

Winter Vegetables

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It has been a very warm August. If you planted fall tomatoes and have been able to keep them watered, they are growing tall with thin leaves and blooming without setting fruit. The plants will quickly widen their leaves and begin setting fruit when temperatures become milder at night. Tomato transplants can still be planted if you obtain the plants in one-gallon containers offered by some nurseries.

It is also time to prepare your garden for the other winter vegetables. Incorporate 2 inches of compost and 10 cups of slow release lawn fertilizer (19-5-9) per 100 sq. ft. of a raised garden bed 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. All the cole crops and greens require ongoing fertilization to maximize production through the winter and into spring. Be prepared to side dress with one cup of winterizer or slow-release lawn fertilizer per 8 ft. of row every 3 to 4 weeks through the winter.

Broccoli is the most popular vegetable for fall and winter production. Place the transplants every 3 feet in the garden. Planted between now and the first week in October you will harvest heads for Thanksgiving. After the major head from a plant is harvested, broccoli will produce a crop of secondary heads through to January. Plant a second crop of broccoli in early November and another in January and you should have 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 mature 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 other nutritious greens that can be grown. Harvest them leaf by leaf and use them throughout the winter. Included on that list are kale, Swiss chard, turnip greens and beet greens. Kale is all the rage for salads, cooked greens and even drinks because of its nutrient value. If you find kale bitter, mix it with Swiss chard. Swiss Chard produces a mild but tasty green over a very long season. If you select the "Bright Lights" variety you also have showy plants with 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.

Gardeners looking to expand their knowledge of raising fall and winter vegetables have several classes to choose from. On September 8 at 9:30 to 11AM I will be covering the topic at Dreamhill Estates Neighborhood in the Medical Center Area. The class is co-sponsored by Milberger's Nursery. Attendees will receive informational handouts and a broccoli plant as a start for their garden. There is no charge for the program. Dreamhill Estates is at Dorothy Louise Dr west of Loop 410 on Babcock. Turn south from Babcock to Dorothy Louise Dr and follow the signs to 6802 Dorothy Louise. Call 210-382-4455 for more information. For other programs visit the Texas A&M AgriLife or your favorite nursery's websites.