

Winter Vegetables

By Maggie King

Q. "I've almost finished harvesting my summer vegetables and still want to have fresh produce from my garden. What can I plant at this time of year?"

Marsha Braun

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A. There are many reasons to love living on the Central Coast. High among them is our mild winter weather. While gardeners in most of the country are putting down their trowels and picking up their snow shovels, we are able to grow vegetables all year round, if we take in to account the particular needs of various plants.

While leaf vegetables like lettuce, spinach and chard may bolt and go to seed in hot summer weather, they grow happily and produce well throughout the cooler months of winter. Other stars of the winter garden are the root vegetables- beets, carrots and radishes for example. Cole crops, like broccoli, cauliflower and Brussels sprouts, also do best when temperatures are cool. English, snap and sugar peas like cool weather, and stop producing pods when it heats up. These legumes have the ability to fix atmospheric nitrogen into the soil, improving it for the coming season.

Onions, garlic and leeks can be added to the garden at this time, as well as culinary herbs. Many seeds can be planted directly into the soil throughout the winter months, while others do best if planted from seedlings. It is important to follow instructions regarding timing of planting.

When preparing for a winter garden, amend the soil well. Most cool season vegetables like to be well-watered, but hopefully seasonal rains will help out.

Some of us are April to September gardeners, seeing the Fall and Winter months as time to stay indoors, read, and make soup. For those in this category, I urge you to venture outside at least long enough to plant a cover crop. Clover and vetch have nitrogen fixing ability as well as providing organic matter to the soil. Fava beans are an especially rewarding cover crop, as they provide a tasty early spring harvest. A few weeks before planting the spring garden, these plants should be cut down and tilled into the soil.