

September in the Vegetable Garden

Would you like to harvest salad-makings from your garden during the winter? Try endive, a very hardy biennial which will overwinter in temperatures as low as 10 degrees Fahrenheit. September-sown endive will fare better under cover than out in the open, since rain and damp-induced mildews can make the plants unusable. Endive varieties with broad, fleshy leaves slightly curled at the edges are known as escarole or broad-leaved Batavian endive. The varieties which have slender leaves with wavy edges are known simply as endive, or sometimes by their French name of chicoree frisee or just frisee. Do not buy seed of Belgian endive (witloof) for fall planting, as that is an altogether different plant. Sow seeds 1/2 inch deep, 2–4 seeds per inch, in rows 12–16 inches apart, thinning gradually and carefully to 12 inches apart in the row. (Add the thinned baby plants to salads.) Moisture trapped between touching leaves causes rot, so thinning to separate the plants is important. In most garden soils, no fertilizer should be used. (Grown slowly, the endive will be more hardy.) For the best growth, soil pH should be near 6.1–6.5. As most of the roots only penetrate the soil eight inches or so, care should be taken in cultivating. Try not to work the soil around the plants any deeper than an inch. A great addition to salads, endive loses its bitterness when gradually exposed to freezing temperatures.

Other greens and herbs for early September sowing and winter harvesting include: arugula (rocket), Asian greens, chervil, cilantro (coriander leaf), cress, lettuce, mustard, onion sets (for greens), radish, and spinach. Protect your planting under floating row covers, tunnels, cloches, or coldframes. As we indicated last month, cabbages to be harvested in the early spring may also be planted in early September.

Late in the month, plant some crops which are meant to overwinter with just four to eight true leaves and to provide February/March harvests. These should not require cover unless we get very cold weather. Choose from: arugula and “rustic” arugula, beets, caraway, carrot, chervil, fava beans, lettuce, mustard, radish, snow peas, spinach, sweet cicely, or overwintering grains.

For your September lettuce sowings, select varieties which have been bred to survive cold, wet, short days: the butterheads ‘Arctic King’, ‘Brune d’Hiver’, ‘Nancy’, ‘North Pole’, ‘Optima’, ‘Rougette du Midi’, ‘Sangria’, and ‘Winter Marvel’; and the romaine/cos types ‘Little Gem’, ‘Rouge d’Hiver’, and ‘Winter Density’.