

Preparing for winter garden delights

It is possible to enjoy tasty fresh vegetables and herbs in winter but you will need to start work now – in the autumn – to enjoy a cold weather harvest, as gardening expert Rachel Knight explains.

I enjoy my winter edible garden even more than my summer one. Things take life at a more leisurely pace in the cooler months. There's plenty of rain, fewer weeds and you'll have more flexibility about when to harvest crops. Many vegetables will continue growing all year round if you don't get a frost. Some crops will taste much sweeter if you do get a freeze. It's the perfect time to grow things that readily go to seed when things heat up. On a sunny day we can all find a sheltered spot from which to soak up the sights, sounds and smells that our garden sanctuary offers.

Successful winter gardens begin in autumn to give crops a good start while there's still enough warmth in the soil and before the days draw in. Some won't be ready until early spring but you'll be even more delighted to see them on your plate then. Try some or all of these cool weather varieties (see panel) for some tasty, fresh additions to your meals. Depending on where you live some or all of these will thrive in winter. Some protection will help move things along if it's really cold. A tunnel house, cold frame or cloche will raise temperatures, particularly on sunny days, and might be what you need to give seedlings a head-start. It's a real treat to be able to appreciate the special taste of fresh winter vegetables in a stew, a salad or a soup.

Crops that love the cold

Leeks – succulent and flavoursome at any size.

Rocket – the nutty, decorative leaf that every salad-lover can grow.

Pak Choi – fast-growing, crispy, cup-shaped greens.

Silverbeet – prolific and reliable back yard staple.

Red kale – a delicate, frilly appearance hides a delicious robust green.

Cos lettuce – the must-have upright leaf for a Caesar salad.

Cavalo Nero – black kale from Italy with distinctively dark, crinkly leaves.

Beetroot – earthy and sweet the red beets can't be beat.

Carrots – round and orangey or purple and pointy they'll taste carrotier than anything you buy.

Turnips – don't turn up your nose at a turnip. Try roasting golfball-sized ones you've just dug.

Radishes – take your pick from red, round and crunchy or white, long and pointy.

Spring onions – multi-purpose onions in a bunch.

Fennel – liquorice bulb to serve raw thinly sliced or roasted chunky.

Parsley – flat leaved or curly. So much more than a garnish.

Coriander – if you love it you'll use it with everything!

Celery – picked a stick at a time will mean your plants will last longer.

Mizuna – spiky, spicy leaf that doesn't mind the cold.

Cabbage – steamed, coleslaw or sauerkraut. Great greens (and reds) to keep you healthy.

Parsnips – a slow grower but the pale, slender roots are worth the wait.

Chicory – bitter salad green beloved of the French.

Broccoli – green brains that give you brains.

Cauliflower – white brains longing for cheesy sprinkles.

Garlic – planted mid-year for a summer harvest.

