

Fall and Winter Vegetable Gardening

By Karen Stephens

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You can harvest year-round using season extenders

Thankfully, we're a few months away from harvesting our last summer vegetables, an activity I once found so depressing that I swore off vegetables until the following year when I could start over. But wait! More and more gardeners are discovering that there need be no end to gardening. They rave about the delicious cool weather vegetables you can grow and harvest in time for the winter holidays and beyond. And some of these vegetables – like Brussels sprouts and kale – are more delicious after a sweetening frost. In fact, a few frosts won't harm most of these cool weather types. Far more threatening are our abundant winter precipitation and reduced light because of short days and overcast skies. However, with a bit of knowledge and ingenuity, you can meet these challenges and enjoy gardening (as well as eating fresh) 10-12 months a year! Here are some tips from veteran gardeners and university extension offices.

Location, Location, Location!

Your winter garden should occupy the brightest, warmest place you can find – ideally, a southern exposure, not at the bottom of a slope where cold air settles. The best place might be in your summer garden but perhaps not. Given the sun's lower arc in the winter sky, buildings and trees that weren't a problem in summer may shade the garden in winter. Next, check the tilth and fertility of the soil. Well-drained soil is critical since winter rain can pool in heavy clay soils, suffocating plant roots and rotting crowns. Raised beds, 12" deep with plenty of compost, are ideal. Beds don't have to be framed and, in fact, some gardeners enjoy the flexibility of hoed-up, informal mounds. If you are replanting ground used in summer, be sure to follow crop rotation guidelines as well as enriching the soil with compost, manure and/or fertilizers as needed.

Season Extenders

Oh, for a heated greenhouse, or better yet, a conservatory! But lacking these, an easy to build, simple cloche or cold frame can make the difference between success and failure in raising half-hardy plants like lettuces. The type of cloche I've used is a tunnel of plastic sheeting stretched over 2-3 feet high PVC hoops sunk into the soil every few feet. Cold frames are wood framed boxes sunk into the ground and covered with raise-able "windows" of glass, plastic or fiberglass. Many models and plans for these extenders can be found on the Internet or in publications. (See Resources.) Inside these structures, temperatures are 4-5 degrees warmer than outside and plants are protected from too much precipitation. Veteran Oregon gardener and author, Steve Solomon, reports that he plants only 4 cold frames (10' x 4') to keep his family in salad greens all winter. He plants two frames in September, harvesting the greens during December and January. The remaining two frames are planted in October and harvested in February and March. An added

benefit to season extenders is the ability to start summer crops, such as tomatoes and squash, up to 6 weeks earlier than you would plant them in unprotected ground. By the time plants are too big for their coverings, danger of frost has passed and the plastic can be removed.



A raised bed cloche is easy to build with directions from an Oregon State University Extension publication. **Photo by Sam Angima / OSU**

Timing Is Key

The time to plant depends on when you want to harvest. Keep in mind that plants grow *very* slowly in our area between late October and mid-February because of reduced light. Therefore, some gardeners try to get their plants to harvest stage beginning in late November. Then the cool air and soil can “store” these mature cool weather crops. Additionally, some people like to get a jump on spring harvest: They plant seeds or transplants in late August/early September allowing the plants to become well-established to get through the winter and then resume growing for an especially early spring harvest. See the following chart for a sample of suggested planting times.

The Right Seed for the Season

Many seed catalogs feature varieties for fall and winter gardening. Several have whole catalogs devoted to such seeds. Here is a sample of vegetable varieties and recommended planting times.

Plant	Seed or Transplant	Planting Time	Winter or Early Spring Harvest	Recommended Varieties
Arugula	Seed	Aug 1-Oct 1	All winter and spring	Roquette
Asian greens like Tah Tsai & Mizuna	Either	Aug 1-Oct 1	Winter and spring	Kyoto Mizuna, Tah Tsai
Beets	Seed	July	Winter	Winterkeeper, Lutz Green Leaf
Broccoli	Transplant	June- July	Winter	Belstar
Brussels Sprouts	Transplant	June 15-July 15	Winter	Jade Cross E, Rubine, Oliver,
Cabbage	Either	May-July	Winter and spring	Danish Ballhead
Collards	Seed	July-August 15	All winter and spring	Champion
Corn Salad	Seed	Aug 15-Sept 15	Spring	VIT
Fava Beans	Seed	September	Spring	Negreta, Aquadulce
Kale	Seed	June 15-Aug 1	All winter and spring	Winter Red, Winterbor, Siberian
Lettuce	Either	August-Sept 15	Winter and spring	Winter Density, Oak Leaf
Spinach	Seed	July 15-Sept 15	Fall thru spring	Tyee, Olympia, Bloomsdale Savoy

*For more varieties, consult “Fall and Winter Gardening in the Pacific Northwest” (Resources) and seed catalogs.

I hope this brief overview has piqued your interest enough to initiate – or expand – winter gardening. It is important to keep detailed records of your planting and harvest dates as well as any unusual weather events that might affect your crops. Because of our region’s many different microclimates, your own records may be your best teacher. Don’t get discouraged if a crop fails; it may succeed another year under different conditions.

RESOURCES

- *Fall and Winter Gardening in the Pacific Northwest*, Oregon State University, PNW 548
- *How to Build your Own Raised-Bed Cloche*, Oregon State University, EC 1627-E, 2008.
- *Fall and Winter Vegetable Gardens*, Washington State University, PC 61
- *Growing Vegetables West of the Cascades*, Steve Solomon, 6th edition, 2007.
- *Gardening Under Cover: A Northwest Guide to Solar Greenhouses, Cold Frames, and Cloches*, William Head, 1989.