

As it has for the past 26 years, it occurred once again. I lost my gardening partner. School has started, and Rita is back in the classroom inspiring young minds. I could lament and say goodbye to summer; but, the fact remains, nearly six more weeks remain before autumn officially arrives and probably another four more weeks until the first frost. That's enough time to consider a fall garden.

Other than our tomato plants and peppers which are still producing, most other vegetables that we planted this past spring are totally exhausted. It's time I clean them out and prepare for a fall planting. With frost a good nine to ten weeks away, I need to examine what veggies I can grow and harvest within this time frame. I also must realize that plants grow more slowly as day length shortens. Knowing this, I actually have about 70 days left. The question is, what should I plant?



Although I probably have enough time to plant and harvest turnips, kohlrabi, spinach, radish and lettuce, I think I'll focus on a salad greens type fall garden and particularly lettuce. First, it's one of my favorites; and secondly, there's a large variety of lettuces from which to choose — all easy to grow. Lettuce is ideal for succession planting. Sow seeds every two weeks for production throughout the season. Most lettuce varieties mature in 45 to 50 days, thus allowing me to possibly make two successive plantings yet this season.

Here are a few tips on growing lettuce. For maximum production, select a site where the soil drains well, yet retains some moisture. The soil should be rich in nitrogen and potassium. One way to accomplish this is to work in plenty of organic matter such as compost, rotted manure, or leaf mold into the soil.

Sow lettuce seed directly in the garden. Plant the seeds about 1/4 inch deep and water. It's that simple. Space the sowings according to packet directions that are based on the size of the mature lettuce. For example, a crisp head may require a square foot of garden space. As many as nine plants of a small leaf lettuce variety can grow in the same space.

Interestingly, having checked the University of Nebraska's website *Crop-watch*, I discovered that the seven-day average soil temperatures has currently been hovering in the mid-to-high seventies, but soil temperatures should continue to cool as summer wanes and fall emerges. It's important to know that lettuce seeds have a difficult time germinating in soil that is 80°F or warmer. If that is the case, one could resort to starting heat-tolerant varieties indoors and moving the lettuce seedlings into the garden as soil temperatures cool.

Water is a key ingredient in successfully growing lettuce. Supplying moderate but almost constant water, especially during hot weather is crucial. Unless there is regular rainfall, lettuce must be watered deeply at least once a week- more frequently during periods of drought. Mulch with a layer of compost or clean straw to help the soil retain moisture.

Lettuce can be harvested any time after true leaves form. For the best quality, it's better to pick earlier than later as lettuce allowed to grow too long may be bitter and tough. When the

crown of a lettuce plant elongates, it is said to bolt and is about to produce seeds. When this happens, the plant has passed its prime, and it's time to remove it and replant if time permits.

Enough talk. It's time for action. I'd best get busy clearing the garden of old veggies and prepare for planting my salad greens fall garden. Furthermore, although I miss my gardening partner on a daily basis, Rita can still help me with the garden on evenings and weekends. Now the question is, will still she want to? 😊