

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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In Skagit County, we are fortunate to live in a mild maritime climate that brings precipitation, humidity and moderate temperatures. These conditions prolong our gardening season and allow us to grow certain vegetables for harvest in fall, winter and early spring. Summer to early fall is the time to sow their seeds.

When we discuss summer-sown vegetables, we can divide the crops into two categories. The first group includes vegetables that will mature and be harvested in fall, before freezing weather arrives. Examples of fall-harvested vegetables are cabbage, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, bush beans, cucumbers, squash, corn and tomatoes.

Here is how to determine the planting date for a given fall vegetable. Find out the date of the average first killing frost. (In western Skagit County, it occurs between about October 15 and November 1.) Next, find the days-to-harvest number on the seed packet. Add to that number: a) days from seed to transplant, if growing transplants; b) days in the harvest period; c) fourteen days to account for shorter days and cooler temperatures in fall; and d) fourteen days, if the vegetable is frost sensitive. Count backward that number of days from the average first frost date. This gives the approximate date to plant seed (usually early to midsummer).

The second group includes vegetables that will be harvested in late fall, winter and early spring, from seeds sown in summer or early fall. Carrots, radishes, turnips, beets, rutabagas, kohlrabi, chard, lettuce and spinach are examples of these cold-hardy types. Exposure to frosty weather improves the sweetness, crispness or flavor of some of them. In general, the plants need to be well established, but not mature, before frosts slow their growth. (However, some fully mature root crops may be held in the soil during winter.)

A winter garden site needs soil that drains well, and maximum exposure to sunlight. Harvesting will be more convenient if you locate the garden close to your house. Examples of good sites are a raised bed on the south side of the house, or a plot on a gentle slope that faces south.

The summer planting period comes just as some early crops are finishing production. After you remove the remains of spent spring vegetables, add to the soil some compost or a small application of a complete fertilizer.

When planting, follow good crop rotation methods. Avoid sowing vegetables of the same plant family on the same spot in succession. Sow seeds slightly deeper than you would in spring, and leave a little more space between plants to increase their exposure to sunlight. Make sure seedlings receive sufficient water, especially on warm days. After plants are established, apply a light layer of mulch to hold moisture in the soil and control weeds.

In late fall and winter, season extenders such as cloches, cold frames or row covers help protect crops from frost and heavy rain. On warm days, these protective devices must be opened up or removed to allow heat ventilation and air circulation. A blanket of snow or a layer of mulch also helps to insulate the soil.

Certain varieties withstand winter conditions better than others do. Sometimes the variety name is a tip-off, as in Winter Red kale, Winter Density lettuce or Alaska leek. Read the descriptions in seed catalogs to find other suitable cool-season varieties.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.