Suitable vegetable varieties for the Highlands and Islands

The range of food crops that will thrive in the north of Scotland is really impressive, unfortunately most seed catalogues and gardening books assume that we are all based in the south of England! Over the last 10 years working in the walled garden at Gordon Castle I've come up with a list of varieties that worked well for us year after year. Whilst the weather in Moray may not be quite as extreme as on some of the islands, we regularly recorded temperatures below –20 and, despite the walls, the garden at Gordon Castle is frequently battered by gale-force winds. I hope the following list is of some use, and I'm always interested to hear more recommendations!

Brassicas

Kale – 3 sowings, 6 weeks apart from March to June should give a supply of fresh greens for most of the year. Plant deep (right up to their lower leaves) to avoid wind rock.
Scarlet, *Emerald Ice*, *Red Russian*, *Cottagers*.

Cabbage – seem to thrive in cooler climates and are happiest grown close together 30-40cm apart. They really benefit from a liquid feed 6 weeks after planting.
January King, *Red Drumhead*, *Greyhound*, *Tundra*, *Brunswick*.

Cauliflower – can be tricky to grow, F1 varieties tend to all flower at the same time giving a glut so choose old-fashioned varieties if you want staggered cropping.
Graffiti, *All Year Round*, *Romanesco*.

Sprouting Broccoli – With longer days this far north, early varieties will crop in just 3 months. Sowing a mix of varieties in one row will give you a really long supply.
Santee, *Early Purple Sprouting*, *Tenderette*, *Chiltern's Purple Sprouting Mix*.

Brussels Sprouts – It's well worth supporting tall canes with a stake in the autumn and stripping away the lower leaves going into winter.
Red Ball, *Maximus*, *Darkmar*, *Brodie*.

Calabrese – The large heads sold as broccoli in the supermarkets are actually calabrese, they will continue growing side shoots after the main head is harvested.
Green Magic, *Iron Man*.

Alliums

Leeks – I always sow leeks in 5l pots in early March and plant them out in May, don't worry if they are still quite small when you plant then, they grow really quickly when they hit the ground! Beware for birds snipping them off when they're little. Blue varieties tend to be more resilient.
Blue Solaise, *Northern Lights*, *Bandit*, *Winner*.

Onions – Choose smaller sets, larger ones are more prone to bolting. They are also dead easy to grow from seed. Start sets in modules as soon as they arrive and plant out when the roots start to poke through.
Ailsa Craig, *Rosanna*, *Hercules*, *Setton*, *Sturon*, *Red Baron*.

Shallots – *Golden Gourmet*, *Bistro*, *Longor*.

Spring onions – *White Lisbon*, *Lilia*.

Peas and Beans

Garden Peas, mangetout and sugar snaps – direct-sown peas are very prone to rotting and mouse attack. I sow quite thickly into large seed trays and then plant out in clumps after about 3 weeks.
Peas – *Hurst Longshaft*, *Alderman*, *Blauwschokker*. **Mangetout** – *Golden Sunset*, *Carouby de Mausanne*. **Sugarsnap** – *Oregon Sugar Pod*, *Sugar Anne*.

French Beans – tender and prone to wind damage so may be better off in hoop beds or polycrubs. Wait until May to sow. Pale leaves are a sign of cold damage.
Climbing – *Cosse Violette*, *Cobra*, *Blue Lake*. **Dwarf** – *Safari*, *Purple Teepee*, *Annabel*, *Amethyst*.

Runner Beans – again wait until May to sow and keep really well watered, Pink and white flowered varieties can be really beautiful.
Sunset, *Moonlight*, *Painted Lady*, *Scarlet Emperor*.

Broad Beans – Tough and hardy so can be sown early but it's well worth supporting the rows with posts and strings.
Crimson Flowered, *De Monica*, *Aquadulce Claudia*.

Roots

Carrots – can be tricky because of root fly so cover as soon as you've sown with fine 'enviromesh' or try growing in pots. Harvesting as baby roots before root fly emerge works well. If you see the leaves bronze, harvest straight away.
Red Samurai, *Chantenay Royal*, *Yellowstone*, *Purple Sun*, *Autumn King*, *Ruby Prince*, *Paris Market*.

Parsnips – wait until the soil has warmed up in May to give good germination and sow in groups of 3 every 10cm. Using a spade to harvest results is fewer damaged roots that using a garden fork.
Tender and True, *Hollow Crown*, *Gladiator*.

Beetroot – sow in modules and plant out 15cm apart. Beetroot have compound seeds and so you may have several seedlings in each module, don't thin them out, they grow happily in clusters!
Bolthardy, *Boldor*, *Detroit*, *Golden Globe*, *Bull's Blood*.

Potatoes – Plant tubers in late march, 30cm apart for first and second earlies, 40 cm apart for maincrops. A dressing of blood, fish and bone before mounding up works wonders. Water regularly until the tubers start to form.
Charlotte, *Maris Bard*, *Arran Pilot*, *Red Duke of York*, *Nicola*, *Vivaldi*, *Pink Fir Apple*, *King Edward*, *Desiree*, *Cara*, *Kerr's Pink*, *Majestic*.

Salad Crops

Lettuce – Cut-and-come-again crops can give weeks of harvests, sow every 3 or 4 weeks from March until October. They can work well in a shady spot where other veg may struggle and are dead easy to grow in pots.
Salad Bowl Green and Red, *Lollo Rossa*, *Freckles*, *Webb's Wonderful*, *Little Gem*, *Marvel of Four Seasons*, *Great Lakes*.

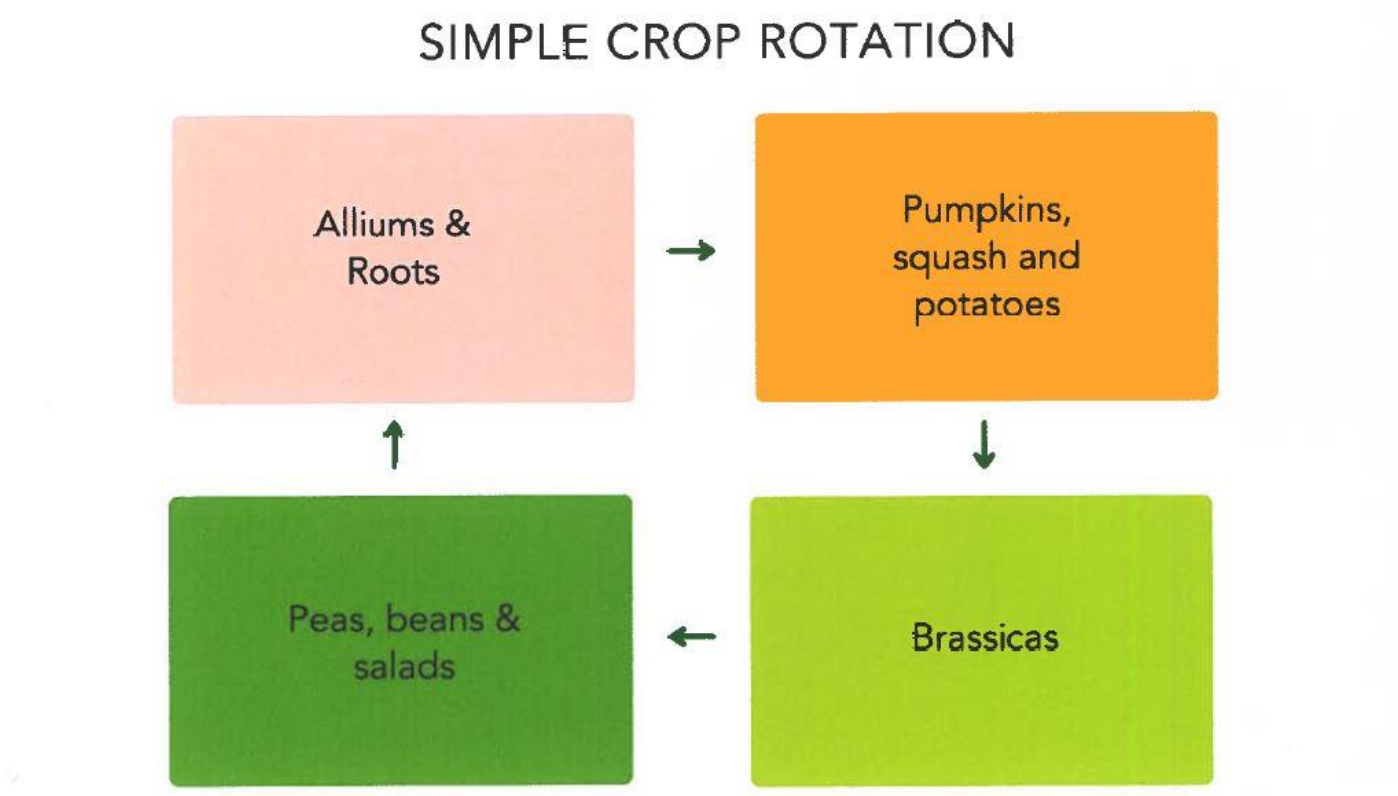
Celery – modern varieties don't need blanching and are really easy to grow.
Green Utah.

Swiss Chard – a really useful, long standing leafy crop, 3 sowings will last 8 months of the year.

Rainbow Chard, *Bright Lights*, *White Silver*.

Pumpkins and Squash and Courgettes – Although they can be quite tender, in a good summer they will grow really well in a sheltered spot. They are hungry plants so add plenty of compost or manure to the soil and liquid feed regularly. A good crop to crow in the compost heap!
Pumpkins – *Atlantic Giant*, *Jack Be Little*, *Racer*, *Big Max*, *Goosebumps*, *Polar Bear*.
Squash – *Crown Prince*, *Uchiki Kuri*, *Sweet Dumpling*, *Waltham Butternut*.
Courgettes – *Romanesce*, *Defender*, *Genovese*, *Gold Rush*.

The following is the crop rotation system we used in the walled garden:



Greenhouse and Polycrub Crops

Controlling temperatures and pests and diseases in greenhouses and polycrubs can be a real challenge. If it gets too warm, whitefly and aphid populations will rocket and many plants stop growing when it gets above 30 degrees. Be prepared to keep adjusting doors and vents, put shading on greenhouses and install automatic watering if possible. Mulching the soil with compost, bark chip or straw will help trap moisture and keep roots cool. Use companion plants and space your crops properly to combat whitefly and aphids.

Tomatoes – sow in March and plant in their final positions in May. Keep well-watered to avoid blossom end rot and feed weekly with seaweed extract when the fruit start to set.
Black Cherry, *Sweet Million*, *Ailsa Craig*, *Gardener's Delight*, *Green Zebra*, *Costoluto Fiorentino*, *Sungold*, *Chocolate Cherry*, *Tigerella*, *Bellandine*.

Chillies and Sweet Peppers – need a long growing season and plenty of heat so sow in early March in a propagator and then feed weekly when the fruit start to appear.
Chillies – *Joe's Long*, *De Cayenne*, *Hungarian Hot Wax*, *Demon Red*, *Bhut Jolokia* (very hot!)
Sweet Peppers – *Sweet Astor*, *Beauty Bell*.

Cucumbers – can be quite fussy, they don't like to be too cold or hot, too dry or wet. On hot days, damping down the foliage with a hose can perk them up and deter red spider mite. The seeds are expensive and you get hardly any in a packet!
Telegraph Improved, *Carmen*, *Mini Munch*.
Melon – If you can grow cucumbers, you can grow melons. Worth the effort just for the wonderful small in your greenhouse as they ripen!
Blenheim Orange, *Emir*.
Aubergine – Surprisingly easy to grow but need plenty of feeding and a big pot (10 or 15 litres)
Farmers Long, *Genie*.

Fresh Vegetables for the winter and hungry gap

Welsh Onions – a perennial allium like a giant chive, very reliable and resilient and will give you tasty fresh greens in March and April.

Swiss Chard - The white varieties ate particularly hardy, if you sow in August or September in a greenhouse or reasonably sheltered spot they will crop right through the winter.

Winter lettuce – sow in September ang grow in a cold frame, hoop bed or greenhouse and you can crop cut and come again leaves until the spring. Try *Lamb's Lettuce*, *Marvel of Four Seasons*, *Winter Density* and butterhead varieties.

Winter Cabbages and Spring Greens – hardy, long standing cabbages sown in July or August will sit in your plot patiently waiting to be harvested for months through the winter – January King is one of the best. Spring Greens (cabbages) sown in September will give you fresh leaves from march onwards, try *Hispi*, *Greyhound* and *April*.
If you grow summer cabbages, rather than digging up the roots after harvesting, just cut the head off to a stump and several tender young florets will emerge that can be harvested through the winter.

Chicory – not as fashionable as it used to be, but modern varieties have had the bitterness bred out. Sow in direct in May and thin out seedlings to 15cm. Cut back the green summer foliage to 5 cm above the root in September/October and then mound up to a depth of 30cm to encourage a dense white/yellow head of sweet crunchy leaves to form that can be harvested from December to April.

Asparagus – If you're patient, asparagus plants will give you a regular crop from April until June for 20 years. Plant 2-year-old roots on a mound in a trench and mulch with compost or leaf mould every winter. Try not to harvest for the first 2 years.

Micro Greens or Sprouting Seeds – you can sow seeds for baby leaves into seed trays on a warm windowsill at any time of year. They often have intensely sweet and aromatic flavours and whilst you'll never get huge crops, they can make all the difference to a shop-bought salad! Try beetroot, parsley, coriander, cress, rocket, and peas.

A few of my Favourite seed companies

- Chiltern Seeds – Great for flower and companion seeds: www.chilternseeds.co.uk
- Kings Seeds – Really good prices and germination rates: www.kingsseeds.com
- Seeds of Scotland – Scotland's only seed company, based near Inverness: www.seedsofscotland.com
- Moles seeds – brilliant for larger quantities as they sell by the gram: www.wholesale.molesseeds.co.uk

- Devon Chilli Farm – lots of interesting chilli varieties, some preposterously hot: www.southdevonchillifarm.co.uk
- Thomas Etty - a treasure-trove of heirloom varieties with an informative and entertaining catalogue: www.thomasetty.co.uk
- Organic Catalogue – good quality organic seeds: www.organiccatalogue.com
- The Heritage Seed Library – preserving and sharing vital heirloom varieties: www.gardenorganic.org.uk

Useful Links

- If you have any questions or recommendations please feel free to email me at edbollom@icloud.com or visit www.bollomgardens.com
- Follow our self-reliance project at www.sufficientorkneyfood.co.uk
- Come to more workshops and lectures in September at the Orkney International Science Festival www.oisf.org

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