

THE OUTSIDER

Illinois Extension Horticulture serving Henry, Mercer, Rock Island, and Stark



THIRD TIME IS A CHARM: FALL GARDENING

By mid-summer, many gardeners are feeling the burn(out). It isn't only the heat of the summer that has outsiders sluggish, the daily tasks of gardening can cause some gardeners to feel ready to throw in the gardening towel for the season. However, for those that are able to muster the energy, planting for a third season can produce a late autumn harvest that will be sure to delight.

As with cool season spring crops and warm season summer plants, selecting plant species that are well suited to handle seasonal weather will produce better harvest results. Species that are being planted in mid-July to mid-August will begin growth in the warm season and mature in cooler temperatures of fall. For this reason, cool season crops are better suited for fall harvest.

When planting in the spring, gardeners are concerned about the average frost-free date as a guide for when to plant certain species. In the fall, the average first frost date must be considered for planting time. In Henry, Mercer, Rock Island and Stark counties of Illinois, the average first frost date is October 15. Counting back from October 15 by the number of days to maturity will help determine planting time. There is, of course, variability in each season as the average first frost date may arrive earlier or later in any given year. Planting earlier in the season, mid-July, may lead to challenges with seed germination rates due to higher soil temperatures. Planting later in the year, mid-August, may result in a limited harvest due to a shorter growing period. Products, equipment, and techniques are available to help mitigate these issues.



CROPS TO PLANT

Cool season crops are best suited for fall harvest. These are the crops that are often planted in early spring and are the first to produce a harvest. Declining average temperatures are welcomed by this group of plants, similar to the cooler temperature of spring as compared to the heat of summer.

It is recommended that carrots, beets, broccoli, peas, and green beans be planted in mid-July to maximize the remainder of the growing season. Turnips, spinach, and head and leaf lettuce are more tolerant of a light frost and can be planted later in the year for late fall harvest dates.

As with any planting, good quality seed is recommended for direct seedings and will have the highest germination rate. Several species that are well suited for direct seeding include carrots, beets, and spinach. Transplants can be helpful for crops that require a longer growing season than remains for a fall crop and to maximize the waning length and intensity of daylight. Broccoli and cauliflower do well as transplants and should be planted in mid-July to maximize the opportunity for a fall harvest. An August planting can be done with the understanding that there is increased risk depending on autumn weather.



SITE PREPARATION

Site and soil preparation help create an environment for transplants or seeds to thrive. This is especially important given the short growing season. Cultivate soil to remove weed pressure and create an ideal seed bed for direct seeding, especially for root vegetables such as carrots that don't like compacted, heavy soils.

Crop rotation is recommended as way to minimize risk of disease infestations from previous plantings as organisms can accumulate in soil over time. Changing the species of plants grown on a site in consecutive plantings remove host plants and reduce insect, nematode, or disease organism populations. Crop rotation also helps diversify nutrient use within the soil as different species utilize nutrients at different levels thus growing the same species repeatedly on a site can deplete the soil of certain nutrients. A three-year crop rotation, avoiding cultivation of plants in the same family on a site more than once every three years is recommended to maximize the benefits of a rotation schedule. Sites amended in the spring will likely continue to benefit from those activities in which case, autumn applied fertilizers can be reduced. New growing sites will benefit from an addition of high-quality compost especially if cruciferous crops such as cauliflower and broccoli are being grown as they are considered heavy feeders and require more nutrients to support growth.

The disease-free remains of previously planted crops can be incorporated into the soil profile. It is recommended that four to five days is provided between previous crop residue incorporation and planting to allow plant material breakdown, minimizing interference with seed germination.



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PESTS AND DISEASE

Pressure from pests and diseases remain present in fall crops. While many pests and diseases are more widespread and vigorous in the early half of the growing season, autumn crops are not immune. Growers should continue to monitor and be prepared to act if pests or disease is present. A few late season issues to watch for include Japanese beetle, leafhopper, downy mildew, powdery mildew, spotted cucumber beetles, and cabbage worm.

FROST RISK

As the season progresses the risk of frost becomes a concern for gardeners. In northern Illinois, the average first frost date is around October 15. Many of the short season fall crops are able to withstand a light frost. For example, spinach, brussels sprouts, and lettuce can tolerate temperatures as low as 20 degrees.. For many of these crops, the highest risk of frost damage is when temperatures change quickly. Gradual changes in temperatures allow plants to adapt and prepare for cooler temperatures, plants are unprepared to tolerate cold snaps and may cause damage. Cold snaps are a greater risk to cool season crops in the fall than in spring. To mitigate the risk of crop damage during cold snaps, row covers are useful tools. Row covers can be as simple as a sheet over the crops during the night when temperatures fall or a more advanced cover with supports.

MUSTER THE ENERGY, REAP THE REWARDS

If Outsiders are able to muster the energy for one more round of garden preparation, planting and care, the rewards will be sweet. Harvesting garden fresh produce late into the year can be exhilarating, nutritious, and delicious. Many flavor connoisseurs delight on the sweetness and change of flavor in the fall harvest.



OUTSIDER ACTION

Try these activities to be more of an Outsider

- Visit a farmers market and taste the flavors of fall.
- Learn about the nutritional benefits of green foods by reading this blog post: go.illinois.edu/GreenFoods

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