

Long Leeks for Exhibition

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Bed Preparation

Bed preparation is very important and must be done properly to achieve the right results. My method is firstly to mark out approximately 1 sq yard of the bed. The soil from this area is then removed to a depth of 2 feet creating a trench. The bottom is then forked over to get good drainage. I then have a board the width of the bed and 2 feet deep. This is placed next to the soil which is going to be used to fill the trench you have just made. A support cane is placed either side of the board to prevent it falling over. I then put in a layer of strawy dung in the bottom of the trench and then work in 2 ounces of fish blood and bone and 2 ounces of chicken manure pellets. This is then covered with soil from the next square yard of the bed (which has already been marked out). This process is carried out another 3 times, giving you a sandwich of 4 layers of strawy dung and 4 layers of soil. By doing this you have now created another square yard trench the same as the first one. I then put in another board and repeat the process of the strawy dung, soil and fertiliser again in the new square yard. This is carried on until the bed is finished. The soil that was removed from the first square yard is used to fill the last trench. I leave the beds to settle over the winter. If you are growing under cover the beds will need watered several times during the winter.



Propagation

My leek growing year starts in November when I make up a mix for starting the leeks in. The mix is 3 parts peat and 1 part fine vermiculite or perlite. I then add Chempak Seed Mix to this as per the instructions on the packet. This mix is then used to fill whatever you are using to root the pips in - trays, cells, half pots - can all be used. The leek I am using currently is the Pendle Improved, bred by David Metcalfe. If you have no stock of your own make sure that you source your leeks from a reliable grower and one that has won at the highest level with them. I clip off the seed from the stock leeks around September which will force the leek into throwing up vegetative growth known as pips or grass. In mid November I cut the stalk off about 12 inches from the head. This is then placed upside down in a 5 litre bucket which is filled with water and a teaspoon of bleach to kill off any nasties lurking about. This is left for 24 hours. I then remove it from the bucket and shake it to remove the water. Next I shorten the stem to about 2 inches, then with a sharp pointed knife slit down the stem into the head very carefully. This will divide the head into two. I then divide it again giving four quarters. Once you have done this it is easier to remove the pips gently from the head. Once they are removed I give them a tidy up by removing any rubbish material around the base of the pip.



I only use the pips with a nice white base and discard any that show signs of brown etc. The pips are then wrapped in a piece of kitchen towel secured with a rubber band then placed in a jar of water for 24 hours. Next day you should see some small white roots appearing. They are now ready to put into the rooting medium. Using a dibber I make a small hole and then insert the pip and water the tray when full. The trays are then left on a hot bed set at 55 f to root, which should be in around 2 weeks.



Potting On

Once the pips are well rooted they are ready to pot on into 3 inch pots. The mix I use is:

12 gallons peat - 2 gallons soil - 2 gallons rough vermiculite. To this I add 1 packet(600g) Chempak Multipurpose Mix, 200g calcified seaweed and 50g Rootgrow powder.

A 12 inch split cane is then inserted into the pot with a green plant support clip. The pots are put back on the hotbed under 24hour lights. Approximately 4 weeks later the leeks will be ready to pot on into 4 inch pots using the above mix. However you must check the roots in the 3 inch pots to make sure they are ready to move on. Again the pots are put back on to the hot bed and under lights. Keep adjusting the supports as they grow. In another 4 weeks they should be ready to pot on into 1 litre

pots but again check the roots first. The mix for this changes to:

4 gallons soil - 4 gallons rough vermiculite or grit - 8 ounces TEV4 or Vitax Q4 - 4 ounces calcified seaweed - 4 ounces dolomite lime. This is all thoroughly mixed together and then added to 8 gallons Everris M3 and mixed together. At this stage put on higher supports and keep the leek well supported and put back on hot bed under lights which are still on 24 hours.



Water in at this stage and then only water when needed. At this time put on a 6 inch piece of pipe lagging, this helps to draw up the centre of the leek. You should also put a split cane behind the lagging and tie it to the lagging to ensure the leek is kept perfectly straight.

In February I make a start on mixing the final potting mix. This is used for the 2 litre and 4 litre pot stages and like before is a double mix.

First Mix

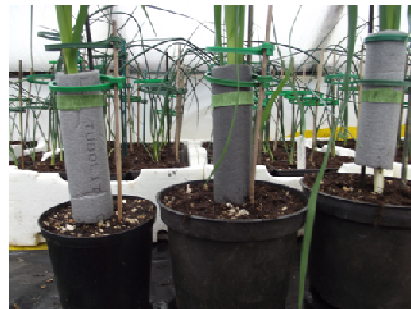
7 x 2 gallons soil
3x 2 gallons peat
2 x2 gallons rough vermiculite
36 ounces TEV 4 or Vitax Q4
18 ounces calcified seaweed
18 ounces Nutrimate
7 and a half ounces Dolomite Lime

Second Mix

9 x 2 gallons Everris C2
3x 2 gallons rough vermiculite
18 ounces calcified seaweed
18 ounces Nutrimate

Both the above mixes are made separately and then both mixed together, bagged and stored in a warm place.

Around mid February check the root system in the 1 litre pots and if well rooted they are ready to pot into 2 litre pots. Using the prepared compost put a layer in the bottom of the pot and then give a sprinkling of Rootgrow. Put in the plant and water in. At this stage I raise the pipe lagging by 2 inches and also raise the lights until just above the foliage. In addition higher supports are also put on.



In the first week of March move the plants from the growing chamber on to the open staging. Lights are now reduced from 24 hrs to 18 hrs and heating turned on to maintain 50f . Around mid March check the root system and if good pot on into a final 4 litre pot using the same compost and method as a 2 litre pot. Raise the collar by another 2 inches. By this time you will need 3 foot split canes with extra clips to support the foliage. From now until planting out extra vigilance is needed with regards to plant management. Keep plants watered, sprayed with a proprietary insecticide ,and pots turned every 7 days to keep plants straight.

Planting Out

Depending on where you are in the country you can start planting out end of April or May. About 2 weeks before planting out the beds are raked level and given a dressing of 8 ounces TEV4 or Vitax Q4 and 4 ounces of calcified seaweed per square yard. This is raked well into the bed and the bed firmed down with the back of the rake. A line is put down the middle of the bed and a marker placed at 17 or 18 inch

spacing's along the line. The line is then removed and holes are dug at the markers to hold an empty pot of the same size as your final pot. Once the bed is complete cover with clear polythene to help warm the bed temperature and keep in moisture.



When you are ready remove the empty pots and place the root ball of the leek into the hole and firm the soil around the base. Make sure that the flags are all facing the same way across the beds and water in. Once the bed is complete run a support wire along the length of the bed attached to support frames at 18 inch

high level and 2 inch behind the barrel of the leek. A support cane is attached to this wire making sure it is perfectly straight. Support rails are then placed along the upright framework along both sides of the bed. Rails along the top should be at least 20 inches apart.

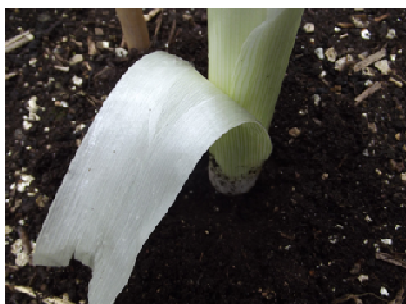


Once completed the flags of the leeks are then draped over the rails tidily. 2 weeks after planting out put on a 12 inch pipe lagging collar and a piece of reflective foil around the lagging and then tie to the support canes behind the leek. Do not over water at this stage, only about 1 pint per week around the base is required as roots will not penetrate into the bed if it is wet.

Growing On

4 weeks later remove all support clips and split canes and replace collars with 15 inch ones. Whilst doing this remove any split skins, peeling them right down to the root plate. The amount of water given can be increased from now on. The amount really depends on the climatic conditions

Towards the end of June change the collars again from 15 to 18 inches. The leeks at this stage will be growing vigorously and I now start to record the size of the leeks around the barrel and from base to button every 2 weeks using a soft measuring tape. The beds are also at this time mulched with leaf mould or straw. During July and August maintain good



management with watering, spraying, checking barrels, removing split skins and recording sizes. The leeks will put on a lot of growth at this stage. The tops will become very heavy so the flags need to be carefully draped over the supports. Sometimes they require a little help and I manipulate them by hand to lie per-

fectly across the supports. This is best done on a warm day as the flags will be more supple and will not split. Make sure the flags all lie the same way and that the collars are tight around the leek just above the button to exclude any light.



Lifting and Show Preparation

Just before the first show check with your notebook and select the amount of leeks you need that are similar in size. Remove the collars from them and if they are ok lift them. Using a spade push it down into the bed all around the leek about 10 inches away from the base. Once you have lifted it up a bit work your fingers in around the roots to remove some of the soil. I then take the leek over to the area where I will wash it. Using a hose try and remove all the soil from the roots. The barrel of the leek should be on a whole skin. The leek is then taken to the wash tub and the barrel washed very carefully with a soft sponge. The flags are also gently given a rinse in the water. The leek is then put in a safe place. Once you have the amount you need the leeks are carefully wrapped up in soft cloth and protected well.



When staging make sure that the buttons are all facing the same way and are level in length with each other. The leeks are staged on black cloth to show them off to their full potential. Once you have staged them and put your entry card down make sure they are covered with a damp cloth.



Leeks are also an extremely valuable vegetable to use in collections, with the same principles applying of uniformity and condition being paramount. In large collections they are almost always staged on a backboard

Keeping Stock

After returning from a show I select my best leeks for stock. The bottom 10 inches or so is cut off and then approximately a third of the flags peeled off to increase the size of the root plate. They are then put into water to start off the root growth. Only select those leeks that are healthy and free from any pests, damage or disease. Any leeks that have multi centres (more than one central growth) should also be discarded. Once you have good growth pot them into large pots (7 inch is fine) with a good multipurpose compost. These will then grow on and produce your leeks for the following year. Keep them frost free but not in heat.



So that's my method of growing leeks. They are not the easiest of vegetables to grow to top quality but when you do achieve it they are stunning. Whether you win or lose I hope that you remember the main thing—enjoy it!!



If you are interested in growing vegetables for exhibition or the kitchen
why not join us. Please visit www.nvsuk.org.uk

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