

How to have a vegetable garden in winter

So you want to have a vegetable garden? It's a tricky proposition but can be done with a little planning and a few precautions taken. Consider the following six basic techniques to produce a winter bountiful harvest:

1. Select the hardiest vegetables you can find: All members of the *Brassica* genus are good candidates for a winter garden...including white and red cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, Chinese cabbage, brussel sprouts, collards, and kale.
2. Prepare raised beds: A winter garden must be well drained, since any water in the soil could freeze and damage delicate roots. The best way to insure good drainage is to plant winter crops in raised beds.
3. Pay attention to the average first frost (AFF) date for your climate: Set the sowing times of your winter crops so that they'll be 2/3 to 3/4 mature by the first frost. The harvest should then begin about one month after the AFF date.
4. Use mulch to provide insulation against cold: As plants grow closer to maturity, and as the AFF date nears, cover the beds with dry hay and/or leaves.
5. As the cold deepens, mulch all beds under more material and cover them with plastic: Before the ground freezes, bury your winter beds under a foot of dry hay or leaves. This insulating layer will keep the ground from freezing in the early part of the season. Poly sheets can also be used to seal in the earth's remaining heat. Insert short sticks into the corners of the beds to hold up the plastic and prevent any foliage from touching it and, possibly, freezing.
6. Harvest from the ends of the beds only: Open up only the ends of the bed and harvest from there. After harvesting, quickly and carefully close the ends by replacing the hay mulch and refitting the polyethylene on top.

These tips and tricks should help the vegetable gardener extend his or her gardening season.