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Home Grounds, Gardens, Home Pests

### **Planting a Fall Vegetable Garden**

If your summer vegetable garden has been a bust, you're not alone, while the occasional pop up thunderstorms give your plants the relief they need from the heat (and you and the garden hose too for that matter) the problems that follow from humidity and wet foliage all through the night bring many other unwelcome problems to the vegetable garden. Remember, if you are dragging that hose, only water the soil and not the plant! As we move into the late months of summer, the fungal issues and insects can take over and there may not be much of your garden left so go ahead and clean out the garden and plan now for fall veggies.

Mid August and September are the months for planting that fall veg in central Alabama so amend the soil with some good organic matter and lime if needed and get ready to start again. The fall months are usually our driest months with very little rainfall so get that hose ready, especially if you plant from seed. Starting seeds outdoors in the ground in August and September can be very difficult as you must keep the soil around the seeds from drying out or it will kill a newly germinated seed. If seeds are not your thing or you like instant gratification with less worry and stress, I recommend transplants and with fall garden veg there are lots of fun options. Again, keep that soil moist and one way to do that with less watering is to mulch. The mulch will also suppress weeds and improve the soil quality over time.

Fall vegetables are really my favorite to grow and I have just about decided I will leave the peppers and tomatoes to the local farmers market and avoid the summer heat, afternoon rain showers and weeding all together and plant when I know we have cooler days ahead with less insect pressure, weeds and humidity!

Many cool-season vegetables, such as carrots, broccoli, cauliflower, collards, lettuce and brussels sprouts, produce their best flavor and quality when they are maturing during cool weather, but we have to germinate and get them started when it is still warm. These can also be planted in early spring, but in Alabama, the spring temperatures often heat up quickly causing vegetables such as lettuce and spinach to bolt (flower) or develop a bitter flavor. This is why planting these veggies late in the summer to early fall when we are transitioning to cooler temps is more ideal than in the spring.

For a more accurate planting schedule, determine the average date of the first killing frost in the fall, and then count backward from the frost date, using the number of days to maturity to determine the best time to plant in your area. Seeds of lettuce and spinach will not germinate if the soil temperature exceeds 85 degrees F so for these you may need to wait a bit longer before sowing or plant from transplants. A few other plants I highly recommend you plant are kale and swiss chard. These plants are so easy to grow and have very little insect and disease pressures and maybe add a few to your containers or flower beds as they can be beautiful additions all winter. Harvest these leafy plants like lettuce, collards and spinach from the outside leaves as the plants continue to grow for a constant harvest for months.

You can extend your summer vegetables that are still producing and your semi-hardy vegetables like lettuce, mustards and broccoli on into the fall and early winter by protecting them from frost. In Alabama, we often enjoy several weeks of good growing conditions after the first frost. Cover growing beds, rows or individual plants with burlap, old bedsheets or a floating row covers supported by stakes or wire to keep the material from directly touching the plants and remove each morning. Plants like kale, onions, collards and cabbage can take a pretty heavy frost with no protection and will bounce back with no problem.

Root crops such as carrots and radishes should be harvested or mulched heavily before a hard freeze. Mulched root crops can often be harvested well into the winter and during mild winters, harvest may continue until spring. Also don't forget to plant your potatoes in late January/ February and plan to harvest in May when you dig them up and then start again with your tomatoes, peppers and squash.

If you have questions about any of these vegetables or others please call our Master Gardener Helpline!

**If you've got home garden questions, we've got answers!**  
**Call 1-877-252-GROW (4769)**