

Winter Vegetable Gardening

Ventura County's mild Mediterranean winters rarely drop below 40°F – which means our garden never truly stops. Cool-season vegetables actually **thrive** here from October through April, offering fresh homegrown produce with less pest pressure and lower water needs than summer crops.

What Are Cool-Weather (Winter) Vegetables?

- Plants that thrive in temperatures between **40–75°F** and can tolerate light frosts.
- Why they are perfect for Ventura County: mild winters, less pest pressure, lower water needs, and the possibility of year-round homegrown produce.
- The ideal planting window is **late summer through early fall** – but many cool-season crops can be started as late as January for a spring harvest. Microclimates, soil moisture, and day length can all affect optimal timing.
- Warm weather causes **bolting** (premature flowering) in many cool-season crops – harvest before temperatures consistently exceed 75°F.

Vegetable Families to Grow This Winter

- **Leafy Greens** – fastest to harvest (30–60 days); arugula, lettuce, spinach, Swiss chard, bok choy, kale, and mustard greens.
- **Root Vegetables** – need deeper soil; beets, radishes, carrots, turnips, parsnips, and rutabagas.
- **Brassicaceae (Cabbage Family)** – need most space; broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, kohlrabi, collard greens, and kale.
- **Allium (Onion Family)** – flavor foundations; garlic, onions, leeks, chives, shallots, and bunching onions.
- **Legumes** – nitrogen-fixers that improve your soil for next season; peas and fava beans.
- **Herbs and Stems** – fennel, celery, celeriac, and rhubarb.

Leafy Greens – Quick Reference and Varieties

Days to maturity: 30–60 days. Harvest in the morning. Use the cut-and-come-again method – harvest outer leaves and leave the center growing. Do not remove more than 1/3 of the plant at once. Watch for bolting when temperatures rise above 75°F.

Spacing: Lettuce 6–8” | Spinach 4–6” | Kale and Chard 18–24”

- **Lettuce** – ‘Winter Density’ (romaine, cold-hardy), ‘Buttercrunch’ (bibb), ‘Rouge d’Hiver’ (red romaine)
- **Spinach** – ‘Space’ (smooth leaf), ‘Bloomsdale’ (savoy type)
- **Swiss Chard** – ‘Bright Lights’ (colorful stems), ‘Fordhook Giant’ (large leaves)
- **Kale** – ‘Lacinato’ (dinosaur kale), ‘Red Russian’ (tender, frilly leaves)
- **Arugula** – wild type is spicier and slower to bolt than cultivated types
- **Bok Choy** – fast-growing; excellent stir-fried or braised

Root Vegetables – Quick Reference and Varieties

Soil depth is critical for root crops. Thin seedlings aggressively – crowded roots will not develop properly. Do not forget the tops! Beet, carrot, turnip, and radish greens are all edible.

Minimum soil depth: Radishes 6” | Beets 8–10” | Carrots 12” (6–8” for short varieties) | Turnips 10–12” | Parsnips 12–15”



Days to maturity: Radishes 25–30 days | Beets 50–70 days | Carrots 60–80 days

- **Carrots** – clay/heavy soil: Chantenay, Danvers, Nantes types; amended/sandy soil: Imperator, Scarlet Nantes
- **Beets** – ‘Detroit Dark Red’ (reliable), ‘Golden’ (sweeter), ‘Chioggia’ (candy-striped)
- **Radishes** – ‘French Breakfast’ (mild), ‘Easter Egg’ (colorful mix), ‘Watermelon’ (large, pink interior)
- **Turnips** – ‘Hakurei’ (white, sweet), ‘Purple Top White Globe’ (classic)
- **Parsnips** – ‘Hollow Crown’ – only plant if you have very deep, loose soil

Brassicaceae (Cabbage Family) – Quick Reference and Varieties

Temperature sweet spot: 50–70°F. Needs consistent moisture for head formation. Watch for cabbage worms (use row covers) and aphids (spray with water or insecticidal soap). Rotate brassicas to a different bed each season – this family shares pests and diseases.

Spacing: Kohlrabi 6–8” | Broccoli and Cauliflower 18–24” | Cabbage 18–24” | Brussels Sprouts 24–36” | Kale and Collards 18–24”

- **Broccoli** – ‘Belstar’, ‘Packman’ (both 55–65 days, heat-tolerant) – after cutting the main head, side shoots continue producing
- **Cauliflower** – ‘Snow Crown’ (white, reliable), ‘Cheddar’ (orange, milder flavor)
- **Cabbage** – ‘Early Jersey Wakefield’ (pointed head), ‘Red Express’ (small red head)
- **Brussels Sprouts** – ‘Long Island Improved’ (90–100 days – plant early in fall!)
- **Kohlrabi** – ‘Early White Vienna’, ‘Purple Vienna’ (45–60 days – one of the fastest brassicas)

Allium (Onion Family) – Quick Reference and Varieties

Alliums are the flavor foundation of the kitchen. An important note: not all onion varieties will produce bulbs in our area – day length is the most critical factor.

- **Onion Day Length Types** – choose the right type for our latitude (approx. 34°N):
 - **Short-day onions** (latitudes 25°–35°) – best for Ventura County. Bulb when daylight reaches 10–12 hours. Plant in fall; harvest late May through July.
 - **Intermediate-day onions** (latitudes 36°–40°) – might work here. Bulb at 12–14 hours of daylight. Start seeds in January; harvest by end of August/September.
 - **Long-day onions** (latitudes above 40°) – do not perform well in Ventura County. They will grow leafy tops but never form a bulb.
- **Garlic** – plant individual cloves in October–November, pointed end up, 2 inches deep and 6 inches apart. Harvest when lower leaves begin to dry (typically May–June)
- **Leeks** – harvest when about 1 inch in diameter; dig rather than pull to avoid breaking long stems
- **Chives and Green Onions** – harvest when leaves are at least 6 inches tall; cut exterior leaves 2 inches from the base

Legumes – Quick Reference and Varieties

Legumes fix nitrogen in the soil through their root system, improving the bed for next season. Botanically, bean pods are fruits. Young leaves and stems are edible; young pods are good fresh.



- **Peas** (plant October–February) – plant seeds directly, do not transplant. Direct sow into the ground and avoid disturbing roots.
 - **Snap Peas** – ‘Sugar Ann’ (bush, no trellis needed), ‘Sugar Snap’ (vining)
 - **Snow Peas** – ‘Oregon Giant’, ‘Mammoth Melting Sugar’
 - **Shelling Peas** – ‘Lincoln’, ‘Little Marvel’
- **Fava Beans** (plant October–December) – a Ventura County superstar. Plant in fall, harvest in spring.
 - **Varieties** – ‘Windsor’, ‘Aquadulce Claudia’
 - After harvest: cut stalks at ground level and dig into the soil to return nitrogen – do not compost them.

Herbs and Stems – Varieties to Consider

- **Fennel (Florence/Bulb Type)** – anise/licorice flavor. Plant in fall for spring harvest. Varieties: ‘Zefa Fino’ (bolt-resistant), ‘Orion’. Spacing: 12” apart; days to maturity: 65–80.
- **Celery** – ‘Tall Utah’, ‘Tango’ (85–120 days; heavy feeder requiring consistent moisture and regular fertilizing).
- **Celeriac** – root type; ‘Brilliant’ (110 days). Mild celery flavor, stores well.
- **Rhubarb** – a perennial. Plant December–March. Prefers cooler temperatures (below 75°F). Only harvest stems – leaves are toxic.

Tuber-Type Vegetables – A Note

- **Potatoes (Solanaceae)** – plant February–April; mature in 90–120 days. Always use certified seed potatoes (not grocery store potatoes, which may be diseased or treated with sprout inhibitor). Hill soil around the plant as it grows to prevent green tubers. Varieties: Yukon Gold, Red Pontiac, Kennebec.
- **Jicama (Fabaceae)** – needs a long, warm growing season under short-day conditions. Better suited for summer planting in warmer inland areas of the county.
- **Sweet Potatoes** – frost and cold sensitive; need long, frost-free growing seasons and sandy soil. Not recommended for winter planting.

Basic Care for Winter Vegetables: QR code will take you to the Soil to Sprouts slide deck on the Ventura County Master Gardener website



- **Seeds or Transplant** – either works, but consider days to maturity. For slow-growing crops like Brussels sprouts and celery, start with transplants to gain weeks. Direct-seed quick crops like radishes, carrots, and peas.
- **Mulch the Soil Surface** – apply a 3–4-inch layer of organic mulch to retain moisture and moderate soil temperature.
- **Watering** – water in the morning. Avoid overwatering – cool weather means slower evaporation. Overhead watering can promote fungal disease; drip or furrow irrigation is preferred.
- **Raised Beds or Containers** – use potting soil or a blend of compost/topsoil/vermiculite. Many leafy greens and herbs do very well in containers.
- **Fertilizer** – use a general purpose (10-10-10) fertilizer. Heavy feeders like celery and brassicas benefit from additional nitrogen mid-season.



- **Pests** – winter means fewer pests, but watch for cabbage worms, aphids, and slugs. Hand-pick, use row covers, or apply targeted sprays. Avoid broad-spectrum pesticides that harm beneficial insects.

When and Where to Plant

- The ideal planting time for cool-weather vegetables is **late summer to early fall** – but you can continue planting many crops through January for a spring harvest.
- **With Summer Plants** – you can interplant fall and winter crops between finishing summer vegetables while they are still in the ground.
- **Garden Planning** – place taller plants (brassicicas, fennel, chard) on the north side of the bed to prevent them shading shorter crops.
- **Container Gardening** – use containers that can be moved to follow the sun as the sun angle changes in winter.
- **Succession Planting** – sow a new batch of fast crops like radishes and lettuce every 2–3 weeks for a continuous harvest rather than one large glut.

When to Harvest

Leafy Greens – harvest when firm and crisp, usually 3–4 weeks after planting. Harvest in the morning when leaves are coolest. Use clean, sharp scissors or a knife. Stop harvesting before plants bolt.

Root Vegetables – check seed packet for days to maturity. Observe foliage – yellowing or dying-back tops signal readiness. Harvest in the morning with moist (not wet).

Brassicaceae – harvest broccoli and cauliflower before flowers open. Cut the main broccoli head and side shoots will continue to develop. Harvest cabbage when heads are firm and solid.

Onions and Alliums – harvest bulb onions, shallots, and garlic when tops begin to yellow and fall over. Green onions and chives can be harvested when leaves reach 6 inches. Dig leeks; do not pull.

Learn more about the Ventura County Master Gardener using this QR to visit the website.

