



Sow Summer Seeds for Fall Foods

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It's easy to get into the swing of spring gardening when there's an empty brown canvas waiting to be painted green. On muddy knees you worship the strengthening sun, cheering on the sprouted peas as you would a baby's first steps.

Summer planting is a different matter. The garden is a hungry beast, demanding attention, and the last thing you feel like doing is creating more work. But plant you will, if you want a garden that's as abundant in fall as it is right now. Don't look for a pep squad. In the sapping heat of the dog days, everyone is at the beach or relaxing on the porch with iced tea. The nurseries have usually sold all their seedlings. But planting now is something that successful gardeners do.

Here are strategies to psych yourself up for the job.

First, make sure you order plenty of fall crops when you buy seeds in spring, especially brassicas such as kale, broccoli, cabbage, collards, pac choi, tatsoi and arugula. Fall is a long, glorious season for these vegetables, sweetening them and mellowing their flavors. Plan on tender young Swiss chard, sweet baby turnips and certainly lettuce, which is so much less apt to bolt when it's cool. Sneak in a quick crop of bush beans or fall peas to bear before frost. All of these can all be started from mid-July through August. Order spinach and carrot seeds for sowing in September, as well.

Choose a cloudy day, if possible. Failing that, work early or late in the day.

Give the garden a thorough cleanup, yanking up any crops that have finished bearing. You'll realize how much empty space there is -- that brown canvas again.

The day before planting, water the designated area thoroughly. The act will seem more hopeful with moist ground. If direct-sowing, set the seeds a bit more deeply than in spring, then keep the bed well irrigated until emergence. With seeds that are especially challenging, such as carrots, put a board over the row and check it daily. As soon as you see wisps of green, you're home free. They'll still need watering but will be out of intensive care.

You might create a shaded area (cooler to work in) as a nursery bed. Sow seedlings there, then transplant them into the sun. You can also spread shade cloth, supported by wire wickets, over a newly sown area, then remove it when the seeds sprout.

With some fall crops such as lettuce, shade is not sufficient for good germination if temperatures are still too high. Consider sowing indoors, in a room that is cooler than the outdoors. (Yes!) Prepare ice tea.

As you watch your fall crops grow, get ready to welcome what may prove to be your garden's best season: a long stretch of golden, non-muggy, non-buggy days, with crops that appreciate that change in the air as much as you do.

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