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**THE SECOND ACT- YOUR WINTER VEGETABLE GARDEN**

*~ by Mike Kluk, Master Gardener of Nevada County, 2014*

For many of us, when the curtain of frost falls on our summer vegetables, we put away our tools and wait for spring to begin again. But it is possible to have a second act with a whole new cast of characters. Growing a winter garden is a great way to continue to have fresh, healthy vegetables throughout the year. With a bit of planning and a few winter specific approaches, you can successfully grow vegetables that are as varied and tasty as anything summer has to offer.

This is the first of two articles. This month we will consider what vegetables you can grow in the winter, when to start them and some of the planning you will need to do to successfully grow a winter garden in the foothills. The second installment will cover some of the structures such as low tunnels, cold frames and greenhouses that make growing a winter garden more forgiving than it may otherwise be. Even if you live in snow country-- and who didn’t this past winter-- you can successfully grow an amazing number of vegetables under simple structures. The guru of winter vegetable gardening, Eliot Coleman, is a market gardener on the coast of Maine. If he can grow winter vegetables profitably there, it should be a piece of cake to have a winter garden in the foothills of Nevada County.

In many respects, your winter garden will take less work than the summer version. You will not need to water as often. Weed and bug problems are fewer. The key is getting started early and planting cold-tolerant varieties. Mature plants can withstand cold temperatures better than younger plants. Most of the plants you will grow in the winter such as lettuces, leeks, onions, mache and kale can survive temperatures into the teens or even single digits once established, especially if given some protection. A well-hydrated plant will handle the cold better than one that is drought stressed. So, be prepared to water if there is an extended dry spell in the winter. Choosing beds that are protected from the prevailing winter wind will also help.

I have managed to have a respectable winter garden for several years. Our nighttime temperatures on clear nights are generally in the low 20’s with excursions into the teens a few times during the winter being predictable. The lowest temperature I have recorded at our place was 10 degrees F and our winter garden pulled though in decent shape.

One of the big challenges to growing a winter garden is figuring out where to put it. Many of your winter vegetables will need to be planted in July, August or early September – when your summer crops are still producing well. You can never have too many garden beds and this is a good argument for establishing more. You’ll find that the rotation is actually fairly simple if you plan ahead. You may have a summer cover crop such as buckwheat on some beds, just waiting for your winter vegetable starts. Beds that had peas in the winter and spring are also likely candidates. Instead of winter cover crops or straw on all of your beds, some will be growing salad and a vegetable side dish.

If you live in snow country, you will probably need to use one of the structures discussed in the next article (see “Season Extenders – Maybe You Can Fool Mother Nature”). You will also need to clear the snow away to allow enough light to reach the plants. The exception would be root crops such as beets and carrots. If you plant a sufficient number in the spring, you can enjoy them all winter. Unless your soil freezes, mature beets and carrots will do just fine under the snow waiting to be pulled up for dinner. But the spring planted crop will not be as sweet as those you plant in the late summer or early fall after the frost hits them.

The following chart includes hardy vegetables you may want to consider growing and the number of days to plant prior to your first frost date. It is by no means a complete list. This information came from Eliot Coleman’s book *Four Season Harvest* with some modifications based on my experience. Of course, the best planting date “depends” on whether the cold settles hard in the fall at your garden site or if you tend to have a period of warmer weather after the first frost. Sequential planting through the period will extend your harvest although that is not a big issue for a winter garden because the plants mature slowly. If you use the covers that will be discussed in the next article, you can plant in the shorter time frame. If you don’t, you should start your plants near the earlier date. In any case, mustard, in all of its manifestations-- from broccoli to tatsoi-- is likely to be the star of your winter garden.

***Vegetable Varieties for the Winter Garden***

**Direct Seed** **Days Before First Frost**

Beets 30-60

Carrots 45-60

Cilantro 20-60

Claytonia (Miner’s Lettuce) 15-45

Lettuce (leafy cut and come again 15-70

varieties seem most successful)

Mache’ (Corn Salad) 15-45

Peas 45-90

Scallions 15-90

Spinach 0-30

Swiss chard 30-60

Turnips 45-60

**Seed Transplant Starts (Plant out approx. 30 days after seeding)**

Broccoli 75-105

Cabbage 60-90

Cauliflower 75-105

Kale (Red Russian) 45-105

Leeks 90-120

Parsley 45-90

Mustard Greens, Boc Choy, Pak Choy,

Mizuna, Tatsoi 15-75

**References**

*The Winter Harvest Handbook* - Eliot Coleman

*Four Season Harvest* - Eliot Coleman

*Gardening When It Counts- Growing Food in Hard Times* - Steve Solomon

*Winter Gardening in the Maritime Northwest: Cool-Season Crops for the Year Round Gardener* – Binda Colebrook

*How to Grow Winter Vegetables* - Charles Dowding

*Solar Gardening- Growing Vegetables Year Round the American Intensive Way* – Leandre Poisson & Gretchen Vogel Poisson

The Art of Season Extending- University of California Cooperative Extension