

**CARVER SCOTT EXTENSION MASTER GARDENERS****2017****PLANNING FOR A LONGER GROWING SEASON****WHY BOTHER?**

Some gardeners like the competitive feeling of producing the first ripe tomato of the year, while others wisely want to get their crops in the ground early to beat the heat. In addition, the majority of vegetable growers like to provide fresh, high-quality food for their table as long as possible each year, holding off winter as long as possible.

PLANT REQUIREMENTS

But we can't simply start everything earlier and hope it will live longer in the fall. There are three things we can manipulate to extend the season: light, soil temperature, and air temperature. We can control these conditions when starting seeds and consider them when planning methods to protect plants during the season.

SEED STARTING

Starting seeds yourself is a valuable way to have plants the right size at the right time for planting outdoors. If you have the right indoor growing conditions, you can grow very large plants for a jump-start in the spring, while avoiding the root-bound plants you often find at garden centers.

Several cold-hardy seeds may be sown directly outdoors much earlier than the typical Mother's Day or Memorial Day gardens. Candidates for very cool soil include lettuce, onions, carrots, radish, beets, Swiss chard, spinach, brassicas, peas, and potatoes.

Harvest of many crops may be extended by succession planting such as planting lettuce several times over a period of weeks, or planting a second row of zucchini when the first planting starts to bloom.

A large number of vegetable crops, particularly brassicas, grow and taste better when grown for fall harvest. By proper timing of seed starting, the garden will never be empty until the first very hard freeze in the fall, and even then fall plantings of garlic, dill, spinach, and lettuce will promise a very early spring crop.

PLANT CARE

Cutting bush beans back to 6” after the first flush of harvest will lead to a second crop later in the season, while planting pole beans ensures a harvest long into the fall. The Asparagus patch may be handled to provide both spring and late summer harvests. And, of course, keeping ripe fruit picked encourages most vegetables to keep on producing even longer.

SEASON EXTENDERS

A greenhouse is the ultimate season extender, but may be cost prohibitive. High tunnels are only a little less costly, but most people will be able to afford a cold frame or other plant covers. Some individual covers have been documented to protect plants down to temperatures in the teens.

Greenhouses and plant covers provide protection by warming the air around the plants. Raised beds and plastic mulch can provide protection by warming the soil.

Although we generally think of extending the season at either end, there are times we want to cool off the summer to enjoy the spring and fall cool-season crops a bit longer. Seeds that don't germinate well in warm soil benefit from cooling soil by straw bales or plywood. And plants that prefer cool air will often grow better under shade cloth.

Finally, we have a few tricks in the fall to extend the harvest, such as covering individual plants with blankets, or picking mature, but underripe fruit to finish ripening indoors.

RESOURCES

1. <http://www.extension.umn.edu/garden/fruit-vegetable/docs/high-tunnel-manual-2012.pdf>
2. <http://www.extension.umn.edu/garden/yard-garden/vegetables/planting-vegetables-midsummer-fall-harvest/>
3. <http://www.extension.umn.edu/garden/yard-garden/landscaping/season-extendors/>

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