

# Growing edibles in wintertime



Ah, the lazy days of winter. For gardeners, this is the perfect time for thumbing through plant catalogs, reading gardening books by the fire, and propping up shovels so they can rest like their owners. Garden beds have been put to sleep after having been given a dose of compost and a warm blanket of mulch, and at last the gardener can while away the hours dreaming of spring.

Not so fast.

Okay, so you've put your garden to bed. True, you can take a break from your ornamental beds, but why not grow some delicious edibles while the rest of your garden is snoring? It doesn't take much work or much space, it's a whole lot more interesting than pruning roses, and the rewards are great.

## Cool crops for a cooler planet

Growing a little bit of your own food is as good for your health as it is for your warming planet. Just do the math (courtesy of the Environmental Protection Agency Greenhouse Gas Equivalencies Calculator). There are around 100,000 households in Marin. Let's say each of these households travels five miles roundtrip to the grocery store. Assuming an average of 20 miles-per-gallon of gas, if each of these households grew a few edibles and reduced their need to run to the grocery store just four times a year—one time per season—we would collectively save the carbon sequestering equivalent of growing almost 23,000 tree seedlings for ten years. That's 2,000 barrels of oil saved and a dozen tanker trucks that won't be delivering gasoline to your local Shell station. All because you didn't have to run to Safeway to pick up a head of lettuce.

Chances are pretty good that you have room in your garden to tuck in a few Swiss chard starts, some deep purple cabbages, earthy red beets, or a few leafy braising greens. These edibles are like jewels in the winter garden, reminding us that in our gentle climate we can have beauty—and food—in our gardens year round.

Growing edibles in winter is actually easier than growing them in summer, when the demands of water are greatest. The simplest container—a half barrel, old terracotta pot, or quickly-constructed redwood box—can easily do the trick so long as it's protected from critters and has a hole at the bottom for drainage. Fill it with a rich mix of soil and compost and you're ready to roll.

There are plenty of edibles that you can plant in wintertime, including garlic, leeks, onions, radishes, lettuce, peas, potatoes, chard, spinach, rhubarb, and other leafy greens such as bok choy and kale. Organic vegetable starts are available at many nurseries. Two of my favorites are Green Jeans in Mill Valley and O'Donnell's in Fairfax. Here are some growing tips for common winter vegetables.

**Garlic** – Set out nursery-purchased bulbs (separated but unpeeled) four inches apart. Don't water them in. It's best to wait until shoots poke up before watering for the first time. Better yet, let the rain water them for you. Garlic takes up very little room and takes very little attention. A good source of seed garlic is Peaceful Valley Nursery ([www.groworganic.com](http://www.groworganic.com)).

**Leeks** – Nursery starts are inexpensive and plentiful. They can be harvested throughout the year and are unfazed by our mild winters. Think leek soup on New Year's Day and leek quiche for Easter.

**Onions** – This is where your well-amended soil is important. Onions love rich soil—not too sandy or clayey. And they like regular water. You can sow onion seeds but it’s easier to buy bulbs (called “sets”) from a nursery or online source. Don’t try to plant grocery store onions because it’s unlikely to work. The best time to plant onion sets is January and February. (For green onions, or scallions, pull up the plants when they are about six weeks old.)

**Radishes** – Forget about those starchy red rocks called radishes at the grocery store. This is where online seed sources are really valuable. Check out Peaceful Valley’s long list of gorgeous radish seeds including French Breakfast, White Icicle, and Pink Beauties. Easter Eggs is a particularly beautiful variety that produces radishes of varying purples, pinks, and whites. Radishes grow easily and quickly, with some small-rooted varieties ready in a month or less from the day of seeding.

**Lettuce** – Like onions, lettuce appreciates fertile soil and regular water. Some are more suitable for warmer months, some for cooler. There are dozens of varieties, including heirloom and redleaf.

**Mesculun**—a combination of several lettuces which may include arugula, chervil, chicory, and cress—grows beautifully in our climate. Sow seeds in January or February or check your local nursery for starts.

**Peas** –November and February are the best months to plant peas. Poke shelling peas or snap peas an inch or two deep directly into rich soil and give them something tall to climb up and wind their tendrils around. Pea shoots are delicacies for birds, so you may need to cover your sprouts with a floating row cover or anything that keeps birds at bay but that lets sunshine and rain in.

**Potatoes** – Like peas, a good time to plant potatoes is in February, with the satisfying potato harvest around three months later. Potatoes are a joy to harvest for adults and kids alike. Every child in my neighborhood—even toddlers—has participated in planting and harvesting potatoes in my garden. Depending on the variety, potatoes are usually grown from pieces of tubers that have at least one eye or from whole small tubers. Peaceful Valley has a fun red, white, and blue potato mix that’s perfect for Fourth of July potato salad.

**Swiss chard and other greens** – Swiss chard is like an exclamation point in the winter vegetable garden, lighting up beds with bright pink, yellow, and red stalks. It’s one of the easiest greens to grow either from seed or from starts, and it grows all year. Other greens, such as spinach, kale, and bok choy, are also easy. These greens can be used for salads or can be braised in stir-fries or thrown into soups. Most greens relish cool temperatures and go to seed in warm weather. Give them rich soil and keep them cool and you’ll be rewarded with fresh salad greens throughout the year.