

How did your crops grow in 2024?

This is our third round up of the growing season, taken from surveying 548 Garden Organic members and supporters. Each year we ask people to rate the performance of ten common crops on a scale from 1 – 5. The aim is to gather information that can be used to provide a helpful summary of how each crop responded to the climatic conditions around the UK. Over the long term, this longitudinal data will be useful for examining trends and evaluating the resilience of various crops grown at a range of locations in different seasons.

Weather

Winter was mild, dull and wet. Temperatures were 1.2°C above average (for last 20 years), the second warmest on record, with many other temperature records broken. Rainfall, especially in February was very high, 130% of the average with local areas receiving 170% of the average.

Spring was warm, unsettled and dull. March was cold followed by a warm April and May, 1.3°C above average. High rainfall continued with 132% of the average and accompanied by low levels of sunshine (75% - 95%) of the average. This cold dull wet weather delayed planting for many crops.

Summer was cooler than average, especially June that was 2°C below average, that delayed the soil warming up, giving many crops a very slow start.

Autumn was closer to average, giving some crops a late reprieve, with temperatures 0.2°C above average, although there were some cooler spells contained within this. Autumn rainfall was slightly below average across the UK but showed a great deal of variability within the regions.

Summary

In the bar chart below the crops are ranked in order of performance. The ranking was determined by comparing the number of good crops to the number of poor crops. Those with large amounts of red and orange performed poorly, those with larger amounts of yellow and green performed well.

Many people were disappointed with the 2023 growing season, but it appears that the 2024 growing season managed to trump it in terms of poor performance. One grower stated:

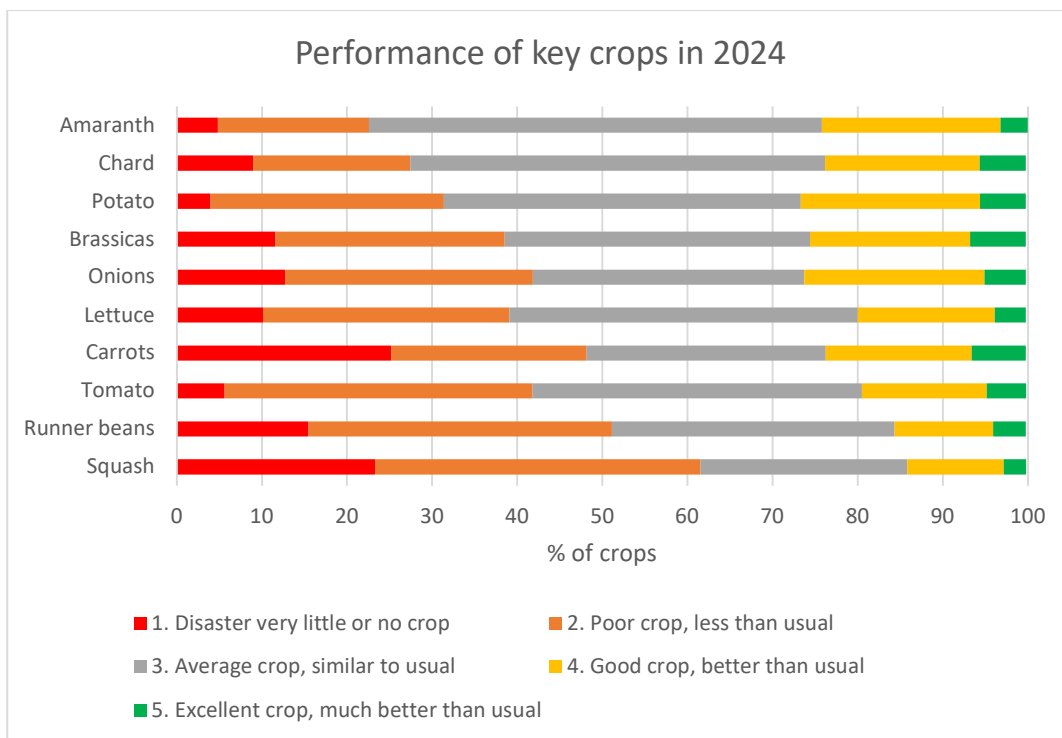
“This was the most disappointing growing year in my 50 years of gardening.”

We also collected everybody’s comments together and collected together the most common groupings of words. Of these, the two most common groupings of three words together were: “Slugs and snails” and “Later than usual”. These two phrases do a good job of summarising the 2024 growing season.

Everything seemed to be stacked against vegetable growers this year. The mild winter, followed by a cool and very damp spring meant that slugs flourished in abundance. Some people awarded the season with the title “Year of the slug”. This meant that direct sown crops were demolished as they emerged with many people repeating sowings numerous times, just to try and establish a crop. People commented that slugs attacked plants that were normally untouched, even felling tomato plants in one location. Additionally, the very cool spring meant that there were few

pollinators around, so fruits failed to set on beans, cucurbits and tomato plants. The low levels of sunshine also meant generally lower yields. There were also quite a few reports of leafy crops such as chard and lettuce starting to flower early – this phenomenon is not something we have commonly observed, it is usually associated with hot dry conditions.

There were some redeeming features of 2024. The lack of insects meant that there were fewer insects pests – cabbage white butterflies did not arrive until late august, but then, due to the mild autumn, they persisted into November. The mild autumn also allowed people to harvest a lot later than usual, although low light levels compromised yields and quality.



Individual crops:

Brassicas Many people said saying that winter brassicas did reasonably well and benefited from the cool damp season. If they managed to survive the onslaught of slugs, there were lower levels of other pests, especially compared high levels of aphids in the hot dry 2022 season. The cabbage white butterfly made a very late arrival in August / September but continued to attack crops even into November.

Runner beans

Runner beans, which are normally considered a dependable crop, again came near the bottom of the performance table. In 2022, it performed poorly as the hot weather prevented flowers from setting pods. In 2024 the poor performance was for different reasons. Slug attack was a major problem for establishment. "Slugs were a big problem with runner beans decimating plant after

plant. I set out as plugs 5 times then gave up” Low levels of pollinators early in the season also meant that pod set was poor.

Chard

Many people had to resow chard multiple times due to slug attack and cold temperatures but once it germinated, this was one of the better crops. Some people reported that it remained small then went to seed early and there were reports that beet leaf miner was causing more damage than in previous years.

Amaranth

Amaranth was only grown by a small proportion of respondents (12%). A high proportion of people marked it as having an average performance, but it has shown to be a dependable performer three years' running.

Squashes

This was the worst performing crop with 23% of crops being termed 'a disaster' and 38% termed poor. Conditions were especially harsh for growing courgettes and squashes this year. Slugs ate most of the seedlings and cold dull weather meant that plants either reached full size very late or not at all. The lack of pollinators also prevented many from setting fruit, and those that did failed to ripen. Several growers reported that courgettes grew well but squashes failed, but others found it was the opposite way round. "Courgettes and squashes struggled to get growing, quite a few rotted but at least we didn't have too many courgettes."

Lettuces

It is no surprise that slugs were a big challenge for those growing lettuces. Some of those that escaped attack did well, but generally they were slow growing. As with the chard, a significant number of growers found plants that remained small then quickly went to flower.

Tomatoes

Tomato growers had a very late season characterised by slow growth and poor fruit set due to a lack of pollination. "Many of my tomato trusses had lots of flowers but no fruit" Some people also said that the flavour was poor due to lack of sunshine. The mild weather in autumn allowed for harvesting into November, but by this time, light levels were low and couldn't make up for loss of growth earlier in the season.

Potatoes

Some growers achieved good yields of potatoes but there were complaints about poor quality texture and flavour. There was also extensive slug damage especially for any maincrop varieties left in the ground. There were some reports of late blight but no more than a typical growing season.

Carrots

Of all the crops surveyed, carrots managed to achieve the highest proportion (25%) of crops that were classed as 'disaster'. Most earlier sowings did not germinate due to slug attack. The few people who managed to get later sowings to germinate achieved good yields

Onions

Onion yields were generally smaller than average, due to the lack of summer sunshine. People also remarked on the increase in the allium leaf miner pest.