

## EDIBLE GARDENING

### Making Time for Fall's Bounty

by Rita Pelczar

The warm-season crops of summer are fading fast, but months of fresh harvests from your garden are still possible with vegetables that can thrive in the cooler days ahead. Depending on where you live, your harvests can continue throughout fall and even into winter, especially if you add a little extra protection.

#### PLANNING AHEAD AND COUNTING BACKWARDS

Cool-season crops include leafy greens, cabbage family crops, peas, several root crops, and some herbs (see the sidebar on opposite page). When possible, opt for early maturing varieties, especially if you live in colder regions. Check seed packets for the number of days each takes to mature and add a couple weeks to accommodate fall's shorter days and cooler temperatures. Next, determine the average date of your first hard frost (24–28°F)—Dave's Garden (<https://davesgarden.com/guides/freeze-frost-dates>) has a handy online tool you can use by plugging in your zip code. Count backwards from that date the number of days each crop needs, and you will arrive at the best last date for planting.

Of course, where you garden has a major impact on what and when to plant. If growing from seed, gardeners in cooler regions will need to start their fall garden in summer. In Vermont, garden author and lecturer Ellen Ecker Ogden plants most of her cool weather greens at the end of August, “because it's not so much the temperatures as the shorter days of sunlight.” She plants her fall spinach in early September. If you didn't get your cool-season seeds started in summer, you'll likely still find vegetable plants available in your local nurseries.

Those who garden in regions with mild winters can plant later. In Austin,



Many varieties of kale will grow until first frost in most regions of the country.

Texas, Estes Garden manager Anamaría Gutiérrez plants cool-season veggies for a nearby farm-to-table restaurant in continuous succession from August through December. Her root crops—radishes, turnips, beets, carrots, and potatoes—thrive in fall. “This is their most ideal growing temperature in Central

Texas,” says Gutiérrez. She also plants a wide variety of fall greens, cabbage family crops, peas, onions, garlic, and herbs.

Some cool-season crops such as broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, and Brussels sprouts take a good bit of time from seeding to maturity. These can be started indoors or in a protected spot outside

in mid- to late summer or purchased as young plants from a garden center. Most other fall crops are usually seeded directly in the garden.

## ACCOMMODATIONS FOR FALL PLANTING

Remove any residue from earlier crops and work some compost or well-rotted manure into the soil before you start to plant. “Fall is a great time to compost your beds. Summer takes a toll on our soil and we must replenish it before planting again in the fall and winter,” says Gutiérrez.

You may need to plant your seeds or transplant seedlings to the garden while the weather is still warm, so the crop has enough time to mature. Cool-season crops may not like the heat—most of them prefer soil temperatures around 65–75°F for seed germination. You can cool the soil by watering it well before planting and mulching alongside the rows after planting to help shade the soil from the sun. You can also use a light row cover, which not only shades, but protects the new crops from the pests that are probably still around.

In areas with regular autumn rains, watering won’t be much of a burden, especially as weather cools. But newly sown seed or transplanted seedlings benefit from regular watering until they have formed a decent root system.

I’ve found that using a row cover or tunnel to grow fall cabbage, Brussels sprouts, and broccoli is the best hedge against the cabbage moth, loopers, and other annoying pests. By the time the vegetables are beginning to mature, the weather has cooled, and the pests are gone for another season. That applies to pest of other crops as well. While some protection or hand picking of pests may be necessary early on, as harvest time approaches, few pests will be around.

One of the biggest advantages of growing cool-season crops in fall instead of spring is that they mature in cool weather, which improves their flavor a lot. Cabbage, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, carrots, spinach—just about all your cool-season crops taste sweeter after some exposure to frost. “Most people who have only tasted Brussels sprouts grown in warm climates have no idea



**Exposure to light frost gives Brussels sprouts a deliciously sweet flavor.**

how delicious and sweet a well-frosted sprout can be. It is a whole different flavor profile,” says Ogdon.

Another advantage to the fall garden is that the cooler temperatures make it much more comfortable to work outdoors.

## EXTENDING YOUR HARVEST

There are a few ways you can take your fall garden to the next level—that is, to harvest throughout the winter months. My favorite strategy is using a cold frame; basically a short, un-



**Given protection, beets can be left in the garden until the ground freezes.**

heated greenhouse that captures solar heat to protect crops from bitter cold. I like to use a cold frame for a variety of greens—spinach, kale, mustard, lettuce, and arugula—that I pick for fresh salads throughout winter.

Seed gets planted in the cold frame as you would in the garden, and the lid stays open until temperatures start to drop below 40 degrees. Then you close the frame at night, raising it the next morning when the sun comes out. But you must be attentive; leaving the lid closed on a sunny day, even when the air temperature is chilly, can cook your crops.

Another season-extending strategy, which is great for taller crops such as

## BEST CROPS FOR THE FALL GARDEN

Of course, if you live where winters are mild, you can grow a lot more. But in areas with several months of chilly weather, these crops grow well throughout fall and often into winter.

Arugula	Kohlrabi
Beets	Lettuce
Broccoli	Mustard
Broccolini	Peas
Cabbage	Radish
Carrots	Scallions
Cilantro	Spinach
Garlic	Swiss Chard
Kale	Turnip

broccoli and Brussels sprouts, is to use frost blankets or row covers that help trap the day’s heat near the plants. Lightweight coverings allow a good bit of light to filter through and can be kept in place during the day. Cover root crops such as carrots, beets, and turnips with several inches of straw, and you can leave them in the garden until the ground freezes, harvesting as needed.

So don’t put away your garden gloves and trowels yet. With some planning and a little luck, you can serve home-grown garden-fresh veggies for your holiday feasts. ■

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