

## **Planting a Winter Vegetable Garden in the Mother Lode**

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Who would want to plant a winter vegetable garden in the Mother Lode?

If our winter weather begins sometime in November and ends in March or April of the following year, would hardy gardeners endure freezing temperatures, rain, sleet and snow to tend soggy little plants that are well on their way to becoming compost for next year's spring garden?

While something like the former may happen, it does not reflect the experience shared by most winter gardeners.

Their gardens are planned, built and cultivated in anticipation of winter weather and all the ensuing destructive events.

The most important initial consideration is the location of the garden plot.

Place the site in an area with maximum sun and easy access to water.

Provide protection from prevailing winter winds.

The closer the garden is to a tool shed, garage or house, the better.

This arrangement allows easy access to the garden should there be an emergency, such as sudden heavy rain, snow or heavy frost.

Avoid a location too close to bushy areas that can conceal invading insects and other hostile varmints.

Bush areas, however, do provide protection from winds and frost.

The next consideration is the condition of the planting soil.

In some areas of the Mother Lode, such as Valley Springs where I live, the soil tends to be clay-like with a hardpan level underlying the clay.

As a result, the soil does not drain well and will hold water at the surface.

In cold weather this condition can quickly destroy the roots of a young plant.

Amend the soil before planting with loamy and nourishing ingredients such as a planting mix, compost and manure.

The latter material also helps to maintain soil temperature.

If there is prevalent hardpan, delay planting for the season and plant a cover crop, such as fava beans, which produces a root system that will grow through the hard pan and allow for easier cultivation of the soil.

After the soil is amended and the garden planted, care of the winter garden is usually less demanding than the effort required for a spring or summer planting.

Weeding effort is reduced since the “weed crop” is less than what grows during the spring and summer months.

The weeds that do grow usually are grass like and offer some protection to the vegetable plants by sharing moisture and, as a result, reducing frost damage.

Invasive insects are also a consideration, although, during the cold season, their population is less than in the spring and summer.

Birds can be a problem, since their normal food supply is scarce during the winter.

Some gardeners use planter boxes to maintain and control the growth of their crops.

Typical dimensions are from 10 to 20 feet long, 4 to 6 feet wide, and 1 to 3 feet deep.

The bottom usually has half-inch hardware cloth or aviary wire to discourage gophers and other similar under-ground invaders.

The planter box wood is usually Redwood or Cedar.

Planter boxes have several advantages for cold weather growing.

Assuming box sides are at least a foot high, the young plants get some protection from icy winter breezes or worse.

One of the challenges of winter planting is to protect the young plants from sudden changes in temperature or sudden rain or snow.

One solution is to construct a hoop tunnel that can cover part or the entire planter box.

The materials needed are not hard to find at your local nursery or hardware store.

An easy way to construct the cover frame is to place 12 to 18 inch metal stakes in the ground, on either side of the planter box, and fit 6-foot long PVC pipe over the stakes.

Then cover the frame with plastic sheeting or frost cloth.

Attach the cloth to the frame and cover the entire box.

At night, the cover will protect the plants from nighttime temperatures and frost.

During the day, assuming milder weather, the cloth should be removed or partially removed to allow the plants to dry with sunlight and fresh air.

Planter boxes can also be converted into hot beds in which a heated cable is placed under the soil. Also included in the kit is a thermostat and heat sensitive bulb to keep track of both air and soil temperature.

Cool season vegetables such as the healthy greens: Kale, Collards, Spinach, Arugula, Pak choi, plus Beets, Cabbage, Carrots, Broccoli, Cauliflower, Swiss chard, produce the best crops when average temperatures are 55 to 75 degrees.

During this period they can tolerate slight frost when mature.

I visited several nurseries about 2 weeks ago.

They were well- stocked with cool season veggies, some approaching maturity.

In fact, due to the unseasonably warm temperature, some were beginning to “bolt”.

While it may be late in the season to attempt to grow winter crops from seed, it may be worth the effort to purchase maturing plants from our local nurseries.

A glance at current weather predictions would seem to indicate little rain or snow in the Mother Lode over the next week or so.

Nighttime temperatures, however, may be lower than experienced in the recent past.

This may be an opportune time to plant a winter crop of maturing vegetable plants.

For more information, call the helpline 754-2880, email [mastergardener@co.calaveras.ca.us](mailto:mastergardener@co.calaveras.ca.us) or visit [ucanr.edu/sites/CalaverasCountyMasterGardeners](http://ucanr.edu/sites/CalaverasCountyMasterGardeners)