Patti Anne's Farm
April

YOUR EARLIEST SPRING GARDEN EVER

While your friends are waiting for their gardens to dry out and warm up to plant their spring garden, you could be enjoying your first spring salads. Fresh salad vegetables from the garden in March? Sounds incredible but it's true. With a fall planted garden of the right varieties you can start eating out of your garden as soon as the ground thaws.

Many novice gardeners suffer under the misconception that nothing can be planted in a garden until all danger of frost is past. Nothing could be further from the truth! Many common garden vegetable varieties actually prefer the cool weather of early spring. Just think about it, how many of us have watched a promising crop of spinach bolt to seed before we had more than a couple of meals from it? That is because spinach prefers the cooler (and shorter) days of early spring. The same with lettuce and peas.

Now, if it is already spring, and you didn't get anything planted last fall, don't worry. Just get out there and plant (the below named crops) as soon as your soil can be worked. They will not be killed by frost. I divide my garden into two major catagories. Plants that can handle a frost and those that can't. Below is my list of plants that can handle a frost and keep on growing to produce a crop.

GREENS: Spinach, Swiss Chard, Mustard Greens, Kale and Lettuce,

BRASSICAS: Broccoli, Cabbage, Cauliflower and Kole Rabi.

LEGUME: Peas,

HERBS: Parsley, sage, dill,

ROOT: Garlic, Onions, Carrots, Radishes, Beets, Turnips, Parsnips and Potatoes (the tops of potatoes may frost back but that won't kill them and they'll grow back).

FLOWERS: Petunias, Cosmos, Snap Dragons and Violas

Of course, in order to enjoy the earliest spring garden one needs to plan ahead. Like in September or October of the previous fall. As your summer garden winds down and you find large parts of it are no longer producing, go ahead and pull back the mulch, clean the bed of any old vegetable debris and stalks and such (places where diseases and insects hide) and loosen the soil with a fork, shovel or (my favorite) a Mantis tiller.

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Amend the soil as needed by working in some steer (one pounds per square foot) or chicken (one pound per ten square feet) manure, blood or bone meal. Test and balance the soils ph somewhere between 5 and 7 (between greenish yellow and orangish yellow) and amend as necessary with lime (to make more alkaline) or sulfur (to increase acidity). We have alkaline soil here in Northeastern Washington so I like to use granulated gypsum with added sulfur (gypsum 66%, calcium 19%, sulfur 15%) as it helps balance my soil's ph while adding calcium, which many vegetable like. (see my article on "Building the Your Garden's Soil")

TIP: The ground will thaw faster in the spring if your garden is shaped into raised beds. This exposes more soil surfaces to the warming effect of the sun, thus allowing those weak spring rays to warm the sides as well as the tops of the soil.

As the weather starts to turn seriously cold, just before the ground freezes, go ahead and plant your spring garden. There are many varieties that will come up just as the snow melts and will withstand a hard frosts in the spring. Some will even love the cool weather.

Do not mulch your freshly planted beds as that will slow their warming in the spring. And, don't worry, the cold will not hurt the seeds (I store mine in the freezer) and these varieties will withstand being frozen as they come up in the spring.

THE COLD FRAME

You can greatly boost your growing by covering your newly planted area with a simple cold frame. As this will warm the soil in the spring a lot faster.

The cold frame is not a new invention. It dates back to the beginning of cultivated farming. Very versatile, you can build it to suit your own personal space and needs. I like to make mine in sections. That way I can add a length whenever I want, or move a section to another part of the garden. Many times you can construct one out of recycled or reclaimed materials such as old storm windows. But, more on this topic next time.

Happy Gardening

Patti Kahl

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