Seed Saver's guide on late-season gardening.

Fall gardening, or second plantings. Whatever you call this midsummer pursuit, its goal is the same—to prolong the growing season and reap more from your precious garden real estate, even after the peak of summer.

Getting Started

Vegetable gardening returns its greatest dividends when your plots produce food from spring throughout summer and right up until first frost. Just because you've harvested your early-maturing vegetables doesn't mean you have to buy those crops at the local grocery store or put away your gardening gloves come August. In fact, in many areas of the country, myriad crops can be planted in midsummer for a fall harvest. And who doesn't enjoy eating the fruits of their labor for eight months of the year instead of just a few?

The following tips will help you use your garden space longer and more efficiently to produce even more homegrown fruits and vegetables.

Know Your Hardiness Zone and First Frost Date

Knowing the average first frost date for your region will allow you to calculate "planting deadlines" so that your young plants have time to mature before the temperatures fall and the first frost hits. Consulting the USDA hardiness zone map will help you determine whether a particular plant can thrive and survive in your part of the country. These two tools will help you determine not only which crops you should plant but also when you should have those crops in the ground.

Choose Crops Wisely

Two types of plants are good bets to thrive when planted in midsummer—those that mature quickly and those that tolerate frost.

Paying attention to maturation time is key because crops planted in the summer months take longer to mature than those planted in the spring as shorter days/less daylight and cooler air temperatures combine to slow plant growth. (The good news? While your fall plantings make take longer to mature, they will face fewer threats from pests this time of year.)

To ensure your plants mature in time for harvest, add a few extra days to the "days to maturity" guidelines typically found on seed packets and then count back the total number of days on your calendar to arrive at your summer planting date. Quick-maturing vegetables include beets, bush beans, carrots, cucumbers, kohlrabi, radishes, spinach, Swiss chard, and zucchini. And if some of those quick-maturing crops don't mature fast enough to elude the first frost, you can easily use row cover or garden fabric to protect them from too-cool temperatures.

Crops that will tolerate a light frost and keep growing even when temperatures drop include most brassicas ([broccoli](), [Brussels sprouts](), [cabbage](), [kale](), and [kohlrabi]()), as well as [carrots](), parsnips, [rutabagas](), scallions, [spinach](), and [turnips](). Some of these cold-tolerant vegetables—particularly kale and Brussels sprouts—actually taste better when grown in cool weather as they react to cold by producing sugars which then sweeten them. Take note, however—while spinach, turnips, rutabagas, and scallions can be direct sown, you will need to start most brassicas indoors weeks before the midsummer planting period.

Pull and Plant

This one's easy—as soon as early-season plants (think lettuce) have passed their prime and appear close to bolting, pull them out and replant a different crop in that space. Rotating crops will help avoid diseases particular to one plant type and balance nutrients in the soil.

Cool and Enrich the Soil

Summer, of course, brings heat, and toasty temperatures can easily roast newly sprouted seeds. The best way to prevent that from happening is to keep the soil moist, mulched, and shaded, if possible. Natural shade from a trellis or tall plant, for example, can be used to create a cool location for seeding a second crop. Finally, don't forget the importance of rich soil—be sure to replenish the nutrients in the soil between plantings by mixing in compost and organic fertilizer.