

Growing Food in the Winter

Both Indoors and Outside

By Bettylou Sandy of Bettylou's Gardening

❖ **Planting** a garden for food production takes place *many times through the growing season*. In *February*, many plants are started from seed to plant outside later. *March* is the time to start Pea varieties outside, then mid to late *April* **cold weather crops** of cabbage family (Brussels sprouts, Broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower), Onions, chives, salad greens, spinach, kale, Carrots, parsnips, radishes, potatoes, etc. April is also the time to harvest the Asparagus from your planting two, or more years ago. Egyptian onion sprouts and chive greens are also ready for their first harvest in March and April. Planning for a full season of food is important.

❖ **Outdoor Winter Gardening:**

❖ **Cold weather crops** (may also grow in the shade in warm weather):

- ◆ **Peas** – plant by seed outdoors, usually around mid March, if the soil is workable and not frozen, or muddy. Do the same in August, to early September. It is best to soak the seeds overnight before planting.
- ◆ **Broccoli** – start indoors and plant outside early April and again in August.
- ◆ **Cabbage family** – plant in April
- ◆ **Onion varieties** – plant in April
- ◆ **Lettuce family** - . Plant in April in the sun, in summer
 - in the shade, August in the sun and December through the winter in the house!
- ◆ **Kale** - Plant in April in the sun, summer
 - in the shade, August in the sun and December in the house. I have had Kale available outside for harvesting through the winter.
- ◆ **Spinach** - Plant in April in the sun, summer in the shade, August in the sun and December in the house
- ◆ **Garlic** – Plant cloves outside in October, mulch for the winter, harvest greens (scapes) in June, harvest garlic in July
- ◆ **Parsnips** – Plant by seed in April, harvest the following February or March for a sweet fresh vegetable in the cold months.
- ◆ **Carrots** – plant by seed late April to Mid June, then Mid August through September. Harvest through November, but save some to harvest for February and March.

- ❖ Most people think of May and June to be the only time to plant. That is the time for planting the **warm weather crops** of tropical plants such as Tomatoes, Peppers, eggplant, squash family (Summer Squash, Zucchini, Winter squash, pumpkins, etc.), carrots, string beans and a host of other warm weather crops. May is also the time to start harvesting the peas and broccoli planted in March and April.
- ❖ In **June, harvest** Broccoli and Peas, until the weather becomes too hot. At that time, they die back for the season. Sometimes the broccoli will continue to struggle through the summer months to begin producing again through the fall and into the winter months. We also harvest Strawberries and Blueberries we may have planted last April, or years ago.
- ❖ In **July, harvest** Garlic from what was planted last October. For this reason, planting Garlic around the outside of a rose bed or the perimeter of a vegetable garden is best, so other crops may be planted within the garlic perimeter with the other plants being protected from predators. After harvesting the garlic in July, boost the soil with some composted cow manure.
- ❖ By **August**, the average gardener is ready to quit for the year. Don't do it! This is just *mid growing season*. Celebrate what you have harvested and look forward to **the rest of the season!**
 - In **August**, it is time to plant **cold weather crops** of cabbage family (Brussels Sprouts, Broccoli, Cabbage, cauliflower), Onions, chives, salad greens, spinach, kale, Pea varieties, Carrots, Endive, Kohlrabi, radishes, etc. ***August is only mid growing season***, not a time to quit. As one crop is going by, a new one is planted in its place. Those plants we establish in August are harvested through the fall, and into November in many cases. Carrots can even over winter to be harvested in March and April, so plant enough for both fall and spring harvests.
- ❖ **October, to mid November**, is the time to plant Garlic for next year. Harvesting other crops continues, even after the frost. Root crops, like carrots and parsnips, continue to grow through the cool fall and sometimes into next spring. Potato varieties can also be harvested into November. The energy of most plants and shrubs goes into the roots for the winter. The winter months are when plants and shrubs work on their root system to prepare for spring growth, so foods like garlic, parsnips and carrots do well *through* the winter. ***Hearty cold weather crops use sugar as an anti-freeze*** for protection from the cold. This is why many foods taste sweeter ***when picked after the frost, or hard freeze***. Plan some protection for the more tender warm weather plants. A light covering of plastic, or fabric at night will provide Tomatoes into October and even November. Salad greens and Peas will also continue into October, and sometimes into November. Brussels sprouts, Carrots, Parsnips and other root crops will also be available into November, leaving some carrots and parsnips for a winter harvest, as well. The spring harvests of these are sweeter and very welcome as a fresh late winter vegetable.

- There are so many more vegetables to choose from, but these are the most frequently requested. Each vegetable has its own needs for soil type, temperature requirements, water needs and soil type preferences to produce a good crop.
- Plant your crops so that plants with similar needs are together. It will be much easier to care for them.
- As you can see, planting and harvesting take planning for the rhythm throughout the **growing season, from February to November and beyond!**

For more tender crops like lettuce and spinach, build a **cold frame, high tunnels** or **row covers** outside to house these crops through the winter. This will take more tending and materials, but some people enjoy the process for exercise in the winter months.

- ❖ **For a healthy garden**, it is best to check your plants daily. By keeping up with your garden, you are able to find problems as they occur and deal with them before they become unmanageable and discouraging. A daily visit to your garden usually takes only a few minutes and can be a very relaxing time of the day. I try to carry a bucket and pruners to tidy up the garden as I go. I often bring a harvest basket to collect anything that is ready to be collected, or I just nibble as I go and harvest at another time.
- ❖ **Water for the garden** is best applied in the morning hours, sometime between the hours of 6:00-10:00. The reason for watering in the morning, rather than in the evening, is that plants only drink in the day light, not at night. They sleep at night like we do, so the moisture would sit on the soil feeding mold and mildew spores, if watering was done in the evening. For this reason I keep a full watering can handy for morning use.
- ❖ **Harvesting** your crops will be a daily task. The more often you harvest from the plants, the more they will produce. The more they produce the more nutrition the plants will require to keep up the pace. “Snacks” of a quarter inch of compost added to the surface of the soil every two or three weeks will make a big difference in the yield of the plants. If vegetables seem bitter, a solution of lime (the mineral, not citrus) and water can be used for watering in the morning. The food will be sweeter the next time you pick. PH makes a big difference.
- ❖ **Preserving your produce** for later use includes drying, canning, freezing and root cellaring. There are many resources available to show you how. Enjoying the harvest *as it arrives* through the year is the best reward for our labors. Preserving it at its peak of freshness, *through the season* lets us remember our success as well as the satisfaction of knowing we are providing healthy food for our own table through the year.

- Keeping a stock of inexpensive and nourishing **dry goods** is important through the winter as well. Consider buying brown rice and dried bean varieties in bulk in the fall and store in glass containers with tight fitting metal lids. In this way, the food will stay fresher longer, and prevents bugs and moisture from harming it. Another benefit of storing in glass containers is you can see through the glass to know how much you have.
- **Glass jars** can be saved from pasta sauce, fruit, pickles, jellies and jams and many other food sources. Just be sure to wash and dry them completely before reusing them.

❖ **Indoor Vegetable Gardening** can be done without special lighting!

- ❖ The cold weather crops of *salad greens, spinach and radishes* can be grown in *window boxes* inside your home. The cold temperatures against the window will not bother the plants. The light from the window and regular attention will provide healthy fresh food in the winter for much less money than would cost to buy “fresh” greens from the store. The nurturing activity also prevents the “winter blues” for most people. This is a wonderful activity for families, people who live alone, senior living centers, and schools.

❖ **A light weight window box** may be built using:

- An Eight foot gutter section cut into two four foot lengths.
- Poke holes in one of the sections to make drainage for the excess water to flow.
- Add end caps to both four foot sections of gutter.
- Place ½ inch of gravel or pebbles in the bottom section
- Place the other section (with the drainage holes) into the other section
- Fill the top section with potting soil
- Water the soil lightly and wait an hour for the water to settle, then water again.
- Plant the seeds with a light coating of soil, as directed on the package.
- Water with a mister twice a day for three days, then once a day in the mornings
- When the sprouts show 1 ½ inches of growth, weed them, but put them in your salad, or nibble as you go.
- Turn the garden around once a week to have stronger and more balanced plants. The plants grow towards the sun, so turning them will help them to move and not be stick against the window.
- As the greens grow, harvest only the outer leaves to allow the inner growth to continue producing for months of food.

❖ Another way to grow food inside is to grow **sprouts** in a jar on your kitchen counter. The sprout jar could be purchased, or made by you:

- Just take a clean glass jar with a tight fitting lid,
- Poke multiple holes in the lid, using an awl or a nail, for air and to let excess water drain out.

- Rinse each morning for about a week to get a healthy crop of greens for your enjoyment.
- Having a few jars going at various stages and various types of sprouts too, will provide a constant source of these nutritious vegetables for your meals.

As you can see, it is possible to grow our own food all year round and have healthy food available to us in our own homes. We can grow our food inside the house or apartment all year round, as well as outside in the ground and in containers. All it takes is a little time each day and the motivation to eat well with less expense.

It is my hope that by growing our own food and preparing for the seasons we will have a more peaceful lifestyle and a more secure food supply.

All of these “tools”, and more, for extending the season can also be purchased as kits from suppliers as:

- A.M.Leonard 800-543-8955 or amlgardener.com
- Growers Supply 800-476-9715 or GrowersSupply.com

For further reading:

“Step by Step Organic Vegetable Gardening”
By Shepherd Ogden
Harper Collins

“The Gardener’s A-Z Guide to Growing Organic Food”
Tanya L.K.Denckia
Story Publishing

“Stocking Up”
Rodale Press

“Root Cellaring”
By Mike and Nancy Bubel
Rodale Press

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