

Early fall garden

Some people are dissuaded from gardening in southern Nevada because they heard our growing season is short. Wrong! While people in other regions plant gardens in the spring and watch them through the summer, our horticultural world is different. In the desert southwest we have at least two or three growing seasons.

Our July and August are similar to the depths of winter in other places – too uncomfortable to spend much time outdoors. Non-desert plants also have a difficult time and grow poorly during our summer. When temperatures cool, however, gardens and landscapes burst into growth. The waning of summer and beginning of fall is a great time to start a new vegetable garden.

“Cool season crops”, are hardy in cool weather. Many can tolerate chilling (but not freezing). They are started either early spring or fall. September is perfect.

Leaf lettuce is one of the easiest plants to grow in autumn. It rebels against high temperatures – bolting or even refusing to germinate – but when nights are cool, it produces a leafy crop in six weeks. Many cool season vegetables are leafy greens: kale, cabbage, and collards. These are botanical cousins, and can withstand chilly temperatures. In general, leaf, stem or root vegetables do best until nighttime temperatures drop



below about 45°F.

Cool season crops grow vigorously if they receive about six hours of direct light every day (longer, if the light is indirect).

Regular watering is essential. When it does not feel hot, we forget how dry this area is. Many of these plants have small root systems; hence they may dry out quickly.

Garden success is never guaranteed, particularly in southern Nevada. This is the Mojave Desert – even when temperatures fall, the air is still dry, the winds howl, and the soil poses



major problems. Most cool season vegetables thrive when they have good drainage in fertile soil.

Unfortunately, our soil is anything but fertile. It can be rocky, and difficult to dig. It may have dismal drainage, but can be so sandy that water drains excessively fast! Most vegetables grow in local soil that has received abundant additions. Hefty amendments of compost improve both fertility and drainage. Compost is mainly decomposed plant material, but looks and smells sweet, like soil. It increases available nutrients, improves the acidity level, and makes the soil easier to work.

A vegetable garden is often a raised bed, which is easier to plant and maintain. It can be an area of improved soil that is a little higher than the rest of the yard. More commonly, it is a

box: two feet high or more, as wide as a gardener can reach, and as long as is practical. It should be irrigated. Although they are rarely a problem in raised beds, control weeds while small. Cool season crops are not robust competitors, and weeds cheat them of water, light and nutrients.

When these vegetables are grown in good soil, with ample light and water, they are delicious additions both to the landscape and to the table.

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