Late summer is a good time to plant vegetables

The thermometer may be stuck on 90 degrees, but don’t let the summer heat beat you out of a second crop of fresh summer veggies. Anyone who enjoys vegetable gardening should consider a second planting of the warm season species, and can begin preparing for establishing the cool season vegetables. Our climate is such that something can be produced in the vegetable garden during every month of the year.

The first round of summer vegetables such as tomatoes, peppers, squash, sweet corn, southern peas, snap beans, cantaloupes and eggplant were probably planted in March and April. The harvest on this spring planting is winding down.

But with Florida’s subtropical climate, the summer gardening fun has only just begun. You still have time for another round of summer crops before the first frost. The first frost usually occurs around late November in Northwest Florida.

According to Terry Kelley, an Extension horticulturist with the University of Georgia, there are 110 to 120 frost-free days from late July until mid-November, so warm-season crops that mature in less than four months have time to produce, barring an early frost.

Many gardeners make several plantings throughout the year at various intervals to have new crops maturing periodically throughout the summer. Others try to maintain the first planting and harvest tomatoes, squash and the like throughout the summer.

Rather than trying to keep the same plants producing indefinitely, it is often better to start over after the first planting plays out. This usually results in better yield and quality.

Don’t, however, plant the same crop back in the exact same place. Rotate your garden space to reduce potential disease problems. For instance, plant tomatoes where you planted squash this spring.

Gardeners should also rotate families of crops. Plant peppers, tomatoes or eggplant where squash, cucumbers or cantaloupes were planted. But don’t plant cucumbers on the same ground where squash was most recently planted.
Lima beans, eggplant, okra, southern peas, peppers and tomatoes can be started again in July. During August plant snap beans, pole beans, sweet corn, cucumbers, southern peas, peppers, pumpkin and squash. All of these usually have plenty of time to mature and bear before the first frost.

The cool season vegetables are often overlooked or planted too late to produce as well as they might. Newcomers, especially those from a cooler climate, tend to plant these vegetables in the spring - which is a mistake. In August plant broccoli, cauliflower, collards, bunching onions and turnips. During September plant all of the above in addition to beets, cabbage, carrots, endive, escarole, lettuce, mustard, onions and radish.

Many gardeners who are unfamiliar with our mild winters seem to fear that the cool season vegetables will freeze if planted during late summer or fall. This generally does not happen. In fact, most of them thrive during our typically mild winter weather.

Onions are a prime example of the need for fall planting. They should be established by seeding or by transplanting so that plants are growing well by mid November. If spring planted, onions will either produce a small bulb or a plant that resembles a giant "green onion", with no bulb.

Establishing the late summer crop will be more of a challenge than it was in the spring. There is more pressure from pests at this time of year, so insect and disease control practices must be implemented. Because of the intense heat, you'll need to keep the garden watered enough to reduce heat and drought stress.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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