

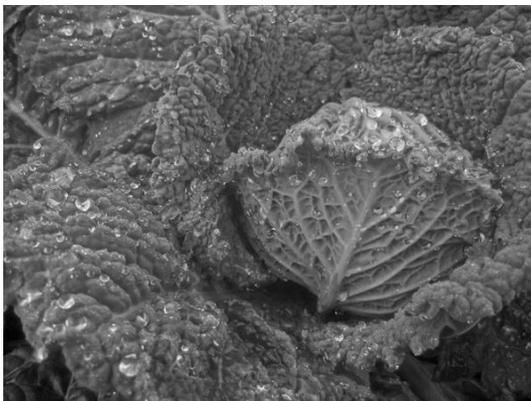
# Winter Gardening

To some it seems counterintuitive, but the period of time from June through August is the prime time for thinking about, and planting your winter produce. In the mild winter of the Pacific Northwest, hardy greens, brassicas like cabbage and sprouting broccoli, and many root crops thrive and can be harvested fall through spring.



Timing is everything in winter garden planting. Planted too early, your crop may mature and not hold well in the garden or in storage. Planted too late, and your plants may not be big enough going into the cold season to be hardy, or they may bolt in the spring instead of producing for you. Moreover if you're already growing vegetables for summer harvest and preserving, it is important to integrate your fall and winter harvest planting with those plans. In essence, becoming a winter gardener will turn you into a year round gardener.

There are special considerations when planning and planting a winter garden. Because of our wet winters here, garden soil for these crops must be especially well drained. The angle of the sun in the winter is very low and to the south. Your winter garden needs sun during those months, so the site needs to be carefully chosen. If possible, choose a site that slopes to the south and will get at least five hours of sun. Cold air settles. A winter garden benefits from being wind sheltered and yet with good air drainage. Keeping your site on a slope rather than in a low spot will improve air drainage. Wind sheltering can come from trees or shrubs or fences. Fences and walls do a better job of breaking the wind if they are not solid, but allow some air to flow through them.



Many crops can be grown in the open. Brassicas that are very hardy include kales and sprouting broccoli. There are also cabbage and Brussels sprouts varieties that are hardy enough to withstand temperatures below 20°F, if they were planted early enough and have had time to harden off. There are also leafy chicories, corn salad (mache) and Asian greens that are hardy enough to grow without cover. These can provide both salad greens and braising greens through the fall and winter.

In addition, some root crops like parsnips, carrots, and beets can be overwintered in the ground, and dug as needed through the fall and winter. A layer of mulch can help them avoid damage. As an alternative, these root crops can also be dug in the fall and stored in a cool garage, basement, or root cellar in bins of damp sand.

There are special tools that can help the more tender crops in your winter garden to be successful. Using cloches and cold frames helps keep soil drier and warmer during the rainy months. For most crops, these shelters should be installed after the crops have experienced some frosts, so they can harden off, but before deep cold sets in. Spinach, Swiss chard, and some hardier lettuce varieties can be fall planted early enough to gain some size, then sheltered through the coldest, darkest part of the winter, to begin growing again in February. During very cold weather (Northeaster or outflow winds) covering these crops with frost protection blankets, even inside their cold frames, can protect them from too much damage.

Planting garlic is usually the first experience many gardeners have of overwintering a crop. Other allium family plants can also be planted in late summer or fall to overwinter for the next summer's crop. Planting onion seeds in August will give you large onions for harvest in July, and if you plant the seeds closer than suggested for large onions, it will also give you green onions in the winter as you pull the extras, essentially thinning the row. Leeks can be planted earlier in the summer, sizing up for fall and winter harvests.

When planning a winter garden, look for varieties that are bred for overwintering or fall cropping. Many of these selections actually perform better when grown for these harvest periods. Spinach and lettuce varieties that do well as winter greens often do not perform as well for summer plantings, bolting quickly during warm weather, but standing up well to the freeze/thaw cycles of the winter months.

In preparing your winter produce beds, pay close attention to fertility. You want your plants to grow quickly into early fall, then slow down and harden off as the weather turns cooler. Once the soil cools, the plants will not be able to take up much nutrition from organic fertilizers that need microbe activity to break them down (seed meals, fish meal). If you are overwintering crops, have some quick acting fertilizer on hand for side dressing in the spring, as the plants begin to grow again. Liquid fertilizers are good for this, and blood meal also works (but may attract animal pests).

Pests that may affect your crops are ones that will be active in the summer and fall, when it is crucial for those plants to size up. Floating row covers are the best protection against cabbage root maggot, cabbage worms, brassica aphids, and carrot rust fly.

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#### Resources:

Winter Gardening in the Maritime Northwest- Binda Colebrook

West Coast Garden Seeds- catalog

Territorial Seeds- winter catalog

