditions. Sowing parsnips on a root day, for example, ensures good strong root growth. Tomatoes, on the other hand, should be sown, hoed and cultivated on fruit days. Unsurprisingly, any flowering plant, annual or perennial, should be sown on a flower day.

In no time at all, my calendar (and its advisory notes) had become my constant companion and I had completely rethought my seed sowing. No more wandering around for weeks with half-used seed packets in my pockets, then having a mass sowing session when I got round to it. I was relieved to read that it wouldn't be a complete disaster if I got things wrong – I just wouldn't get the results I'd intended. Peas and beans sown on a root rather than a fruit day for example, would produce less fruit but more nitrogen-producing root nodules and so make a good green manure. An excellent mistake for anyone wanting to improve the condition of next year's soil, but not so good for this year's hungry family. Rather more alarmingly, there were some days when the calendar advised me to keep out of the garden altogether.

I also had to take note of whether the moon was ascending or descending. While seeds could be sown on any of the specified days, other garden tasks would be more successful if carried out in the right half of the month. Apparently, during an ascending moon, plant sap

rises more strongly, making it a good time for grafting. When it's descending, plants take root more readily – so this is when any transplanting should be done. Sap movement is slower too, so it's a good time to trim hedges and prune trees.

My gardening diary for March 2009 is full of excited exclamation marks. I'd sown parsley, dill, corn salad, coriander, basil and two varieties of lettuce on a leaf day. Within 4 days of sowing all but the parsley had germinated. The same applied to the cornflower and cosmos that I had sown on flower days. I couldn't remember germination ever being quite so reliable and speedy. Whatever I sowed on the correct day did well. Other gardeners who were following the blog reported similar experiences.

My excitement was short lived. There was an unexpected problem just around the corner. Those strong little seedlings did so well that they were ready to be transplanted before the moon started to descend – the optimum time for planting out. What should I do? Should I cheat? Or leave the poor things to get long and leggy? I did neither. I ate anything that was edible and made a mental note to sow the next batch not only on the appropriate day but also as close to 'transplanting time' as possible. Then I could be sure of planting them out while they were still at their best.

Feeling harassed by this pedantic method of gardening, I had a very helpful tip from someone in her second year of lunar planting: be organised. She had a planting list for each month and prepared her allotment or pots ahead of the planting date, so that seed sowing took only a few minutes. I tried it and it helped. But what were the end results? Did I finish the season surrounded by vast quantities of fruit, vegetables, and flowers?

I'd like to be able to tell you that I had a bumper harvest and that my annual flowering plants were even more floriferous than usual. But sadly, that wouldn't be true. It was a strange summer and, as always, the conditions suited some plants more than others. Planting by the moon might give everything a flying start but it doesn't change the weather; not does it avoid the need to water, protect and compost.

However, something very measurable did change, and that was my attitude. As soon as I noticed how quickly the seeds were germinating and just how thick and fibrous the roots of the seedlings were, the discipline of doing what was right for the plant (rather than what suited my own timetable) started to be satisfying rather than irritating. Eighteen months on, I'm no longer writing the blog, but I haven't given up on the moon. Sometimes I can't avoid doing things on the 'wrong' day and I feel quite relaxed about that. But it is almost akin to giving my sons the occasional ready-meal. They still grow, but I know that I haven't provided the very best. Planting by the moon no longer feels odd. It's my new 'normal'. Now that I've mastered the basics, it's become a more measured and restful way to garden. As for the future – I think it could be time to have a go at some hardy perennials. 🌱

**Liz Ware** is a garden historian, garden writer and photographer who also loves growing and eating vegetables.

# Lunatic planting – an allotment-holder’s view

Fern Alder

It was some time in early noughties that I saw a gardening programme on television that really sparked my interest. It followed the work of a horticultural degree student at Wisley, who was required to manage an allotment-sized plot and decided to put the Gardening-by-the-Moon theory to the test. This was, of course, a luxury many of us ordinary mortals wouldn’t have the time for – to undertake a trial in a measured and scientific way.

The student divided the plot into two equal halves, and gardened one side quite randomly and, on the other, religiously followed the rules in the book *Gardening and Planting by the Moon* by Nick Kollerstrom. It goes without saying that the planting on each side was replicated exactly. The results of this experiment were really quite extraordinary: the two sides were obviously very different. An archway with climbing plants, its pillars one on each side, showed enormous visual difference. The crops were strikingly different in quality and quantity. In late summer, when the crops were harvested and weighed, the ‘lunatic’ side came out extraordinarily well, with the yields of crops far outweighing those from the randomly gardened side.

As a long-term allotment holder I was excited about the whole concept, and was of course fascinated to see whether I too could increase my yields by using these methods. I got the book and tried to get to grips with the information about the theory, much of which I have to admit I have been unable to relate to, no doubt owing to my own shortcomings. In a nutshell,



Carrots sown on a ‘root’ day.



Carrots sown randomly, actually on a ‘fruit’ day.

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the essence of bio-dynamic gardening is to plant when the moon is waxing and the soil is moist, and to harvest when the moon is waning.

The system, now hailed as trendy and newfangled, and adopted by a whole new generation of young gardeners, in fact draws on ancient traditions practised by the ancient Egyptians and many farmers and growers down the ages. I am happy to be made aware of the life rhythms in nature that mysteriously connect the growth of plants with the lunar cycle. Convincing scientific studies have over the years appeared in highly reputable publications such as *New Scientist*.

However, the practical side interests me more. The book largely takes the form of a calendar which starts in October and lasts for a full fifteen months to the following December. Each page covers one week, leaving plenty of space for note taking, reminders and observations. I have found this particularly useful as I need any help I can get to stay organised – I find I can keep records in one place with great ease, replacing all those slips of paper that were so easily lost.

At irregular intervals, the calendar shows a large X on a particular day, accompanied by the words ‘No Planting’. I find these ‘forbidden’ days most frustrating, and particularly in the spring, when there is so much I want to get on with, I practically have to sit on my hands to comply.

Thus far, I’ve concentrated on sowing and planting out fruit, vegetables and salad crops on my allotment, but I’m aware that most readers will be more interested in growing hardy ornamental plants, to which, of course, the same rules also apply.

The early growing season always manages to surprise me with the intensity of the sudden flush of activity. It happens unfailingly every year, but I find it well nigh impossible to be a purist. For example, this year I decided to give my neighbours gifts of carrots sown into compost in orange buckets. I was careful to sow the first three buckets on 11th March, a root day, but then I ran out of time and compost and the remaining buckets were sown just whenever I had the opportunity. The photographs show subtle differences in the vigour of the carrots sown on root and no-root days, but as they’ve spent the season with various neighbours, with different watering and aspects, this certainly can’t be credited with the rigour demanded by a scientific trial.

I am reminded that now is the perfect time to reserve my copy of the 2012 edition and, as in previous years, I’ll buy a few extra copies to give to those I think might enjoy gardening by the moon. I’m keenly aware that for many this is just a laughable matter, but for me, the feel-good factor gained in chiming in with an ancient, and tried-and-tested, regimen provides its own satisfaction, and the ease with which I can keep notes of planting dates and the results is also very useful. 🌱

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