

SUSTAINABLE LIVING GUIDE:

58. TEN TIPS FOR HARVESTING YOUR KITCHEN GARDEN¹

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I recently asked my father, an avid home gardener, for some advice for the fall harvest season. He responded, “Just harvest your crops.” It’s nice that he can distill over a quarter-century of experience into a simple truism. However, some of us need a little more advice than that. Here are ten useful tips for a successful fall harvest season:

1. Treat your tomatoes right. Remember that tomatoes like long, hot summers in order to ripen fully. If some of yours are not fully ripe by the colder days, one option is to place cloches over the plants until the fruits ripen. You can also harvest green tomatoes and store them with a banana peel until ripe, or use them in a recipe that calls for green tomatoes (chowchow anyone?).

2. Let your crops offer you seconds. Unlike some veggies, crops like chard and kale are happy to give you take-a-little-now-and-then produce more as cold-weather crops. This is also true of broccoli and cabbage—harvest the main florets of broccoli and the plant will grow additional, smaller florets on the sides. This is the cut-and-come-again method.

3. Make sure onions are ready to store. If the onions are close to maturity but you want to speed up the process, bend onion tops so the bulbs are exposed to as much sun as possible. When the tops become straw in color, loosen the soil under the bulbs and harvest about two weeks later. Generally, onions should be cured for a couple weeks before storing.

4. Share with friends. This means the labor and the bounty. Coming together to pick berries or harvest Brussels sprouts is fun and makes the work go faster. Also, your friends and neighbors will appreciate the fresh produce, and will most likely be inspired to start gardening themselves, if they’re not already.

5. But don’t share too much. There’s a joke that the only reason to lock your car doors in low-crime small towns in the late summer is to keep people from furtively filling your car with excess zucchini while you’re away. Few people appreciate a monster zucchini, not to mention a basket of them. But do be sure to harvest mature zucchini before the first frost.

6. Preserve the harvest. Harvest time is also preservation time. My favorite method of preservation is lacto-fermentation. It’s simple, inexpensive, doesn’t use any heat or electricity, and enhances the flavors and nutrition of your harvest. However, some crops do better with freezing, canning, or dehydrating.

7. Don’t waste. After a small farm harvest, I once saw a pile of cut beet leaves withering in the early fall sun, discarded from their beetroot bases. What a waste! Beet leaves can be prepared or preserved exactly the same as chard and taste similar. The same goes for kohlrabi leaves which are similar to kale.

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8. Eat your weeds. Many of the “weeds” that afflict gardeners are actually tasty, nutritious greens. Here in California, wild mustard and wild radish, both robust growers and members of the brassica family, love to move in on disturbed soil—call them volunteer crops. In the Northeast, lambsquarter is a particularly tasty “unwelcome” guest. If you want to increase your fall harvest, see if you can eat your weeds.

9. Remember to rotate your crops. Make a note of which crops were in which rows, and rotate crops at the next planting season to boost the quality of your soil and the resistance of your garden to pests. For instance, beans are nitrogen fixers so it’s a good idea to follow them with a non-nitrogen fixing crop.

10. After the harvest, apply a green mulch. Harvest time is the time to think about soil improvement for the next growing season. Sow cover crops like vetch, clover, or rye (or others). This will preserve your topsoil from wind and rain while fixing nitrogen and adding organic matter at the same time, preserving and enriching your soil for the next round of crops.