

Planning and Planting Your Fall and Winter Garden

By Valerie Jean Rose

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Don't wait till October! Plan and plant your fall and winter Garden now.

“A heavy wet snow is falling today. There could be a foot or more... We throw on our coats and go out to the cold frames to pick a salad for dinner.” (Eliot Coleman, from *Four-Season Harvest*)

If Maine farmer Eliot Coleman can trek through April snow to pick salad greens, surely we can put on boots and a rain parka and pick fresh vegetables from our Pacific Northwest gardens in January. What kinds of vegetables can handle cold, even freezing weather? How can you plant a garden that survives days when the sun sets by 4:30 PM and there's enough rain to float an ark?

Year-round gardening is easier here than in Maine, cheaper than buying veggies trucked from other states or countries, and more enjoyable than chewing tough greens and taste-free tomatoes. If you ignore one pitfall and follow four important guidelines, you can enjoy homegrown salads in December.

DON'T BE FOOLED BY 'FALL AND WINTER GARDENS'

First, ignore the term 'fall and winter garden' – or at least, don't be confused by it. You plant most of your fall and winter garden in the summer. Only garlic, shallots, fava beans and radishes grow happily when planted in October. Most everything else will not find enough sunlight or warmth to germinate (sprout), let alone establish roots that can feed a plant that can survive low temperatures and lots of rain.

Now, the four essential guidelines to follow for a successful fall/winter garden:

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

What part of your garden (or deck or patio) gets the most sunlight from September to April? Remember, the sun will arc low on the horizon, much further south than in the summer sky. Consider the position of evergreen trees and buildings, casting long shadows in fall and winter. Fortunately, deciduous trees have that ingenious design factor, allowing sun to flow through the branches after the leaves have fallen.

Pay attention to the microclimates in your garden – find areas with shelter from the wind. Beware of low-lying patches where plants must snorkel to make it through the winter.

SEASON EXTENDERS

Some vegetables just need mulch (such as straw, leaves or compost) to survive the dark months. Kale, garlic, and overwintering varieties of cabbage carrots can do well with minimal protection. Other vegetables need a protective cover of glass or plastic. Old windows, wood and hinges are all the materials you need to build a classic coldframe. A low tunnel is easy and inexpensive to make – bend PVC pipe into a ½ circle, secure each end over the edge of your garden bed, and cover with plastic. Secure the plastic to the pipe with clips, and cover the edges with dirt. Remember to water these beds, or uncover them periodically for a rain bath!

‘Floating row covers’ are synthetic fabric, laid on top of plants to keep out insects and retain heat. When night temperatures fell to 15 degrees F last December, I mulched my overwintering greens with oak leaves then covered the beds with two layers of agricultural fabric. The tender leaves didn’t freeze and in January those plants made lovely fresh salads.

WHAT TO PLANT

Many vegetables actually welcome our cool, wet winters (see Infobox.) And if you have a greenhouse, try growing overwintering varieties of tomatoes and cucumbers. Enjoy a homemade Greek salad during a winter windstorm!

WHEN TO PLANT

Again, don’t wait until winter to plant your winter garden! (See Infobox.) Many vegetables should be started in July and August, either directly in your garden beds or in trays, to be transplanted next month. Of course you don’t want to pull up your tomato plants to make room for fall spinach, especially since you probably haven’t yet seen many ripe tomatoes. Plan your garden succession, pull the plants that bolt by summer (such as lettuces planted in early spring) and replace them with kale for fall and winter eating. I just harvested the garlic planted last October. The bulbs are disappointingly small, due to the ‘rust’ caused by the fungus *Puccinia allii* that turned the leaves a rusty orange color. But now the bed is open, and I’ll seed spinach and turnips to enjoy in the coming months.

ORNAMENTALS TOO!

Ornamental kales are very trendy plants. Garden designers use purple kales to add contrast to the greens and tans of fall and winter landscapes. And they’re edible! Some non-edible ornamentals, such as sedum, flower in autumn. For inspiration and ideas, visit the *Fall and Winter Garden* in the WSU Discovery Gardens, 16650 State Route 536 (Memorial Highway) next to the WSU Northwestern Washington Research & Extension Center. Bring a picnic, a notepad and pen. You’ll find lots of ideas and information!

COVER CROPS

Building soil health is as important as growing vegetables for a healthy diet. Planting cover crops is easy and inexpensive. These ‘green manures’ protect soil from winter rains. Add organic matter when you dig them under in the spring. For details on what and when to plant, see ‘Cover Crops’ in the archives of ‘Ask the Master Gardener’ columns on the WSU Extension website: <http://skagit.wsu.edu/MG/2009AA/100209.pdf>.

So plan now, plant now and enjoy your own-grown fresh vegetables in any season.

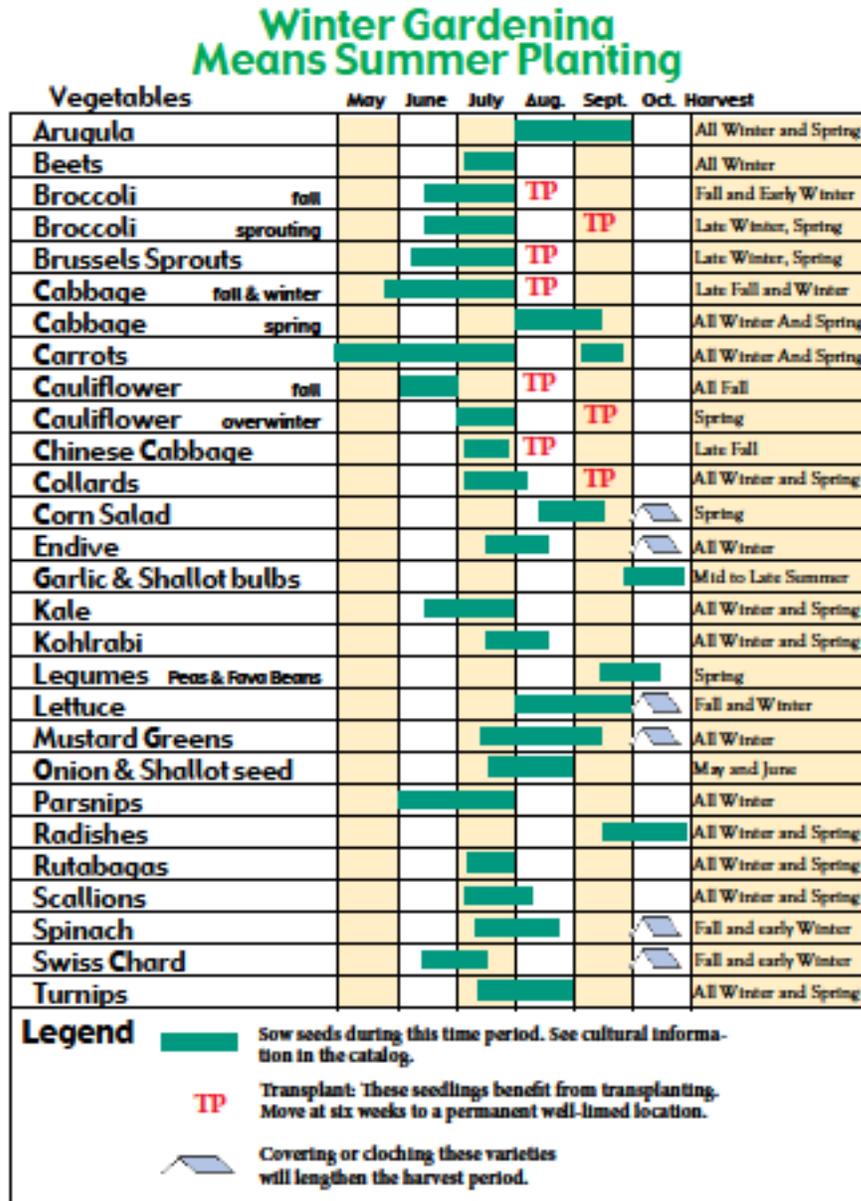


Chart
courtesy of
Territorial
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RESOURCES:

- 'Fall and Winter Gardening in the Pacific Northwest,' OSU Extension Service:
<http://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog/html/pnw/pnw548/>
- 'Planting for Fall, Winter and Spring,' WSU Clark County Extension Service:
http://clark.wsu.edu/volunteer/mg/gm_tips/FallVeggies.htm
- *Winter-Flowering Shrubs* by Michael Buffin. Timber Press, 2005
- *Winter Gardening in the 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
- *Growing Organic Vegetables West of the Cascades, 6th Edition* by Steve Solomon. Pacific Search Press, 2007
- *Timber Press: Guide to Gardening in the Pacific Northwest*, Carol W. Hall and Norman E. Hall. Timber Press, 2007
- *Territorial Seed Co. Fall/Winter Catalogue* –lots of information on planting, fertilizing and harvesting fall and winter vegetable varieties. www.territorialseed.com
- ON-LINE VIDEO: Extending the Growing Season:
www.territorialseed.com/video_season_extending_2010.