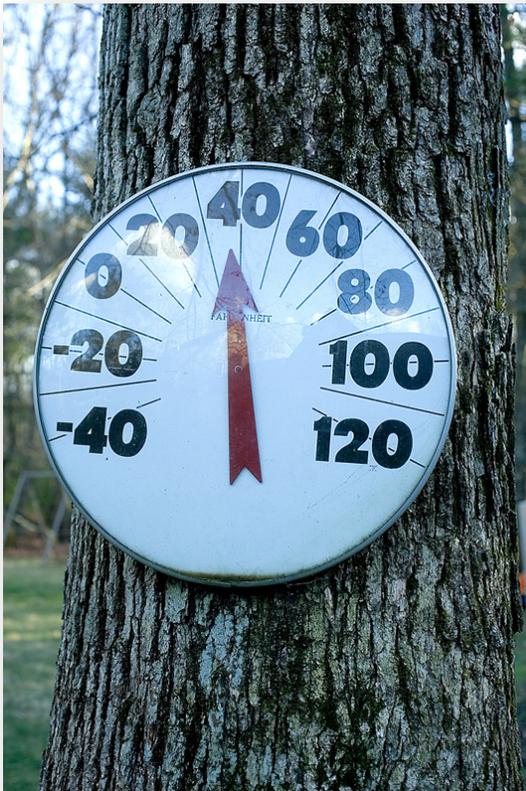


Cold or cold season gardening

Once the autumnal equinox has passed and days are noticeably shorter, gardeners in many parts of the country put their fruit and vegetable plots to bed. They must spend the cool or cold seasons wistfully leafing through seed catalogs.

This is not the case for the intrepid Mojave grower, however. In the great American Southwest it is possible to grow edibles almost year round, as long as the gardener can address some of the desert's unique challenges. Rarely does this region experience long periods of freezing temperatures, nor is there much sleet to damage tender leaves. This does not mean there are no concerns, of course.

During the spring we plant most of the fruiting crops, such as tomatoes and peppers. The intense summer conditions of heat and light generally do not cause serious problems for some of the vining vegetables such as squash and pumpkins, nor does the desert summer bother plants like melons, sweet potatoes and okra.



When daytime temperatures drop into the 50° to 60°F range with cooler nights, most of those warm season fruits begin to suffer. That is the time when they can be taken out of the garden and moved into the compost bin.

Cool temperatures are welcome to certain plants, and gardeners in this region should consider planting root vegetables and leafy greens, which will grow easily down to about 40°F. With protection from our occasional freezing nights, they can grow, albeit slowly, all winter. They still require at least six hours of bright sunlight daily; preferably in the morning and early afternoon.

Plant protection, or “season extension,” is essential for keeping a garden productive through the fall and into the winter. Useful items are available at home stores, nurseries, and online.

Plants are often hardier than one might expect.

Cool season plants, grown for leaves, roots, stems or tubers, will tolerate an occasional chill,

even one approaching freezing. The chemicals dissolved within each cell can act almost like antifreeze down to 30°F. This does not negate the need for protection; it just gives gardeners a bit of security while they put in safety measures to lower the risk of damage.

Mulch is something most gardeners use in summer to keep the soil cooler and moister, and to block weeds. It is also essential in winter, keeping the soil a little warmer than it would be if it were exposed.

The protection can be as simple as a “floating row cover.” This is an extremely lightweight fabric that is laid over growing plants. Under the row cover it can be two or three degrees warmer than outside.

Turning a raised bed into a mini greenhouse can be a lifesaver. It need not be a permanent structure, but more of a cold frame. Heavy clear plastic attached to a foldable framework can let light in and cold out. It can be as tall as the gardener wants.

While gardening in the desert can be difficult, it is also rewarding, especially during the short chilly days coming.

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