

PLANT VEGETABLES FOR A FALL VEGGIE HARVEST

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While often overlooked by gardeners, planting vegetables in July and August for fall harvest is a good practice.

For those who love to garden, fall gardening extends the growing season and is a better time to harvest cool season crops. When these vegetables mature during cooler weather, their flavor is improved.

Semi-hardy and hardy vegetables are most suited to fall gardening. Semi-hardy crops include potatoes, beets, leaf lettuce, spinach, Swiss chard, radishes and green onions. Hardy crops are cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, kale, turnip and carrots.

Semi-hardy vegetables can stand a light frost of about 30 to 32 degrees Fahrenheit. Hardy vegetables will tolerate several frosts and are usually not killed until temperatures drop near 20 degrees. If these crops are protected from frost, they will continue to grow and produce well into fall.

When buying seed or transplants for a fall garden, check the days to maturity on the packet or transplant tag. This is how long it typically takes the plant to grow from seed to harvest. Select vegetables with the lowest number to help ensure harvest before a killing frost.

Seeds, and especially transplants, can be hard to find at this time of year. Early planning may need to be done to have a fall seed supply. If purchased in spring, store seeds in a cool, dry location to maintain viability.

Fall crops are typically planted where earlier crops, such as radish, lettuce or peas, have already been harvested. And fall crops need to be planted early enough to mature before the average fall frost which is about October 9 in our area.

To determine when to plant, take the days to maturity listed for a vegetable, count backwards from the average frost date, and then add 14 days as a fall factor and for the harvest period. The fall factor accounts for shorter day length and cooler weather that lead to a slower growth rate.

Most fall crops are planted in July and August. A challenge at this time is seed germination in hot soils. Soil preparation along with soaking seed, planting deeper and shading the area until germination helps.

For soil preparation, spread about two to three inches of compost over the soil and hand-spade it in six inches deep. Compost improves nutrient levels and a soils water holding capacity.

Irrigate lightly a day or two before planting. Soak seeds in water overnight and then plant about twice as deep as during spring. A light irrigation two to three times per day during hot weather will keep the soil moist and prevent seedling death.

Although most seed will germinate quickly in warm soils, some, like lettuce, peas and spinach, will not germinate well if soil temperature is above 85 degrees. Shading the soil with a board or a light mulch is a trick fall gardeners use to keep the soil cooler and improve germination.

To shade with a board, place a brick or flower pot under each end to hold the board off the soil. Remove the temporary shade once sprouts emerge. A light covering of one-half inch or less of dry grass clippings can be used and left in place. Do not use green grass clippings.

Once the seedlings are 1 to 2 inches tall, apply additional mulch to help retain soil moisture and insulate the soil from the sun.