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# Planning a Winter Vegetable Garden

Ripe, juicy home garden tomatoes in January? Fresh home-grown salad and cooking greens from October 'til April? With a little advance planning, not much extra work and no greenhouse or other season-extending appliances, New Hampshire vegetable gardeners can eat “fresh from the garden” every day of the year.

Many veteran growers are already savvy to the secrets of tucking away a winter's supply of root vegetables, a bushel or two of apples and a crowd of cabbages in a cool, damp root cellar. These are the folks with bags of homegrown onions and garlic hanging stashed in the pantry and a bushel or two of winter squash tucked away under the bed in an unheated guest room.

Here are a few easy ways growers can extend the summer vegetable garden:

- Harvested just before the first fall frosts and stored properly, sound green tomatoes will ripen gradually, providing fresh tomatoes for Thanksgiving dinner and well into the new year. The trick is to select only perfect, firm green fruit from late, dense-fleshed varieties. Set out plants for your storage tomatoes two or three weeks later than your main-crop seedlings. Water the plants sparingly from mid-August on. Just before frost harvest all the sound, firm green fruits and place them in single layers in shallow cardboard or wooden boxes lined with slightly crumbled newspapers. The gradually-ripening tomatoes keep best in a moist, cool location (35 to 45 degrees F.) Check the tomatoes often, discarding or using any that begin to mold.
- In early May sow seed of frost-resistant crops of Brussels sprouts, kale, collards and leeks – even some varieties of extra-hardy “winter” lettuce (a good one is *Winter Density*). Check catalogue or packet descriptions and plant varieties advertised as “super-hardy, or “frost-resistant.” Sow the seeds direct (don't use transplants). Give them plenty of space to grow and protect them from insect and disease attack. Though these crops will stop growing after a few hard frosts and you may have to dig them out from under a blanket of snow, most years they'll “keep” perfectly well right in the garden most of the winter or until you've eaten them up, whichever comes first.
- For a crop of gourmet greens you can harvest indoors all winter long, sow Witloof Chicory, also known as Belgian Endive, into rich soil in early May. Other than thinning and weeding, just let the dandelion-like chicory greens grow all summer long — they're rarely plagued by diseases or insect pests.

In late fall, dig the roots, cut the greens back to about an inch long and “plant” the roots in moist sand or sawdust in tall plastic buckets lined with black plastic garbage bags. Set the

buckets in a cool, dry out-of-the way place like an unheated cellar or an upstairs closet. “Water” your crop occasionally like a houseplant and feast on several generations of tiny, pale “chicons” that are selling at the local markets for \$2.99 or more a pound.

- Reserve a portion your root crops for over-wintering right in the garden. Just cover a section of row or bed with five or six inches of organic mulch – fall leaves chopped by running the lawn mower over them a few times are ideal, but dry grass clippings, straw, pine needles, or even a thick layer of newspapers also work well. As soon as the mulch thaws out in early spring, pull it back and *Voila!* Fresh crisp carrots, tender beets, firm onions and sweet delicate parsnips will be ready for digging long before your spring crops even germinate.
- In late August or early September sow salad greens that will be ready early the following spring: spinach, leaf lettuce, arugula, oriental greens. Thin the new plants as they germinate and cover with a heavy layer of fall leaves when the first heavy frost is predicted. As with garden-stored root crops, simply pull away the mulch in early spring and the greens will spring to life again, giving you a head start on spring salads.
- Finally, don’t forget to mulch your cabbage stumps! Harvest your summer and winter storage cabbages by slicing the heads off at the base, leaving the stumps in the ground. Pull a few inches of leaf mulch up around the base and sides of each stump - no need to cover it over completely - and watch them sprout a ring of little fist-sized cabbages around the severed tops as soon as the warm sun kisses the early spring garden.

*Reviewed by David Kopsell, UNH Extension Vegetable Specialist, 9/00*

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