



*"Lettuce is like conversation: It must be fresh and crisp,
and so sparkling that you scarcely notice the bitter in it."*

C.D. Warner, 19th century

Autumn is officially here! And with the changing hues of our foliage comes a new bounty of hearty crops. Winter squash, turnips, parsnips, cabbage, carrots, rutabaga, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, carrots, kale, spinach, green tomatoes.....mmmm! It's time to think about harvesting the remainder of your crops, storing them properly, planting garlic, and preparing to put the gardens to "bed" for the winter.

Jodi, Kate and Cindy, Growing Places Garden Project

Harvesting and Storing Winter Squash

Winter squash can be harvested whenever the fruits have turned a deep, solid color, generally they will lose their shine and become dull. The rind should be very hard, and will not yield easily to a thumbnail. Harvest the main part of the crop in September or October, before heavy frosts hit. Cut squash from the vines carefully, leaving two inches of stem attached if possible. Avoid cuts and bruises when handling. Fruits that are not fully mature, have been injured, have had their stems knocked off, or were out side during a heavy frost do not keep and should be used as soon as possible. Squashes and pumpkins need to be "cured" for storage so that they will last. Cure squashes and pumpkins after harvesting them by putting them in a warm, dry place for a few days until any abrasions or cuts from harvesting heal up then store. Good air circulation in the storage area is also helpful. A layer of straw helps keep them dry.

Where space allows, it is best to place the fruits in a single layer so that they do not touch each other. This decreases the potential spread of rot. Avoid storing them near the ground or floor where the humidity is highest, and avoid storing them on paper or in paper or plastic bags, as bags tend to hold in too much moisture. Store in a dry building where the temperature is between 50 and 55°F. An attic or high garage shelf, if kept above 50 degrees, may work well. Under proper storage conditions, acorn squashes will last from five to eight weeks, butternut squashes from two to three months and Turban and Buttercup should keep at least three months. Keep an eye on your stored pumpkins and squash and remove any that are turning soft.

Harvesting and Storing Kale

Harvest when leaves are large enough for intended use. Tender young leaves are best for salad, older leaves for cooking. Pick outer/lower leaves as you need them and kale will keep producing new inner leaves, like cut and come again lettuce. Frost improves the flavor of kale. Mature kale plants survive to 10F or below, meaning you can store your kale plants right in the garden. Mark the site so you can find the fresh greens under the snow!

Harvesting and Storing Fresh Carrots

To know when carrots are ready, look for dark green foliage, bright orange flesh, and a root that is about the size predicted on the seed packet and/or is about 1/2 inch across at its top. Pick those carrots with the largest roots first, so the rest have more room to grow. If you leave them in the ground too long, they'll get too big and woody and lose their flavor. Generally, carrots will maintain their sweetness and nutritional value for about 4 or 5 weeks. To prevent them breaking when you pull them from the ground, use a tined garden fork to lift them out of the soil. Carrots will keep in the refrigerator washed, with the tops cut off for 2 to 4 weeks. They stay crisp longer if stored in a plastic bag. If the carrots get a bit limp, they can usually be restored to some crispness by soaking them in cold water for about 30 minutes. When the frost arrives, use the garden as a refrigerator. The last crop can stay in the soil under a winter mulch of 10 or 12 inches of leaves or bales of hay. Cut off the tops before you put out the thick mulch. Harvest them, a few at a time, as long as the ground doesn't freeze solid... If the ground freezes it is impossible to dig up your carrot-sicles.

Harvesting and Storing Cabbage

Harvest cabbage anytime after the heads form. Test that the heads are solid (firm to pressure), but harvest before they pass their prime and crack or split. Late fall or winter cabbage can be stored for several months in humid conditions as close to freezing as possible. Pull out the cabbages and hang in a moist cellar, roots and all, or cut heads, remove loose outer leaves and spread one layer deep on shelves or pallets in a moist cellar. Store only disease-free heads.



Harvesting, Ripening and Storing Tomatoes Before the Frost

It's important to harvest tomatoes before a frost hits because frosted tomatoes won't ripen. You can often stretch the tomato harvest several weeks by covering the vines with burlap, an old sheet, or heavy paper in the evening when frost is predicted. When the time comes, bring still-green tomatoes indoors and store them in a single layer, inside a paper bag until ripe, or hang the entire plant (minus roots) upside down and in a paper bag to help ripen still-attached fruit. Or use those unripe tomatoes and enjoy fried green tomatoes, green tomato relish, jam, salsa.....

Planting Garlic

Garlic planting occurs after October 31st – if you plant too soon the bulbs might start to sprout and you will lose your crop. Choose garlic bulbs with crisp, dry skin (paper), not bruised, soft or wrinkly. Crack the bulb and separate the cloves, DO NOT remove the skin. Spacing is 9 cloves/sq ft or 4" apart. Plant cloves root end (blunt end) down and cover with 3-4" of soil. After you have planted your garlic, it is a good idea to mulch the bed. Leaves, compost or straw make good mulches. Water well and then only water again when the soil is dry. Remember, garlic loves water and food, but it must have good drainage or it will rot. Keep the weeds away from your garlic at all times; you either grow weeds or garlic, but not both! Every clove you plant will become a whole head of garlic by July!

If you are a 1st or 2nd year gardener and you requested garlic from us, you will be receiving it in the mail closer to planting time.

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RECIPES

When carving that Jack O' Lantern don't throw out those seeds! Roasted pumpkin seeds have a nutty flavor and are packed with protein and fiber. Pumpkin seeds are delicious toasted and salted, but they're even better flavored with sweet and savory spices. Check out these fun variations.

How to Roast Pumpkin Seeds

- Rinse pumpkin seeds under cold water and pick out the pulp and strings. (This is easiest just after you've removed the seeds from the pumpkin, before the pulp has dried.)
- Place the pumpkin seeds in a single layer on an oiled baking sheet, stirring to coat. If you prefer, omit the oil and coat with non-stick cooking spray.
- Sprinkle with salt and bake at 325 degrees F until toasted, about 25 minutes, checking and stirring after 10 minutes.
- Let cool and store in an air-tight container.

Try these variations instead of plain salt (for two cups of fresh seeds):

- Sweet and Spicy- 1/4C sugar, 1tsp cayenne pepper, 1tsp salt
- Salt and Cinnamon- 1½ tsp cinnamon, 1tsp salt
- Maryland Style- 1/8C Old Bay Seasoning
- Spiced- 1/2tsp salt, 1/8tsp garlic salt, 2tsp Worcestershire sauce

A special thanks to Nikki Conzo for her contributions to this edition of Growing Times!