Winter Vegetables

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Some area nurseries are already selling broccoli and other cole crop transplants for fall planting. It is a little early for me, I seem to have the best results when I plant after September 15 or in early October but it is certainly time to prepare the garden.

For excellent results with winter vegetables incorporate 2 inches of compost and 8 cups of slow release lawn fertilizer per 100 sq. ft. of a raised garden bed that is in full sun. Drip irrigation is the most effective way to water the garden but a wand on the end of a hose also works well (if you have the time!). All of the cole crops and greens require ongoing fertilization to maximize production through the winter and into spring. Sidedress with one cup of winterizer or slow-release lawn fertilizer per 8 ft. of row every 3 to 4 weeks.

Broccoli is the premiere vegetable for fall and winter production. Place the transplants every 2 to 3 feet in the garden. Planted between now and the first week in October you will probably harvest heads for Thanksgiving. After the major head is harvested, broccoli will produce a crop of secondary heads through to January. Plant a second crop in early November and another in January and you should have a season of production that lasts through early spring.

We usually harvest broccoli when the heads are tight but it is still tasty and nutritious if the yellow flowers have opened. Waiting to harvest heads will reduce overall production however. Protect broccoli and the other cole crops from cabbage loopers by applying a Bt product at first sign of foliage feeding.

Cauliflower takes longer to mature a crown than broccoli but it can be treated in the same manner. I have not bothered to cover the heads from the sun to keep them white but it is easy to do with a rubber band or a hinged clothes pin to hold the leaves in place over the crown. Cauliflower does not usually produce side heads and since it is slower to mature there is no advantage to plant transplants late in the winter.

Brussels sprouts are even slower than cauliflower to produce but the plants produce the sprouts over a long season. Harvest them up the stem as the season progresses.

Cabbage can be planted with one foot between plants in the row. The heads are ready to harvest relatively quickly but also last well in the garden until you need them through the winter. Kohlrabi and collards are other cole crops that are easy to grow in the winter garden.

In addition to the cole crops there are a number of nutritious greens that can be grown. Harvest them leaf by leaf as you use them throughout the winter. Included on that list are Swiss chard, kale, and turnip greens. Swiss chard is especially noteworthy because it produces a mild but tasty green over a very long season. If you select the “Bright Lights” variety you also have attractive plants with a combination of blue, yellow, orange red and green stems. They make excellent container plants.

Plant carrots, radishes, beets, lettuce, rutabagas and turnips by seed in the winter garden. The key to successful germination and growth seems to be cool soil temperatures. Leaf lettuce is more likely to produce well in our gardens than the head lettuces. Lettuce seeds will not germinate if the seed is covered with soil. Plant lettuce and carrots on the top of the soil.

For more information on growing fall vegetables, gardeners have the opportunity to participate in 2 free programs. Extension Horticulturist David Rodriguez will present a class on the topic today (9-10) at 10 am at Milbergers Nursery. I will discuss the topic on Saturday the 17th at 10 am at the Dreamhill Neighborhood Clubhouse(6800 Dorothy Louise) near Medical Center. Send me an email at calvinrfinch@gmail.com if you want to attend.