

Growing a Fall Vegetable Garden



It's not too late to plant vegetables this year. Many vegetables are well adapted to planting in the summer for fall harvest. Pennsylvania gardeners can plant a second crop in early August. Planting a fall garden will extend the gardening season so you can continue to harvest fresh produce after earlier crops have finished.

Some possible choices are greens such as lettuce, collards, endive, escarole, turnip greens (fall types), kale, mustard greens (Savanna hybrid is one of the best) parsley, and spinach (fall types). You can also plant beets, broccoli, carrots, cauliflower, (early fall types), kohlrabi, parsnip, peas, radicchio, radish, rutabaga, shallots and turnips.

Select the crop variety that you are interested in planting. Take the first frost date for our area (usually mid October) then subtract the number of days to harvest shown on the seed packet and add 10. This gives you a 10-day stretch of picking. For example, butterhead lettuce is a cool season crop that can be sown early spring through fall. The number of days to harvest is 65 days; add 10 days. For a fall planting, count back from mid October 75 days and you would plant these seeds in early August.

Growing a productive fall vegetable garden requires some planning. Before you prepare the soil for a fall garden, you need to decide what to do with the remains of the spring garden. The cool-season crops that you planted in the spring are already matured which opens up a space in the garden for the fall planting. Some of your warm season vegetables may already be looking a bit ragged. Remove the plant residue and any weeds. Prepare the soil by tilling or raking to a depth of 6-8". If the spring crops were already fertilized, you may not need to make an initial pre-plant fertilization. A soil test will help you to decide about fertilization. Otherwise, 1 to 2 lbs. of a complete fertilizer such as 10-10-10 may be applied per 100 square feet of bed space. Mix this in thoroughly.

If you plant seeds rather than transplants, be sure that you supply adequate moisture to keep the young seedlings from drying out excessively. Vegetables require 1" of water per week. It's better to do a single deep penetrating watering rather than frequent shallow applications. The roots will be encouraged to go deeper if the moisture is deeper in the soil.

Our summers can be hot and dry. Soils may form a hard crust over the seeds, which can interfere with good seed germination particularly in heavy clay soil. Some vegetables, like carrots, have trouble germinating in crusty soil. You may need to cover the seeded area with burlap cloth, newspapers or boards to keep the soil moist and cool which is more favorable for germination. The shading material must be removed as soon as the seeds begin to germinate. Lettuce and spinach will not germinate if the soil temperature exceeds 85 degrees Fahrenheit.

You can extend the season of tender vegetables by protecting them through the first early frost. Cover the beds with burlap or a floating row cover supported by stakes or wires to keep the material from touching the plants.

For a list of suggested vegetable varieties, the College of Agricultural Sciences publication "Pennsylvania Vegetable Variety Recommendations for the Home Gardener and Bedding Plant Grower/Garden Supplier" is a good resource. If you are interested in this publication, the York County Penn State Garden Hotline office has a limited supply in hard copy.

Rita Potter is a Master Gardener in York County. Penn State Master Gardeners are volunteers for Penn State Cooperative Extension. For more information, contact the Master Gardener office at 717-840-7408 or YorkMG@psu.edu.