Fall Into Gardening

Record setting heat has brought the demise of many vegetable gardens. If you are like me, then you are probably ready to clean up and be done with it for the year. It seems that because of the weather, gardens have had less production and more insect and disease pressure than ever. But do not give up just yet! There is another opportunity for your garden to be fruitful.

In this area, traditional gardening usually begins in late February or early March with the planting of cool weather vegetables like broccoli and lettuces. But did you know that you could plant those cool weather plants in the heat of the summer to provide you with vegetables throughout the fall?

Fall gardening extends the season so you may continue to harvest fresh produce after earlier crops have finished. The fall harvest can be extended even longer, by providing less-hardy plants with protection from frost. Many cool-season vegetables, such as Brussels sprouts, broccoli, carrots, and cauliflower, produce their best quality and flavor when they mature during cool weather. In North Carolina, the spring temperatures heat up quickly. Oftentimes, vegetables, such as lettuce and spinach, will bolt or develop bitter flavor if they mature during hot summer weather. This makes fall gardening the perfect opportunity.

When planning a fall garden there are a few things to keep in mind: site preparation, planting, watering and fertilization, insects and diseases, and frost protection.

First things first, get rid of the weeds and debris that took over your summer harvest. Turn the soil to loosen and remove any additional weeds or rocks that might appear. Put down about 1 to 2 pounds per 100 square feet of a complete fertilizer like 10-10-10. Make sure that the fertilizer is thoroughly incorporated into the soil.

If you are planting from seed, make sure to plant them 1.5 to 2 times deeper than the package indicates to ensure adequate moisture. If you do not have the time or the resources to be watering every day, then it may be better to use transplants. Many seeds will not germinate when the soil temperature rises above 85 degrees, so shading might help with germination rates.

Watering should be done on a regular schedule. Most gardens require about 1 inch of water per week. Newly planted seeds will require more water to keep the moisture level higher. After six to eight weeks, a side application of nitrogen will help boost growth.
Squash, cucumbers, and corn are known to have more insect and disease problems the later in the season it gets. So it may be wise to avoid these in your fall garden. Your best defense against insects and diseases is a great offense. Keep on the lookout for problems, and treat only when necessary.

Just like the weather in the summer, the weather in the fall is the true limiting factor to how long your garden can be productive. Crops can be covered with burlap or a floating row cover made of fabric (make sure it does not touch the plants) to protect them from frost. This can extend the season for several weeks depending on the weather after the initial frost. Root crops, such as carrots and radishes should be mulched before a frost. If mulched heavily, harvest could continue until spring.

Fall gardening is a great opportunity for a second chance. All those tips and tricks that your neighbor has been offering about how your garden could look SOOO much better if you just did this… Or the scouting for insects that you forgot to do in the spring and your garden was overrun with stinkbugs. This is your chance to have the best garden on the block!

For any questions or comments on this or any other horticultural issue, please contact Kerrie Roach, Extension horticultural agent, at 910-671-3276, by E-mail at kerrie_roach@ncsu.edu, or visit North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center, website at robeson.ces.ncsu.

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