

It's that time of year to harvest most of the crops we planted in the spring and summer and to put in or prepare some winter crops.

While you're harvesting don't forget to take your excess produce to our local food banks. They're located in every end of our county. Apples, potatoes, carrots, beets, all root crops, squash and beans are especially good to donate. Most of these grow abundantly, store well and we always have extras to share. The food banks will welcome any and all donations, however they're closed on weekends.

If you want to start some winter plants from seed remember that most seeds need soil temperatures in the 70 to 75 degree range to germinate. We're in luck because early September days usually heat our soil up and we get just the right amount of rain then too. Purchase seed varieties that germinate quickly (10 days or so) and reach maturity (or semi-maturity) within 60 days. Also check the temperatures for germination. Leafy crops often don't need heat to germinate and can be planted throughout the winter if it's mild. But most plants must be seeded and growing during the months of August through October. Remember too that many of our nurseries have starts available now. That saves you a planting step and will get them hardened off before winter sets in.

You'll have excellent success with Swiss chard. Try the bright lites varieties, they're colorful, decorative, delicious and grow for nearly forever. Actually they'll go to seed in May or June and old plants become bitter but you can plant Swiss chard nearly continuously and pull up the over-grown, over-mature plants. Brite lites Swiss chard also looks great growing among perennials in flower gardens. You'll also want to try small beets, radishes (numerous varieties), kale, spinach, lettuce, snow peas, mustard, garlic, onions and leeks. You'll harvest many of these crops in the early spring, but can eat the leafy plants all winter long. If you planted Brussels sprouts and carrots this spring remember that the flavors sweeten after our fall frosts, so don't be too quick to harvest.

The three best resources I've found to guide gardeners through the process of winter vegetable gardening are: Seattle Tilth's "The Maritime Northwest Garden Guide," "Winter Gardening in the Maritime Northwest" by Binda Colebrook, and "Growing Vegetables West of the Cascades" by Steve Solomon. Colebrook's and Solomon's books are published by Sasquatch. All are available at local bookstores and can be found at our local libraries. Seattle Tilth has a website at www.seattletilth.org. You'll be glad you visited the site.

Solomon's book takes a while to read and is extremely complete, however unless you're a speedy reader it might not get you growing veggies this year. Digest it during the winter and you can plan out your garden for the next twelve months using some of his ideas. His book is especially good for serious vegetable growers or for people wanting to grow produce to sell. One of the reasons I own this book is because Solomon provides really detailed and scientific explanations for how vegetables grow and can grow with a minimum of water. It's an excellent resource book.

Colebrook's book is extremely user-friendly and will inspire you to get planting this fall. You'll find information about organic gardening tips; leeks, garlic and onions; Bok choy in January; crops for continuous harvest; cold frames and cloches; fresh winter salads; and dealing with pests without pesticides. In fact the chapter about slugs, cabbage loopers, cabbageworms, maggots, carrot rust flies and aphids is titled "Sharecroppers." As you might be intuiting, I can't say enough good things about this book.

September is also the month to plant green manure crops. After you've harvested all your summer produce, rake up the garden beds and sprinkle on some green manure seeds. Green manure is the term for cover crops. Try crimson clover, rye, winter wheat, or a mixture of fava beans, crimson clover and rye. Make sure you're getting annual rye. Most feed stores and nurseries have barrels of these seeds and you scoop up the quantities you need and put them in a bag. You'll often find helpful information sheets about using cover crops. The seeds

germinate now and you'll till them into your garden in the spring as a source of nitrogen. Additionally you'll also inhibit the growth of weeds. Try it you'll like it.