



## What to Plant Now

**Fall is the perfect time to refresh your garden and keep growing well into winter.**

by Jessica Walliser

Don't put your trowel back into the shed just yet. Even though it may feel like planting time has come and gone, late summer brings a renaissance of sorts, ushering in another heyday for home-grown vegetables.

Keeping your garden chugging along and producing well beyond the first frost is as easy as 1-2-3. Choose the right crops. Site them well. Protect them from the impending cold weather.

Do all this right and you'll be filling the fridge with fresh produce for months to come.

### Making Smart Choices

Successful late-season planting is tied intimately to the varieties you choose. Crops that thrive in the cooler temperatures of autumn and have shorter growing seasons are the ones you should be planting right now. They'll germinate, take root and produce before the harsh weather of winter sets in.

These cool-season crops can do this partly because the soil is still retaining a bit of summer's heat but also because they're genetically predisposed to thrive in chilly weather. Plus, cooler air and shorter days mean a reduced chance of bolting for many autumn-planted crops.

And, if you play your cards right, some of them will overwinter in the garden, producing an early crop of veggies in the spring and perhaps even allowing for harvests through the winter.

### Leaf Vegetables

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The magenta color of certain kinds of kale, such as the Red Chidori kale, actually intensifies in cold weather. Leaf vegetables are prime choices for late-season planting. Lettuce, spinach, kale, mustard greens and collards have maturation rates between 40 and 60 days, making plantings in July, August and September prime for picking when late autumn rolls around. Plus, these veggies are notoriously sweeter after a few light frosts.

Selecting cultivars with a noted preference for fall planting is a good idea since some varieties are bred for bolt resistance (a good quality for spring plantings), while others are bred for frost tolerance (an obvious must for fall sowings). Winterbor, a finely curled, thick kale, is one of the hardiest winter kales, perfect for planting right now, as is Red Chidori, whose magenta color intensifies in cold weather.

Collard varieties you might want to try include Flash, known for its dependable harvest and rapid regrowth, and Top Bunch, with slightly crinkled leaves. Almost all lettuce and spinach varieties do excellent when planted in the autumn, and all of these plants can be started by directly seeding them into the garden.

Lynne Gelston of Dream Thyme Farm in Mercer, Penn., also suggests sowing arugula in the fall. "We love the spicy, peppery taste of arugula. We do all heirloom varieties here, and they're just terrific."

### Brassicas

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Blue Wind broccoli has excellent frost tolerance and is



ideal for cold-weather gardening. Other crops that relish growing in cooler temperatures are cauliflower, broccoli and cabbage. Since these veggies have a longer growing season than leaf vegetables (between 60 and 85 days on average), they're often planted as transplants rather than seeded directly into the garden.

Seeds should be started indoors in mid- to late June and then transplanted into the garden when they have three or four sets of leaves. Since it's too late in the season to start your own broccoli, cauliflower or cabbage from seed for late-season planting, you may want to shop at a local nursery for ready-to-plant transplants.

Katie Bjorkman, owner of Earth Harvest Farm in Lake Geneva, Wis., says "Brassicas are huge fall crops on our farm because they can tolerate cold nights and frosts. We love Packman broccoli for its side-shoots, but Blue Wind had great frost tolerance last year. I also left red and green storage-type cabbage in the field all the way until Thanksgiving, and while it wasn't the most beautiful head of cabbage around, it was still delicious after peeling the outer layers off and letting it thaw. For us, Brussels sprouts can also stay in the ground until around Thanksgiving."

## Alliums

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Onions, specifically the Evergreen Hardy White, are a hardy plant for fall planting. Several members of the onion (or allium) family are also good bets for fall planting. Scallions, or bunching onions, are sown from seed late in the season for winter harvests. If left in the ground under a layer of light mulch, they'll produce one of spring's earliest crops.

Evergreen Hardy White is the most winter-hardy bunching onion with a mild onion taste. Deep Purple is a red bunching onion good for both spring and late-summer sowings. Egyptian walking onions, also called topset onions, are hardy perennial onions that are very fun to grow. They form bunches of edible bulbs underground but also develop little bulblets at the top of each stem. At the end of the season, the stems topple, planting the bulblets and creating the "walking" effect.

Egyptian walking onions can be harvested either by digging up the strong-flavored bulbs or by using the greens much like chives in early spring. Leeks are another winter-tolerant member of the allium family. While they're planted in the spring, leeks can be harvested all winter long and have a mild flavor that many gardeners enjoy both raw and cooked.

And then, of course, there's garlic. Planted each autumn, gardeners can enjoy three different garlic harvests. First, cut a few of the young greens emerging in early spring to top salads and soups, then use the curled scapes (or flower buds) to make pesto or in sautés, and finally dig up the newly formed garlic "heads" in July when the tops have browned completely.

## Root Vegetables

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Radishes, such as the Easter Egg variety, produce mild, tender roots during cold-weather growth. And let's not forget about those root crops. The humble turnip will be rendered a family favorite with fall harvests. (Yes, I did say "favorite" when referring to a turnip!) Much like a tomato, store-bought turnips don't hold a candle to homegrown.

Purple Top White Globe, Golden Globe and Petrowski turnips mature in a mere 40 to 50 days. Seeds sown in late August are ready to pick when autumn's first frost arrives. Radish, another fast-maturing root crop (they take about a month from seed), produce mild, tender roots in cooler weather. Look for bright purple Amethyst and multi-colored Easter Egg radishes to become choice varieties in your garden.

Beets—grown for either their roots or their greens—should be planted in the garden about 6 to 8 weeks before regular heavy frosts are expected. Most beet varieties perform well in the cool of autumn but Chioggia and Touchstone Gold are personal favorites for their unusual color and super-sweet taste.

Carrots, too, will tolerate the cooler temperatures of fall, but since they are slow to germinate, plan on sowing seeds about



10 weeks before your first expected frost date. Napoli carrot is noted by many growers to be the best selection for fall and winter harvests, and Merida is a selection that's particularly successful at overwintering in the garden. Sow seeds of Merida as late as early September in most climates, cover them with 6 inches of straw, and harvest the following May.

Location, Location, Location ...

Where you site your late-season crops matters more than you might think—for several reasons.

First, sowing these plants in soil that has already hosted a crop this season means you'll have to refuel your soil by adding more nutrients. This type of succession planting is a great use of space, but it does make good soil management a necessity. Before you plant any new crop, work several inches of finished compost or well-aged manure into the planting area.

"At Dream Thyme Farm, we amend our soil with two-year-old manure from our llamas, horses, rabbits and other animals. It's the only thing we use on our gardens, and because it's so broken-down, it makes a great mulch for weed control too," says Gelston.

If you have neither manure nor finished compost, use a balanced, organic granular fertilizer to replenish your soil. Bjorkman suggests adding a cup of worm castings to individual planting holes for transplants to add a little boost. Don't go overboard, though; nutrients that don't get used this fall may leach away during the winter months.

Secondly, location matters because the protection provided by garden microclimates may make the difference between harvesting in six weeks versus eight weeks; when pending winter temperatures and heavy frosts are involved, two weeks is an eternity.

This means that more sheltered garden sites are ideal for fall-planted crops—perhaps against a retaining wall or fence, or under the "skirts" of your tomato plants. These are areas that provide a bit of extra protection from winds and frosts and may lengthen the season by a few weeks. Farm topography can determine the presence of microclimates, too.

Gelston notes that her farm sits in a valley where frost readily settles. "We tend to get earlier frosts than surrounding growers since we sit so low."

And finally, location matters for harvesting purposes. Why plan for late-season harvests when you can't get to them? Since some of these crops may stay in the ground for months to come, access is important. Plant them near a walking path, close to the garden gate or kitchen door, or put some stepping stones nearby to guide your feet away from plant tops.

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