

Time to Start Thinking about Planting Fall Garden



Dry pea vines and spent spinach may be all that's left of the spring garden in July, but by rototilling compost into nutrient-depleted soil, gardeners can jump start new crops for harvest in the fall. For gardens in warmer areas of the foothills, plant seed in July for broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower and other cabbage-family cole crops like kohlrabi, kale and collards. The plants will mature in the fall when it's cool, making crops sweeter at harvest because plant respiration decreases and more sugar accumulates at lower temperatures.

Plant seed a half-inch below the surface and keep the soil on it moist until seedlings emerge. Moist soil cools seed and increases the number of seedlings. The first two leaves that emerge will be seedling leaves. Wait until two true leaves emerge, then thin the seedlings to the appropriate spacing for each type of cole crop. Apply a nitrogen fertilizer periodically during the growing season for optimum growth.

July is also a good time to plant bush snap beans. Unlike cole crops, which require supplemental nitrogen fertilizer for good growth, green beans produce their own nitrogen. Nodules on the roots contain Rhizobium bacteria that extract nitrogen from the air and convert it to a form the plants can use. However, gardeners who are planting beans for the first time must inoculate the seed with bacteria before planting. Many seed catalogs and nurseries sell Rhizobium bacteria in small packages. Pour the powder-like bacteria directly into seed packets and shake it to cover the seed, then plant and irrigate. Nodules containing the bacteria will form on the roots.

Bean seed planted in gardens where beans were previously grown do not need to be inoculated because the bacteria are already established in the soil. Nitrogen produced by beans will remain in the soil and can be used by corn and other crops the following year. Organic growers often use beans, peas and other "nitrogen-fixing" plants as rotation crops to enrich the soil because the nitrogen produced by them is considered natural.

Pick green snap beans when the pods are relatively smooth, before the seed makes them lumpy and tough. Pick the pods frequently so that the plants continue to produce new pods. Keep weeds and insect pests under careful control during the summer. Also, train tomatoes to cages to keep vines off the ground because the fruit tends to rot if it touches the soil. Cages will reduce sunscald because the vines provide more shade, and the fruit is easier to pick. Use mulch such as dry grass clippings or straw at the base of cages to conserve moisture and reduce incidence of dry rot on the tips of the fruit known as blossom end rot.

This article adapted from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, USDA. Please contact Ken Churches at cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu or (209) 754-6475 with your agricultural questions. To speak with a Certified Master Gardener: Calaveras (209) 754-2880, Tuolumne (209) 533-5696, Amador (209) 223-6837, El Dorado (530) 621-5543.