

Cool-Season Vegetables



When to Plant

Planting dates for cool-season vegetables depend on crop hardiness and days to maturity.

Hardy vegetables can be planted in the spring, four to six weeks before the average frost-free date above 32 F. **Half-hardy or frost-tolerant vegetables** can be planted two to three weeks before the frost-free date. Some fast-maturing vegetables can be planted in summer for a fall harvest. Growers can provide additional protection by planting one to two weeks later in the spring to avoid a late frost. In the fall, plant one to two weeks early for protection against an early frost. Cover plants to protect them if there is an early or late season frost.

Actual frost dates vary from year to year. Find details about locations across the state for spring and fall frost-free dates on the Illinois State Climatologist website: go.illinois.edu/FrostDatesIL.

Hardy vs. Half-Hardy Vegetables

Hardy vegetables can be planted in Illinois as soon as the ground can be worked. Typically, this occurs from early March to early April. A few vegetables can be planted again in mid-July to early September for a fall harvest.

Hardy Vegetables

Broccoli*	Kale*	Rutabaga*
Brussels	Kohlrabi*	Spinach*
Sprouts	Leek*	Turnip*
Cabbage*	Onion	
Garlic**	Pea	

*Can plant for fall harvest. **Best planted in fall.



Source: Master Gardener Sandy Cusack.

Half-hardy vegetables can typically be planted from late March to early May. These plants need soil temperatures above 40 F. for seeds to germinate. Most of these crops can be planted again in mid-July to early September. Potato and parsnip are the exception and are best planted in the spring.

Half-Hardy Vegetables

Beet	Cabbage	Potato
Carrot	Lettuce, leaf	Radish
Cauliflower	Mustard	Swiss Chard
Chinese	Parsnip	

Root Crops

Planting: Root crops need well-drained soil with plenty of organic matter. Directly sow seeds ¼-inch to ½-inch deep. Prepare a shallow trench and spread a pinch of seed along the row. Once seedlings are 1 to 2 inches tall, thin them to the correct spacing, typically 1 to 4 inches apart, depending on the vegetable.

Harvesting: Harvest by pulling the plants from the ground and trimming off the tops when necessary. Beet top greens can be eaten along with the sprouts that were thinned out.

Brassica Crops, Broccoli Family

Planting: Plant as transplants or by direct seeding. Transplants are preferred with many Brassica crops as they establish faster and mature earlier.

Harvesting: Follow the instructions on the seed packet or plant label to harvest these crops at the right time. Timing is essential because vegetables can easily become over-mature, for example when broccoli begins to flower. For broccoli, cabbage and cauliflower, harvest once head forms. For kale and collards, harvest the outer, mature leaves. This allows for continual harvest from summer to fall.



Leafy Greens

Planting: Direct seeding most leafy greens is more economical than transplants. Lettuce and Swiss chard can be transplanted, whereas spinach, mustard and turnip are best direct seeded. Consider succession planting in two- to three-week intervals for a more usable harvest spread out over a longer time period.

Harvesting: Most leafy greens are fast maturing. Leaves should be harvested when young and tender and can be harvested as baby leaves. Typically, lettuce and mustard are ready to harvest from seed in just 30 to 40 days. Harvest by cutting whole plant or harvest individual, outer leaves.

Vegetable Gardening Tips

- **Soil Health:** Prepare the soil well and fertilize as needed. Incorporate organic matter into the soil annually.
- **Choosing Plants:** Choose disease-resistant plants. Purchase fresh seed.
- **Planting from Seed:** Provide consistent moisture during germination period.
- **Post-planting:** Provide proper care and monitor for pests and disease.
- **Watering:** Water deeply, less frequently, at least 1 inch a week. Prevent moisture loss by mulching with disease-free shredded leaves or straw that is free of seed heads.
- **Follow good sanitation practices.**
- **After Harvest:** Clean up the garden at the end of the growing season. Consider planting a cover crop.

Learn More

Learn more about growing vegetables at extension.illinois.edu/gardening

Author

Nancy Kreith, Illinois Extension Horticulture Educator, kreith@illinois.edu, (708) 679-6889
Photos (unless otherwise noted) by Nancy Kreith.

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