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Plant Now for a Fall Harvest

By Dawn Pettinelli



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With the hot, muggy days of summer well upon us, most gardeners are content to reap their harvests and occasionally attend to chores like weeding and watering. More ambitious souls, however, are planning and planting quick-maturing vegetable varieties for fall harvest.

There are a surprising number of vegetable varieties that can be planted in late July and August providing a September through October yield. Vegetables that can be planted late summer include loose-leaf lettuce, bush beans, spinach, kale, Swiss chard, radishes, carrots, beets, bunching onions and peas. Young transplants of cole crops such as cauliflower, broccoli and Chinese cabbage can be set out by Aug. 15. Late summer is also the time to plant garlic and saffron crocus bulbs for harvest next year.

Most of these plants enjoy growing in cooler fall weather, often increasing in tenderness and productivity. Seed packets generally list the days to maturity on the packet. This refers to the approximate number of days it takes until the plant is harvestable, plus or minus a week. Day one begins when the seed sprouts, not

when it is planted. Select varieties with 65 days or less to ensure a harvest before the first hard frost. Except for beans, which are frost tender, the other plants listed will withstand a mild frost.

Seedbed preparation for fall crops is similar to that of spring seeding. Weeds need to be removed and the soil loosened. Organic matter such as peat moss, coconut coir, small amounts of well-rotted manure or compost, or even untreated grass clippings can be incorporated into the soil to help retain moisture. One to 2 pounds of 5-10-10 or similar fertilizer can be added to every 100 square feet of garden area if no compost or manure is used. This is especially important if you are reusing an area just harvested. Many vegetable crops require good fertility for maximum production.

The biggest challenge a gardener faces when sowing seeds during July and August for fall harvest is ensuring adequate moisture necessary for seed germination. Often soils will crust over during periods of dry weather, preventing many of the smaller seeds from germinating. Sprinkling a thin layer of vermiculite or untreated grass clippings over the newly seeded areas prevents the soil from drying as rapidly. A light watering once or twice a day will keep the seedbed moist. Seeds should be planted at twice the recommended depth during the hot weather. Once the plants have germinated, an organic mulch will keep the soil cooler and also prevent excessive evaporation. If grass clippings are used, be sure that the lawn was not treated with an herbicide.

Salad greens such as lettuce will benefit if you shade them from the hot summer sun. Plant them next to taller plants or provide shading with a floating row cover such as Reemay.

Obtaining seeds in midsummer can sometimes present a problem. Your best bets are ordering them from a seed company or checking out your local garden center. Broccoli and Chinese cabbage transplants are also difficult to come by in July, so I always end up starting my own in late June.

Try some of the following varieties and see if you don't agree that the sweetest harvest is in the fall.

Lettuce – Black Seeded Simpson, Freckles, All Year Round, Winter Density, Green Ice

Radishes – Cherry Belle, Easter Egg, Pink Beauty, French Breakfast

Swiss Chard – Fordhook Giant, Rhubarb Chard, Perpetual, Lucillus

Spinach – Tyee, Space, Viroflay, Winter Bloomsdale, Gigante di Inverno

Carrots – Little Finger, Mokum, Sugar Snax, Minicor, Parisian

Broccoli – Gypsy, Di Cicco, Early Dividend, Calabrese, Premium Crop Hybrid

Peas – Cascadia Snap Pea, Little Marvel, Alaska, Knight, Novella II

Beets – Almost all varieties except for winter keepers, which take at least 80 days to mature.

If you have questions about planting for a fall harvest or any home or garden topic, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free in Connecticut, at 877-486-6271, visit www.ladybug.uconn.edu or call your local Cooperative Extension Center.