

Fall and Winter Vegetables

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Temperatures should moderate in September much to the relief of gardeners and fall vegetables such as tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, and even okra.

The most influential changes in that regard are the nighttime temperatures. As the temps fall to 70 degrees and below expect the fall tomatoes to quickly respond with leaf expansion and blooms. The eggplants and peppers will resume the production of larger fruit. Okra is more dependent on day length than temperatures but there should be another period of heavy production in September before the winter decline begins.

Help the fall vegetables maximize their growth and production by side dressing the tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants with lawn fertilizer. One third cup per plant of slow release product such as 19-5-09 works well or use one of the 3-1-2 ratio "winterizers". Apply the granules six inches from the plant stem. Okra will probably not benefit by additional fertilization.

As exciting as the response of the remaining summer vegetables is to the moderation of temperatures in September, planting the winter vegetables is even more exciting. Among the vegetables you can plant as transplants are broccoli, cabbage, collards, Brussels sprouts, kale, Swiss chard, and Chinese cabbage. Consider planting lettuce, radishes, turnips, rutabagas, carrots, and beets by seed.

The air and soil temperatures are important to the development of all the winter vegetables. Lingering heat may slow down the germination and development rate but there are two important winter vegetables that are especially sensitive to the heat. Wait to plant spinach transplants in October and plant onion transplants in December.

For the most success the garden bed for the winter vegetables should be in full sun. Incorporate 2 inches of compost and 10 cups of slow release lawn fertilizer (19-5-9) per 100 sq. ft. of bed. The soil should be moist at planting time so irrigate generously before the planting if it has not rained in the last week.

Swiss chard deserves a special note. Grow it in a container or raised bed where it produces a large quantity of a tasty, nutritious greens for salads and recipes. Of all the greens, Swiss chard best resists development of bitterness into late spring and it also is an ideal partner to use in recipes with nutritious but sometimes overly strong-tasting kale. Plant the selection "Bright Lights." It is especially attractive with yellow, orange, and green stems.

Leaf lettuce is easy to grow by seed as long as the soil has cooled a few degrees and if you do not cover the seed with soil. Try the reseeding Crawford lettuce that is a favorite of the Gardening Volunteers of South Texas and Bexar County Master Gardeners. It is available at several of the local nurseries in San Antonio.

Broccoli planted in September will produce large heads in time for use before Thanksgiving and then will go on to produce a second crop of smaller heads into the winter. It works to plant broccoli and other large cole crops such as Brussels sprouts and cauliflower 2.5 feet apart in the row. To maximize

production requires that the plants be side dressed with a product such as “winterizer” lawn fertilizer every 3-4 weeks. It is also essential that you be ready to apply a Bt product such as Dipel or Bio-worm Killer at the first sign of foliar feeding by cabbage loopers. The Bt product is applied to the foliage and consumed by the caterpillars as they feed.