



VEGETABLES IN THE WINTER GARDEN

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Have you thought of having a winter vegetable garden?

We are fortunate to live in Northern California where we are able to grow a number of great vegetables during the shortened, wet, cold days of winter. A good pick for the winter garden might be a cold hardy green vegetable such as brussel sprouts, broccoli, or asparagus. Root crops such as carrots, beets, leek, or carrots grow successfully too. Cool season greens are perfect for winter gardening. Kale, spinach, Swiss Chard, leaf lettuce, and exotics like mache, mizuna, and tatsoi are fun to grow. In fact, there are varieties of these greens specially suited to frosty temperatures.

The first step to putting together a winter garden is to know what to grow in your geographic area. Placer and Nevada Counties are unique, covering a wide range of climatic conditions and elevations including rain and snow, wind, mild to freezing temperature and varying soil types from rocky to loamy bottomland.

There is a wide range of vegetables that can be grown locally and it can be a daunting task just to pick out what you want to grow!

To help out, Old Farmer's Almanac offers an on-line Garden Guide that can be customized for your geographic location (by zip code or city). Simply go to the website (www.almanac.com/gardening) and look for the Outdoor Planting Table for 2009. After you change the geographic location to where you live (zip code or town, state)—Voila! a planting table of the crops that will flourish in your growing area is created.

So now you know what you want to grow. The next step is to prepare the planting bed. Because there is abundant rain in the winter, raised beds and/or containers are the perfect way to control the excess moisture that Mother Nature sends our way each winter.

Gardens on a slope allow excess water to flow downward and away from the crops. For this reason, it is best not to locate a winter garden at the base of a slope or in a depression. Soil dries out quicker in raised beds and containers so the plants will not suffer from too much moisture. Pests are also easier to treat and get at in a raised bed or container. Raised beds can be covered with row covers to protect plants from pests, and cold and freezing temperature. Simply peel back the cover on sunny days or when not needed. Row covers also protect young seedlings until they are robust enough to brave Mother Nature uncovered.

Snow may be a condition your garden faces if you live in the higher elevations of Placer or Nevada Counties; however, there are methods of gardening even as the snow falls. My sister living in Sheridan, Wyoming grew iceberg lettuce late into December one year. She did this by being very creative with leftover bales of straw from a rabbit's cage. By building a protected garden against a south-facing wall, and covering the entire structure, she fashioned a cold frame/greenhouse where lettuce and cole crops flourished through sub-zero temperatures.

Rich soil high in organic matter is optimum for winter gardening. Just add compost to the bed and work it deep into the soil. The high nitrogen content from the organic matter is just what winter foliage plants need to produce large crispy leaves.

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Growing a vegetable garden in winter is an adventure and a challenge, but the rewards can be satisfying for any winter gardener. Give it a try and if you need help, don't hesitate to call the Master Gardener's on their HOTLINE: Placer—530-889-7388 Nevada—530-273-0919

References

Poor Farmer's Almanac. www.almanac.com/gardening

The Vegetable Gardener's Bible, Edward C. Smith

www.wintergardeningtips.com/fallandwintervegetables

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