

# HUME CITY COUNCIL GROWING WINTER VEGIES

While you might not feel like spending much time outside during the cooler, darker months of the year, winter in Victoria is actually one of the easiest times to grow vegies. Many of our common pests are dormant (or at least not breeding so fast!), there's less need to water and no heatwaves to wilt you and your plants. Some delicious vegies only grow in cold weather, while others get sweeter as they convert starches into sugars.

## Design for cold conditions

When the weather is cold you won't want to walk through long, wet grass or venture to the back of your garden - so keep your vegie patch as close to the kitchen as possible while still maintaining excellent sunlight. Protection from cold winds is important too. If your soil is clayey you may need to raise beds for better drainage. Mini greenhouses and cloches can also be used to warm up conditions for beds or individual plants.

Frost is rarely a problem in urban areas, but if it happens where you live, site your patch away from frost pockets, surround your patch with thermal mass (rocks, bricks, water tanks, pond), use geofabric to insulate, mulch heavily or grow frost-resistant vegies.

## It's all in the timing

One of the most important factors in growing winter vegies is planting them at the right time. Broccoli planted in late autumn may not be ready to harvest until spring, just when you need the bed clear for tomatoes! Cold weather dramatically slows growth, so if you want to harvest vegies to eat in winter you need to give them time to grow while the weather is still warm. Many vegies will need seeds planted in February and seedlings in March for harvest from May. The table overleaf provides a rough starting point but keeping a garden diary will help you refine timing in future years.

## Summer plants that stick around

Some of your summer vegies will continue to grow in colder weather – so don't pull them out! Capsicums and chillis will usually produce until mid winter, and some will overwinter and fruit even better the following year. Basil often produces until mid winter or frost, and celery, carrots, beetroot and silverbeet can be harvested until warmer weather arrives in spring.

## Preparing your soil

To grow strong, nutritious vegies you need healthy, nutrient-packed soil. Remove and compost previous plants (or simply cut them down and leave as mulch on the surface), gently aerate the soil using a garden fork and mix 1-2 inches of compost into the top few inches, and spread around existing plants. Heavy feeding winter vegies like brassicas (broccoli, cabbage, kale etc) will enjoy some extra nitrogen (eg. blood and bone, poultry manure – try a handful per m<sup>2</sup>) – but keep it away from seedling roots. Growing plants enjoy a boost from diluted seaweed extract or worm juice every 2-4 weeks.



## Meet the stars of your winter patch

Vegetable	When to sow seed	Punnets or direct?	Notes
Beetroot	November - February	Direct or Punnets	If sown in punnets, must be planted out very gently before second set of true leaves to avoid damage to roots. Use leaves as cooked greens.
Broccoli	January - February	Punnets	Sprouting varieties provide longer harvest and have tender leaves and stems for cooked greens. Purple varieties won't produce shoots until spring.
Brussel Sprouts	January - February	Punnets	Requires long growing season so must be planted in summer.
Cabbage	January - February	Punnets	Won't form heads if shaded so give an open, sunny position.
Carrots	August - March	Direct	Hard to get seed started in summer as seeds must be kept moist and at an even temperature, so I now plant for whole year in spring. Lay an old blanket over the seeds while germinating.
Cauliflower	January - February	Punnets	Requires long season – may not produce heads until spring but will grow rapidly when they finally appear!
Coriander	February - March	Direct	Much easier to grow in colder weather as it won't bolt to seed. Use roots too as these have a stronger flavour.
Daikon radish	March - April	Direct	Harvest leaves for salad or cooked greens, then later use mild, giant roots for cooking, pickling or grated fresh in salads.
Fennel	February - April	Direct or Punnets	Edible bulbs, leaves, stems, flowers, seeds, plus roots that taste like parsley/parsnip. Attracts beneficial insects when flowering.
Kale	January - February	Punnets	Leaves become sweeter after frost.
Leeks	August - January	Punnets	Take a very long time to reach edible size – perennial leeks are a better option. Chop green leaves finely and cook slightly longer.
Lettuce	February - March	Punnets	Less likely to bolt to seed in cooler weather, plant a few seeds every 2 months for a continuous supply.
Mache	March - May	Direct	A winter delicacy – small rosettes of leaves with gorgeous nutty flavour.
Mizuna	February - March	Direct	Fantastic, hardy salad green.
Mustard	February - March	Direct	Grows well in shade. Slice leaves finely in salad, or use cook to remove heat.
Parsnip	July - March	Direct	Seed must be very fresh to germinate well.
Peas/Snow Peas	February - April	Direct	Climbing peas can grow to 2m and need support structure. Better yield from varieties with edible pods.
Radicchio and Chicory	February - March	Punnets	Bitter greens for salads or cooking.
Radish	February - April	Direct	Quick crop – some varieties ready in 30 days. Use leaves as cooked greens.
Rocket	February - March	Direct	Less likely to bolt to seed in cooler weather, plant a few seeds every 2 months for a continuous supply.
Silverbeet	August - March	Punnets or direct	Will produce greens for a whole year if planted in spring and well fed.

## Notes

- If buying seedlings, add about 6-8 weeks to these sowing times for approximate planting time.
- Many of the 'weeds' in your winter garden have a long history of culinary use (eg. nettles, chickweed and dandelion) but be certain that you know how to identify them correctly.
- Winter is also a planting season for broad beans, onions and garlic that will be harvested in spring and summer.
- Don't forget perennial vegetables that can fill harvest gaps and reduce work: some examples for late autumn and winter harvest are chokos, wild rocket, sorrel, perennial leeks, Jerusalem artichokes.

## Do I need to water?

Over winter the rate of rainfall exceeds water lost through evapotranspiration and your soil should theoretically become wetter. However mulch, dense leaf cover, poor soil or a drier than normal winter can interfere. Wet leaves and mulch can be very misleading - the best gauge is to stick your finger into the soil about 10cm, and if it feels dry you should water.

## What about mulch?

Mulch in late autumn and winter can keep your soil warmer, and protect from compaction and erosion caused by heavy rain. Organic mulches like straw and leaves feed your vegies, worms and beneficial soil microorganisms as they break down. They may also harbor slugs and snails, and in early spring mulched soil warms up more slowly. I generally maintain a thin layer of mulch in winter, keeping it away from young seedlings until they are established and removing briefly in spring to sow seeds and allow soil to warm up.

## Take a break with green manures

If you don't want to grow winter vegies, or only want to use a section of your vegie beds, green manures are a great way to maintain and improve the condition of your soil while you take a break. Green manures protect soil from sun, rain, erosion and leaching and prevent weeds. They also provide a nutrient boost for your next crops by building organic matter and sometimes fixing nitrogen in the soil. Once sown you can leave a green manure crop to grow, then cut down and either dig in, or leave on the surface as mulch for the next season's crops. Generally you'll get the maximum soil fertility boost by cutting back when they begin to flower, but anytime is still good. Some examples of autumn and winter green manure plants are broad beans, vetch, winter wheat, oats and peas.

## Happy gardening!

### MORE INFO?

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