

Rejuvenating the Kitchen Garden for Fall and Winter



Photo (special to Democrat): 'Bright Lights' Swiss chard is but one of several colorful and attractive greens that can be grown in the winter salad garden.

Audrey Alessi is an employee of Native Nurseries, a member of the University of Florida IFAS Leon County Extension Horticulture Advisory Committee . For more local gardening information, visit the UF-IFAS Extension website for Leon County at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>

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With the days slowly getting shorter, the temperature cooling subtly, I eagerly begin to imagine my fall and winter kitchen garden. I can think of no greater satisfaction than walking out of my door to my garden just before serving a meal, to gather mesclun, arugula, fresh herbs and colorful, perky nasturtiums for the table. As the basil begins to fade, I envision my fall garden overflowing with lush, colorful lettuces and greens, aromatic herbs and cheery violas.

As I plan my cool-season kitchen garden, I know the first step will be to prepare the garden by removing faded, spent plants and doing some major weeding. In order to keep the garden growing abundantly all season, I will need to replenish my well-draining soil, by double-digging (3"-5" deep), adding aged mushroom and/or homemade compost. Lettuces and other leafy greens are known to become tough and bitter tasting if not grown in rich, humus-like soil. I also make sure my garden's pH level is between 5.5 and 6.8, which is ideal for growing most vegetables, leafy greens and herbs.

Now with my garden soil refreshed, I am ready to begin planning what I will be planting in mid-October. As I plan and select, I like to choose vegetables and greens for their color as well as flavor; yellow and ruby-stemmed chards, giant purple-red mustards, chartreuse and red oak-leaf lettuces are only a few of the wonderful selections. Herbs work wonderfully as fillers and edging choices in the kitchen garden. Since most are mainly foliage plants, their variety of leaf texture, plant structure, and color will help create dynamic interest in the garden.

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There is a wide variety of cool-season vegetables, leafy greens and flowers that can be grown from seed or transplants and that are available in your local garden center. The following are some tried and true favorites for the north Florida area. Varieties are given in parentheses: arugula, Bok Choy, chard ('Ruby', 'Bright Lights' and 'Perpetual Spinach'), curly endive; ('Tres Fine'), kale; ('Lacinata' and 'Red Russian'), mache ('Gayla'), minutina, mizuna, mustard ('Green Wave', 'Tendergreen' and 'Giant Red'), spinach, and Tat Soi. Now for some wonderful lettuce varieties: 'Black-Seeded Simpson', 'Brune d'Hiver', 'Buttercrunch', 'Deer Tongue', 'Four Seasons', 'Lollo Rossa', 'Red and Green Oakleaf', and 'Red Sails'. Many of these are available as single variety seed, or as part of a salad greens seed mix, or as transplants.

You may want to try succession planting, allowing you a bountiful harvest throughout the entire season. This technique for keeping a steady, garden fresh supply is done by continually seeding in flats or containers and then plugging the transplants into the empty holes left from harvested plants. Try adding earthworm castings, an effective organic fertilizer, and high in good bacteria, calcium and iron as well as N-P-K, to your seed-starting medium, or add to the planting soil at transplanting time. Seeds can be sown directly into the garden as well, either in rows or in small beds no more than 3' to 4' wide. This allows for manageable weeding and harvesting. You may also find, especially with salad greens, that they can be planted closer together than the recommended spacing. With their rapid growth rate they will grow quite nicely and choke out weeds at the same time.

It is essential to keep seed-beds and transplants evenly watered. Once established, it is time to begin a fertilizing regimen. Using an organic form of fertilizer of the proper form can provide a slow, steady release of nutrients. You might try a granular or pelletized, dehydrated, chicken litter-based fertilizer or a liquid concentrate that you mix with water. Try a mixture that I have had great luck with from the 'Victory Garden' folks. I mix 3 Tablespoons fish emulsion and 1 Tablespoon liquid seaweed to 1 gallon water and apply twice a month throughout the growing season. Fall and winter kitchen garden pests are few. You may find caterpillars on chards, cabbages, mustards and broccoli. These are easily and safely treated with *Bacillus thuringiensis*. Aphids can be treated easily and safely with insecticidal soap.

With good, sound garden preparation and minimal care, you too can enjoy a thriving, bountiful kitchen garden this fall and winter.

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