Fall and Winter Harvest

OVERVIEW

One of the great advantages of BC's mild South Coast climate is the ability to harvest fresh vegetables through most of the year. With good planning and the right variety choices, you can have homegrown produce from your garden well into winter and through to early spring. This guide covers what to grow, when to plant, and how to protect your crops for a productive fall and winter garden.

KEY PRINCIPLES - HOW TO SUCCEED WITH FALL AND WINTER CROPS

- Plan ahead: most fall and winter crops must be started in mid-summer (June-August) while spring crops are still in the ground
- Choose the right varieties: look for cultivars specifically noted as suited to fall, winter, or overwintering production
- Accept variability: cool-season crops are weather-dependent. A crop that struggles in an unusually cold year may thrive the following year. Experiment and persist
- Use crop rotation: avoid planting related vegetables in the same spot as the previous year to reduce disease and pest carryover

SITE SELECTION - CHOOSING THE BEST LOCATION

- Choose the sunniest available spot: short winter days make every hour of light count; south-facing slopes are ideal
- Avoid frost pockets: cold air settles in low-lying areas and at the base of slopes, increasing freeze risk
- Avoid exposed, wind-prone locations: cold wind causes significant crop damage and moisture loss
- Good drainage is essential: raised beds perform best and dry out faster after rain
- Consider accessibility: harvesting in winter rain and cold is unpleasant; place your winter garden somewhere easy to reach

WHEN TO PLANT - PLANTING WINDOWS FOR FALL AND WINTER CROPS

Most fall and winter crops need to be well established before cold weather arrives but should not reach full maturity too early. Planting too late leads to small, underdeveloped plants that struggle in the cold; planting too early risks bolting or premature maturity. The sweet spot is mid-June to early September, depending on the crop.

KEY TIMING RULES

- Fast-maturing crops (radish, mesclun, arugula): can be sown as late as September for fall harvest
- Slow-maturing crops (Brussels sprouts, sprouting broccoli, parsnips): must be started in late spring or early summer
- Root crops (carrots, leeks, parsnips): left in the ground act as cold storage; harvest through winter as needed
- Overwintering crops for spring harvest (broccoli, cabbage, garlic): should be well established but not mature when cold weather arrives

SOIL PREPARATION - REFRESHING SOIL AFTER SUMMER CROPS

- Restore nutrients removed by spring and summer vegetables before replanting
- Work in a light layer of compost, SeaSoil, or aged manure to replenish organic matter and nutrients
- An application of a balanced organic fertilizer at planting supports strong establishment before growth slows
- Good drainage is critical: amend with compost if soil is prone to compaction or waterlogging

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WINTER PROTECTION - PROTECTING CROPS THROUGH COLD PERIODS

- Many crops overwinter successfully in BC South Coast gardens with no protection in average years
- In colder years or for more tender crops, use a cold frame, cloche, or greenhouse plastic stretched over a simple frame
- Row cover fleece provides a few degrees of frost protection and significantly extends the harvest window
- Raised beds warm and drain faster than in-ground beds, giving crops a head start in spring

WHAT TO GROW
CROP LISTS BY HARVEST WINDOW

Fall Harvest (Oct-Nov)

- Arugula
- Beets
- Cabbage*
- Cilantro
- Lettuce
- Mesclun
- Pac choi
- Parsley
- Radish
- Scallions
- Sorrel*
- Spinach
- Swiss chard
- Turnips

Late Fall & Winter (Nov-Feb)

- Broad beans
- Brussels sprouts
- Cabbage
- Chervil
- Corn salad / mache
- Endive & radicchio
- Kale
- Kohlrabi
- Leeks*
- Mesclun (with protection)
- Mustard greens
- Pac choi
- Parsley
- Parsnips*
- Rutabaga**
- Sorrel*
- Spinach
- Swiss chard
- Turnips

Overwinter for Spring (Mar-Apr)

- Sprouting broccoli
- Cabbage
- Cauliflower
- Garlic
- Kale
- Kohlrabi
- Leeks
- Radish

* Must be started in late spring.
** Must be started in early summer.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Is fall and winter gardening only possible on the Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island?
The techniques in this guide are written for BC's mild South Coast (Zones 7-9), which includes the Lower Mainland, Vancouver Island, the Sunshine Coast, and similar mild areas. In Penticton (Zone 6b) and other colder inland regions, the growing season is shorter and winters harsher. Cold frames and cloches extend the harvest window significantly and make some of these crops possible, but the variety of winter crops is more limited.

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How do I know if a variety is suitable for overwintering?
Look for cultivar names or descriptions that include terms such as 'winter hardy', 'overwintering', 'cold-tolerant', or specific mentions of winter production in the variety notes.
Seed packages for fall and winter crops should specify the planting and harvest windows.
The GARDENWORKS team at any location can advise on the best current varieties for winter production.

My winter crops bolted (went to seed) early. What happened?
Bolting in winter crops is usually caused by planting too early (so the plant matures and perceives warming temperatures as a signal to flower) or choosing the wrong variety (a summer type sown for winter use). Always use varieties specifically selected for fall and winter production, and observe the recommended sowing windows.

Do I need to water my winter garden?
In most South Coast winters, natural rainfall provides sufficient moisture for established crops. However, during dry spells in early fall (October in particular can be dry) and during extended cold snaps when the ground is dry but frozen, supplemental watering may be needed.
Check soil moisture rather than assuming rain is providing enough.