Get growing on a fall garden

The end of summer doesn't necessarily mean bidding farewell to fresh, homegrown vegetables. In fact, many cool-season crops hit their heyday as fall temperatures drop, and some even taste better when nipped by a light frost.

As long as basic growing conditions are met, vegetable plants don't care what season it is. In most regions of the country, gardeners plant fall vegetables in August or September for harvest in October and November. It's important to carefully calculate a growing season to ensure plants have time to produce before freezing weather arrives. Generally, plan to plant fall vegetables when daytime temperatures range between 60 and 80 degrees (the cooler the better); night temperatures should be above 40 degrees, and enough sunshine is required to ensure plants will get at least six hours of sun per day. Also plan to give plants at least one inch of water per week.

To get started, remove all the debris left over from a summer garden so fall crops have plenty of room to grow. Add compost to garden beds and landscapes. Soil should be light, well-aerated and well-draining since fall gardens are more likely to get soggy from rain. Mulch will keep the soil cool and moist during the last days of summer.

All-natural fertilizer can be mixed in as well, such as Bonnie Plants Herb and Vegetable Plant Food which is made from soybean oilseed extract. This food is known to contain 150,000 nutritional and organic compounds including vitamins, minerals, amino acids and proteins, enzymes, plant hormones and carbohydrates. All are vital to plant growth. Next, determine local frost and freeze dates. For most areas, frost doesn't have to end the fall growing season. Monitor local weather forecast during late September and early October to know when frost is coming.

Once local frost and freeze dates are ascertained, planning and planting can begin. Keep in mind that when growing vegetables in the fall, plants need to be in the ground in time to mature before the first frost, and to yield most of their harvest before the first heavy freeze. Some cool-season crops mature in as little as 30 to 40 days, while others may take several months to produce.

Since time is of the essence when planting a fall garden, start out with transplants that already are growing. Choose fast-maturing varieties, such as Bonnie Plants, to get the most for your harvest. The gardening experts at Bonnie suggest these fall crops:

- **Winterbor kale.** This vigorous producer weathers winter easily, even in very cold climates. Cut outer leaves so that the center can continue growing. Space transplants about 12 inches apart.
- **Georgia collards.** Another leafy green similar to kale, Georgia collards are prized for their sweet, cabbage-like flavor. Space transplants 36 inches apart.
- **Romaine lettuce.** Romaine packs more vitamins, minerals, fiber, and phytonutrients than other popular types of lettuce. Space transplants 18 inches apart.
- **Early dividend broccoli.** Popular, productive and easy to grow, this broccoli is high in fiber and calcium. Set transplants 18 inches apart.
- **Mustard greens.** Offering spicy hot leaves, this is a very fast-growing, nutritious vegetable. Mustard greens always taste sweeter when nipped by frost. Space plants 12 inches apart.
- **Bonnie hybrid cabbage.** Bonnie's best cabbage is high in beta-carotene, vitamins C and K, and fiber. Space transplants 24 inches apart.
- **Arugula.** These fast-growing leafy greens are super-food for the bones. The leaves are "nutrient dense" and low in calories. Leaves grow best in cool weather.

As winter grows closer, home owners can extend their garden harvest by using floating row covers on frosty nights, or by planting in containers that can be brought indoors overnight. Be ready with some kind of protection to cover the plants. Either opt for something commercially manufactured, such as cloches, polyethylene blankets and corrugated Fiberglas covers, or try simple household items such as old towels, bed sheets, or even used plastic milk jugs with the bottoms removed. ❧

Growing fall crops in raised beds can help protect tender plants from frost damage.