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Starting Your Fall Garden From Seed

The midday July heat will chase even the toughest gardener indoors. This is the time to think about starting seeds. That's right. Seeds started in the heat of summer will yield a second crop of greens, roots, and other tasty vegetables that will often outperform the spring crop!

Vegetables to Start in Summer



Salad Greens: Lettuce, Arugula, and Spinach

Germinating lettuce and spinach outdoors in summer can be a challenge. Try starting them indoors, or in a sheltered spot in your garden that does not get hit with the heat of the afternoon sun. Sow seeds in August and transplant seedlings into the garden when they're ready. Spinach seedlings transplant best when they have just two true leaves; lettuce is generally ready for planting three to four weeks after sowing. For an extended harvest, sow greens again directly in the garden when the weather cools.

Arugula, like other mustards, germinates well at a range of soil temperatures. Try sowing it in the shade of larger plants, like tomatoes and peppers.

Roots: Beets, Carrots, and Salad Turnips

Loosen the soil to a depth of about 12 inches for your fall root crop. Add compost so that the soil will retain moisture in heat of late summer, and set up a soaker hose to give your seedlings a good start. Thinning is a must for beets and carrots; carrots should be thinned to 2 inches apart, beets to 4 inches.

Beets can be left in the ground for winter harvest in mild winter areas. In more northern regions, they tolerate some frost. Cover carrots with a thick mulch of straw and harvest them until the ground freezes. Salad turnips are best when harvested young, up to 2 inches in diameter.



Broccoli and Kale

Start broccoli, kale, and other brassicas indoors, with a goal of getting your seedlings in the ground about 10 weeks before the first frost date. In cold winter areas where the ground freezes hard, that could mean starting them as early as June. In mild winter areas, sow brassica seeds in mid August. For an extended fall harvest, look for varieties with good cold tolerance.

Kale can also be sown directly in the garden in late summer, and harvested as baby salad greens.



Bok Choy



An excellent fall crop, bok choy matures so quickly that you may be able to get two crops in fall. It does not have the tendency to bolt, as a spring crop will do during an early heat spell. And it suffers far less from flea beetle damage, which can be a real problem in late spring.

Start it directly in the garden or start seedlings, which transplant easily, on a sunny windowsill. Protect your bok choy crop if a hard frost threatens, or harvest it.

Tips for the Fall Garden

- If the soil is too hot or the weather too dry for good seed germination outdoors, start your seeds on a sunny windowsill.
- To calculate your seed sowing date, look at a variety's "days to harvest" and count back from the frost date in your area, then add a week or two.
- Choose fast-maturing varieties of broccoli, cauliflower, and other slow-growing crops.
- Take advantage of breaks in the weather to sow greens and root crops directly in the garden.
- Don't forget flowers and herbs. Zinnias, calendula, and basil can be started in summer for a second round.

