**Primetime**

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**Vegetable Garden Action**

There are a number of vegetables that will grow and provide produce through the winter. There are also some that can be planted now.

The most productive winter vegetable gardens have tomatoes, peppers, okra, broccoli, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, carrots, turnips, rutabagas, Swiss chard, Chinese cabbage, collards, and mustard growing.

The tomatoes, peppers, and okra are near the end of their life. They are sensitive to cold weather. There is some advantage to taking action to protect the tomatoes and peppers from the cold.

If the plants are protected from an early cold spell we often will have three or four more weeks of weather suitable for growth and maturity. That means that there is a good chance that many of those half grown green tomatoes may reach full size.

When temperatures near freezing are forecast, protect the tomatoes by draping cloth (sheet, blanket or agriculture fabric) over the plants to retain heat from the soil around the plant and prevent freeze damage.

If the forecast is for temperatures lower than 30ºF a combination of plastic and cloth may be the best protective option. The combination works especially well with a heat source inside. Use a mechanics light or a short string of holiday lights as the heat source.

Plastic by itself is difficult because the cold temperatures transfer directly across the plastic to any foliage that is in contact with the material. The cloth in between forms an insulating layer.

Clear plastic is also an issue because of the greenhouse effect; the covered area heats up when sunlight penetrates. You can protect the plant from cold only to fry it the next day when the sun shines.

Cold damage is the most obvious threat to tomatoes in November and December but it is also hard to get the fruit to ripen. Tomatoes require more heat than is normal for late fall to finish coloring. The “good news” is that the large green tomatoes hanging on your plants are probably physiologically ripe. That means if you pick them and take them into the house they will ripen in two or three days.

There is another option to consider. A clear piece of plastic spread across your tomato plants and secured at both ends may increase temperatures enough to ripen the fruit. Jerry Parsons believes the plastic could even be placed and sealed over each individual plant. Using the tomato cage as a tent frame would work well. The temperature of the air inside the cage would increase by 25ºF on a sunny day but that may not be a problem if the highs are in the low 80’s or less.

Spinach is available as transplants in area nurseries. Plant it now for fresh spinach all winter and into the spring. Harvest it leaf by leaf and never remove more than one third of the leaves at any one time to sustain the plant for the long period of production.

One key to a good spinach harvest is to keep the plants well fertilized. A cup of slow release lawn fertilizer such as 19-5-9 spread along each eight foot row every three weeks does a good job. Two eight foot rows (eight plants each row) of spinach will provide plenty of leaves for salads and other spinach uses for a typical family of four.

Control slugs and snails with slug and snail bait spread near the planting. Caterpillars can be controlled by Bt products. The label tells you how long to wait to harvest after an application.

There are many other greens that are available as transplants that can be planted now. Consider Swiss chard, Chinese cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, collards, kale, cabbage, lettuce, and mustard. They all require the same fertilization as spinach.

Onion plants will also be available soon. Plant them every two inches in a row prepared with the incorporation of two inches of compost and a cup of winterizer or slow release lawn fertilizer per eight feet of row. The two middle plants can be harvested as green onions over the next three months. Leave six inches of space between the onions that will reach full size for harvest in May.

For those of you who prefer a more pungent onion look for “Red Creole.” For the rest of us that like the mild onions; use 1015y, granex, red hamburger, or candy.

Fertilize onions with the same regime as the spinach.