

# Get Those Fall and Winter Crops in Now

By Matt Cormons

Now is the perfect time for new gardeners to begin a rewarding hobby; the insects are phasing out, as are the pesky weeds, reducing or even eliminating many of the problems encountered in spring and summer gardening. Once you taste success you will feel more confident about trying a spring and summer garden, and be well on your way to healthier eating and reducing your food bill.

The most popular of the fall crops are the many forms (cultivars) derived from a species of thick-leaved wild mustard, *Brassica oleracea*. The mustard family (*Cruciferae*, meaning cross-bearing from the four-petaled flowers in the shape of a cross, a characteristic you can see in the wild mustards growing on our roadsides in spring and summer) offers other food plants too.

Thanks to the selective desires of various gardeners over thousands of years, the versatile *Brassica oleracea*, native to the sea cliffs of southern Europe, as well as Western Europe, has given rise to a multitude of well-known garden plants we know as the cole crops. The term cole is derived from *kohl*, the German word for cabbage and is seen in the words cole slaw and kohlrabi. Besides cole slaw (cabbage) and kohlrabi, *Brassica oleracea* has given rise to something for everyone, including Brussels sprouts, kale, collards, broccoli, cauliflower and broccoflower. Many of the cole crops can withstand very cold weather; kale can provide delicious greens 30 days after seeding and last through the winter and into spring, as will collards (the latter also does well in summer heat!). And all are rich in vitamins A and C and various phytochemicals that aid in the prevention of cancer and otherwise advance health. These phytochemicals, however, are lost just hours after picking - a good reason to grow your own and pick them right before eating them; store-bought is just not the same. Any good gardening book will tell you how to easily grow the cole crops of your choice.

Chinese cabbage, bok choy and the very tasty lettuce-like Arugula, also in the mustard family, are other good fall crops that survive the winter (cover them it on the coldest nights). Also related are the turnips and rutabaga, but they should have been started earlier in the fall (try some next year).

I mustn't forget to mention lettuce. All varieties do well until frost arrives, but I was able to over 100 healthy plants going all winter, even on the coldest nights, by making a simple cold frame from old windows elevated on thick logs, the chinks sealed with handfuls of hay (one could make a simple cold frame using a simple wooden frame and clear plastic). I was eating and giving away lettuce well into summer. I had sowed seeds by sprinkling them on prepared soil, then lightly covered them with soil. As they grew and became too crowded (and being one who hates to pull up and kill a potential source of food) I was able to successfully transplant all the extras into my cold frames. It was so easy anyone could do it successfully, so start now and have freshly picked lettuce all winter.

Spinach, very high in iron and antioxidants (the latter destroy free radicals that cause cell damage) is another crop that can be planted in the fall, right up to the time the soil freezes!

However, the earlier you plant it, the sooner you can harvest it, even during the winter. Covering it is often a good idea when it's very cold. You can even plant it as late as late March if you want spinach before hot weather settles in.

Another crop you can start in late fall, but can't reap until early summer, is garlic. Simply clear the soil of weeds, stick in the cloves a few inches apart and watch them grow. We usually pile some hay over the plants as the coldest nights arrive. Garlic likes lots of manure to grow large knobs. Onions can be planted in the fall also, and the covered green leaves can be used all winter.

So fall and early winter don't mean gardening has to cease. Try any of the few crops I've mentioned and let us know by writing to our web site ([eslocalfoodproject.org](http://eslocalfoodproject.org)) what you have done and how your crops are coming along. We'd love to hear from you - and you will be an inspiration to others to do likewise and help the Shore eat better and spend less.