

Planning and Planting Your Fall and Winter Garden

By Valerie Jean Rose

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Plant now, harvest in autumn. Don't wait until October to create a fall vegetable garden!

It is counter-intuitive but true – to enjoy a harvest of fresh vegetables in autumn and winter, you must plant those veggies now. Relatively mild Pacific Northwest winters allow us to enjoy garden harvests while folks back east are sledding and shoveling. By planting in summer, your vegetables will spend their youthful days in the sun, getting a good start before daylight becomes scarce and temperatures drop.

You're probably thinking, "Stop it! I don't want to hear about cold, gray days. This year we reached our annual quota for gloomy weather by mid-April!" Let those memories fade - adjust your gardening hat, put on more sunscreen. Plant kale, Swiss chard, fennel and other vegetables you'll harvest when the weather gets – well, just know that in the future, you'll be glad you planted these vegetables now.

Bear in mind that these columns are written at least a month before you read them, so I sincerely hope you are wearing summer clothes and eating outside. If you're wearing a down vest and wool hat, re-checking the calendar to see what month it is, don't blame me, I'm just a Master Gardener, not the Master of Ironic and Miserable Weather.

LOCATION, LOCATION...

The right place for your fall/winter garden may not be the same location as your main-season beds. Find the areas of your yard that enjoy the most sun in the fall and winter, when the sun is much farther south in the sky than it is now. The arc between sunrise and sunset will be diminished by the earth's seasonal tilt, and buildings or trees will cast longer shadows. Does the winter sunshine reach over the neighbor's garage, or above those big evergreens? Deciduous trees will thoughtfully drop their leaves, allowing sun to filter through their branches.

Drainage can be a garden problem in any season. Avoid planting in a low-lying area where standing water will drown any plants – except for weeds, of course. Add a good dose of organic matter to clay soils prior to planting for fall and winter, to improve drainage and add nutrients.

Wind is another seasonal challenge. Open areas may be exposed to desiccating gusts drying out plants, or strong winds bending and breaking even sturdy stalks. As the weather drives you back under layers of wool and fleece, don't forget to protect your garden. Not with a garden-bed-sized parka, but with a cloche, cold frame or greenhouse.

PROTECTION EXTENDS THE GROWING SEASON

Some vegetables simply need mulch (such as straw, leaves or compost) to survive the dark months. Kale, garlic, and overwintering varieties of cabbage or carrots can do well with minimal protection. Other vegetables will benefit from a protective cover of glass or plastic. An unheated greenhouse will allow leafy greens and other cool-season vegetables to grow readily. Old windows, scrap lumber and hinges are all the materials you need to build a classic coldframe. A low tunnel of plastic is easy and inexpensive to make. Bend PVC pipe into a half-circle, secure each end over the edge of your garden bed and cover with a sheet of plastic. Secure the plastic to the pipe with clips, and cover the edges with dirt. Low tunnels, coldframes and greenhouses all block excessive winter rains, but the plants will still need water provided by you. If you forget, you won't have much to harvest.

Rain does come through floating row covers of synthetic fabric. Light enough to lie over plants, this fabric retains heat and keeps out insects, while allowing 70% - 85% of sunlight to reach plants. I use a combination mixture of mulch (straw or leaves) packed around overwintering plants, and then cover with a floating row cover. This has protected my chard, spinach and kale through frost and snow, providing tasty salad greens in decidedly chilly times.



Marvin Jarmin of Mount Vernon works in his hoop house garden. The former horticulturist for the WSU Mount Vernon research center has defied winter growing woes for the past two seasons by building a hoop house for growing carrots, tomatoes and other crops. "I grew up in the Dakotas, where you eat what you grow," Jarmin said. "I still live by that philosophy now." **Photo by Jordan Stead / Skagit Valley Herald**

THE RIGHT VARIETIES FOR LATE-SEASON GARDENING

Read your seed catalogues carefully to select varieties for planting in mid-summer for fall and winter harvest. You can plant collards (for winter and spring use), endive, kales, kohlrabi, leaf lettuce, mustard greens, Asian greens, corn salad, overwintering onions, sprouting broccoli, radicchio, radishes, scallions, spinach, and turnips. Many of these crops, especially leafy salad greens, will do best if you plant the seeds directly into your garden. Overwintering varieties of broccoli and cauliflower can be started by seed in June or July. In August, buy these as plant starts at your favorite nursery, garden store or food co-op. Next year you can grow your own starts by planting seeds earlier in the summer.

Set aside an area for garlic in October. In the fall, you can think about warm summer days while planting garlic cloves in the cool autumn soil. For now, plan and plant your fall/winter garden so you can enjoy garden-fresh ingredients in your autumn stews and winter salads.



Marvin Jarmin shows thick, healthy carrots he is able to grow, despite the stressors of cold winter months, in his custom-built hoop house. **Photo by Jordan Stead / Skagit Valley Herald**

RESOURCES

- Planting for Fall, Winter and Spring... WSU Clark County Extension, <https://s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/2079/2014/02/FallVeggies.pdf>
- Fall and Winter Vegetable Gardening in the Pacific NW, by Pat Patterson, Lane County Extension, Oregon State U., <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog/pdf/pnw/pnw548.pdf>
- Winter Gardening in Maritime Northwest: Cool Season Crops For The Year-Round Gardener, 3rd Edition, by Binda Colebrook, Sasquatch Books, 1998
- Winter Harvest Handbook, by Eliot Coleman. Chelsea Green Publishing Co., 2009

Note: a hyperlink in this article has been updated since its initial publication.