Fall Vegetable Gardens

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Most Texans think that spring is the best season for gardening. While that may be true for a small number of vegetable plants, veteran Texas gardeners will certainly tell you that it is certainly not true for the majority.

Here are just a few advantages to fall gardening in Texas:

- Fall produce ripens in cooler weather, so it suffers less from sunburning and sun scald. Visually, a fall garden is beautiful.
- Fall vegetables have better flavor. They mature in a less stressful season, in cooler weather, for the tastiest produce.
- There are fewer insects and diseases in the fall, so your vegetables are more likely to free of annoying blemishes.
- Rainfall is generally more frequent in the fall; so watering chores are reduced.
- The weather is more pleasant for you, the gardener.

So you want to grow garden fresh vegetables this fall. Where do you start? Simply looking at seed packets in catalogs or transplants at local nurseries will not get the job done. You must garden smartly for economical and productive results.

Fall Bed Preparation

Once the decision to have a fall garden has been reached, a gardener must take action -- drastic action. You must pull out some of those plants that have been nurtured from "babies" in the spring to monsters now. This takes courage and faith!

It is recommended that all plants, weeds included, be removed except okra, cherry tomatoes and pole beans if the foliage is healthy. Large-fruited tomatoes may have some small ones still hanging on, but unless you have at least 20 to 25 good-sized fruit, pull them out and make green tomato relish or chow-chow. If you recall, the largest, best tomatoes you had this spring were the first ones produced. The tomato plant has gotten old, diseased, and damaged by insects; it will never produce in abundance again. Besides, it is too large to be manageable as far as insect and disease populations are concerned. Pull the old plants

up and discard them. Give them to the garbage man. Don't try to compost insect and disease-ridden plants because spider mites don't compost!

Soil is critical to plant growth. The importance of soil preparation cannot be overstressed. At least half of your success has been determined before the first seed or transplant ever hits the ground. To plop your new seeds and transplants down into the barren, parched August wasteland, among the cremated remains of your spring garden, is tantamount to a death sentence. Proper soil pH and optimum nutrition are best set before planting.

The addition of compost, fertilizer and other soil amendments is the next step. After all ingredients have been added, mix the soil thoroughly. Pile and firm the soil in the planting beds then pre-irrigate the entire garden area by wetting with a sprinkler for at least two hours. Allow the area to dry for several days and it will be ready to plant.

Using Transplants

When growing tomatoes and peppers, it is easier to use transplants. However, the use of transplants alone does not insure bountiful fall production. What must be accomplished is rapid establishment of fall transplants. As hot and dry as the weather has been, some people think that transplanting is risky. Transplants WILL survive hot temperatures and full sun IF adequate moisture is available to the plant. "To the plant!" is the key phrase. Transplants in peat pots or cell packs with restricted root zones require at least two weeks to sufficiently enlarge their root systems so that active growth can begin. Until that time, gardeners must provide adequate, daily moisture or the transplants will either die or stunt to the point that fruit maturity will be delayed. Delayed maturity is what we need to avoid!

Daily moisture should be provided on an individual basis to transplants. Depressions or basins around each transplant can be filled daily, or as needed depending on the soil type, with water to provide the necessary wetting or a drip irrigation system can be installed. Too much water, i.e., keeping roots soaking wet instead of moist, will cause root rotting and subsequent transplant stunting or death.

A transplant with a larger root system which can be easily watered will be helpful. Such a large root system will spread faster, have access to more water and will support an older plant which has the potential of producing more fruit, sooner.

When to Plant What

Choose adapted vegetable species and varieties. Unless you love the challenge, avoid growing poorly-adapted vegetables. Most types of vegetables have at least a few varieties that do well here. Many even offer built-in disease and insect resistance. Here in the South, we have a short season between summer heat and the first freeze, in most years. Therefore, it is best to select early-maturing varieties (ones with short days-to-harvest intervals) to avoid having an almost-ripe bean crop freeze.

Proper timing is probably the most important factor in successful fall gardening. Regardless of variety selected or cultural practices used, if a gardener does not do the right thing at the right time, any chances of success are diminished.

Take the time to count back the days from the expected first fall frost, and plant early enough that your crops mature fully.

Remember these are "average" planting dates. With these dates in mind, a gardener can decide which frost-susceptible vegetables to plant, when to plant and whether to use transplants or seeds. Fall vegetable crops are categorized as long-term and short-term crops. Duration of these crops is dependent upon when the first killing frost occurs and the cold tolerance of the vegetables.

Plant the long-term, frost-tolerant vegetables together. Frost-tolerant vegetables can withstand temperatures below 32 degrees F. They include:

Beets	**Broccoli**	**Brussels sprouts**	**Cabbage**
Carrots	**Cauliflower**	**Chard**	**Collards**
Garlic	**Kale**	**Lettuce**	**Mustard**
Onions	**Parsley**	**Spinach**	**Turnips**

Plant the short-term, frost-susceptible vegetables together. Frost-susceptible vegetables will be killed or injured by temperatures below 32 degrees F. They include:

Beans	**Cantaloupes**	**Corn**	**Cucumbers**
Eggplants	**Okra**	**Peas**	**Peppers**
Irish Potatoes	**Sweet Potatoes**	**Squash**	**Tomatoes**
Watermelons			

Keep in mind the relative maturity rate, average height (in feet) and frost sensitivity of the crop of various garden vegetables. **FS – frost-susceptible crops** and **FT – frost-tolerant crops**

<u>The quick (30-60 days) maturing vegetables are:</u>

Beets (1½ feet) **FT**
Bush Beans (1½ feet) **FS**
Leaf Lettuce (1 foot) **FT**
Mustard (1½ feet) **FT**
Radishes (1½ feet) **FT**
Spinach (1 foot) **FT**
Summer Squash (3 feet) **FS**
Turnips (1½ feet) **FT**
Turnip Greens (1½ feet) **FT**

The moderate (60-80 days) maturing vegetables are:

Broccoli (3 feet) **FT**
Chinese cabbage (1½ feet) **FT**
Carrots (1 foot) **FT**
Cucumbers (1 foot) **FS**
Corn (6 feet) **FS**
Green Onions (1½ feet) **FT**
Kohlrabi (1½ feet) **FT**
Lima Bush Beans (1½ feet) **FS**
Okra (6 feet) **FS**
Parsley (1½ feet) **FT**
Peppers (3 feet) **FS**
Cherry Tomatoes (4 feet) **FS**

The slow (80 days or more) maturing vegetables are:

Brussels Sprouts (2 feet) **FT**
Bulb Onions (1½ feet) **FT**
Cabbage (1½ feet) **FT**
Cantaloupes (1 foot) **FS**
Cauliflower (3 feet) **FT**
Eggplant (3 feet) **FS**
Garlic (1 foot) **FT**
Irish Potatoes (2 feet) **FS**
Pumpkins (2 feet) **FS**
Sweet Potatoes (2 feet) **FS**
Tomatoes (4 feet) **FS**
Watermelon (1 foot) **FS**
Winter Squash (1 foot) **FS**

References:

http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu – articles on Vegetable Gardening by Dr. Jerry Parsons, Professor and Extension Horticulturist (retired), San Antonio and Larry Stein, Associate Professor and Extension Horticulturist, Uvalde

Neil Sperry's Complete Guide to Texas Gardening

Texas Garden Almanac, by Doug Welsh

"Ten Commandments of Fall Garden Success", Article by Skip Richter, County Extension Agent – Horticulture, Travis County