

Can't "Beet" a Fall Garden!



Photo is special to the Democrat: If you plant now you can enjoy a salad buffet from your garden this winter.

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Are you getting tired of tomatoes? Are you exhausted from battling pests, disease, heat and mosquitoes in your vegetable garden? Well relax and know that the battle is coming to an end. Now is the time to start your care-free and easy fall garden from seed. Fall gardens have less competition from weeds, insect pests and disease and grow beautifully without the maintenance required of summer gardens. With very little work you can plant a salad buffet that will produce plentiful fresh greens through the winter and into spring.

Lovely lettuces, colorful chard, bountiful broccoli and a kaleidoscope of kales! Mustards, arugula, carrots, spinach and beets! They are all ready and waiting to be direct seeded into your garden. Not to mention all the delicious Asian greens like tatsoi, bok choy and mizuna. Cold-hardy herbs like cilantro and dill are also awaiting your invitation.

Starting from seed is cheap, easy and fun. Success starts with the right seed selection. You can find fresh, healthy seed varieties that are tried and true for Tallahassee at your local nursery. If replanting an existing bed, I just add a few fresh inches of compost before I plant. You can start a new bed by following these easy steps:

1. Select a mostly sunny spot and plan out wide rows to plant, 2 to 3 feet wide for best yields, but not much wider for ease of harvesting.
2. Break up the soil with a garden fork or spade, removing sod and any existing plants and roots.
3. Prepare the soil. Add a few inches of homemade compost, mushroom compost or composted cow manure and mix with existing soil. You can also mix in some organic granular fertilizer such as Plant-tone that adds organic matter to the soil and supplies nutrients for the plants. Rake the bed out smooth before planting.

Now the fun begins! The easiest way to sow seeds in wide rows is by sprinkling or broadcasting them over the bed. This is an easy and carefree way to plant seed. A large bed can be effortlessly planted in a few minutes. For the most even distribution over the entire bed pass your hand over the area and scatter the seeds. It takes a little practice to get the hang of it.

Ideally the seeds will be about an inch apart. But don't worry if you get some unevenness. Just come back afterwards and redistribute by hand or just thin them out later as they grow. Once the seeds are sprinkled over the soil, tamp them down gently with the back of a hoe, spade or board. To germinate well, a seed needs close contact with moist soil.

The next step is covering the seeds with the right amount of soil. Small seeds like lettuce and carrots need just a sprinkling of soil to cover the seeds. Larger seeds like peas and beans need about an inch of soil. The basic rule for most seeds is to cover them with enough soil to equal three times their own diameter. Distribute loose compost over the tamped down bed, rake it evenly to the proper thickness and water well with a sprinkler. Keeping the seed bed moist will be especially important for the first few weeks or so.

As the seedlings emerge you will need to thin them out to allow room for them to grow and mature. Don't feel bad, those thinnings can go straight to your salad bowl! Lettuce, chard, kale, collards and other leafy green crops can be grown close together and thinned out periodically as you eat them, allowing the remaining plants to grow and mature. For heading crops like broccoli, cabbage and cauliflower, make sure to thin out any weak looking plants early, giving the healthy ones about ten inches of space to grow and mature.

Once established, begin a fertilization regime. I use a diluted fish and seaweed emulsion early on, and then I switch to Plant-tone. Keep on top of your gardens' watering needs and you will be rewarded with fresh greens to feast upon well into the spring. Enjoy your harvests!

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