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County Agent's Notes: The Fall Garden - August 14, 2000

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The Fall Garden:

By: Dr. Ernie Flint, Area Agent/Agriculture

Many local gardeners have experienced a lot of frustration with their summer gardens, mainly because of the hot and dry weather. For you die-hard gardeners who never give up, this is the time to start preparing for and planting your fall garden. Bush snap beans, beets, broccoli, carrots, cabbage, cauliflower, collards, kale, kohlrabi, lettuce, mustard, onions, radishes, spinach, turnips, rutabagas, and other fall/winter crops should be planted between the last week of October and the middle of September for best results.

Fall gardening is about the only way to have fresh vegetables until the colder winter months. For many of us the fall garden is a continuation of the summer garden. Tomatoes, okra, pepper, eggplant, and even pole butterbeans can produce well into the fall if plants are cared for and fruit is harvested regularly. To keep these crops producing, control insects and diseases, provide supplemental water during dry periods, and apply additional fertilizers. Don't allow your garden to grow up in grass and weeds. The additional effort will pay off by allowing you to harvest fresh vegetables well into November in most years, and just think of all the great exercise you will get.

Most cool-season vegetables normally planted in spring will grow and produce even better in the fall because they mature during cooler weather rather than during hot weather as they do when planted in spring. Maturing while night temperatures are cooler allows plants to

store more sugar and other carbohydrates in the fruit and leaves rather than burning them up trying to stay cool. The only negative factor is that very rarely we have an early frost that terminates some crops.

For leafy crops in particular, the first few weeks after emergence may be challenging because of increased activity by insects. Some type of insect control will usually be required, but it does not have to be perfect since the bulk of the crop will be produced after frost when insects have become inactive. About all you have to do is to keep them at bay so plants will be alive to grow later. Insect activity should begin to diminish in October, and you will have several weeks of good growth from these crops. Depending on where you live in the area, the normal freeze date may range from October 27 to November 7.

Even if you do not plan to have a full-fledged fall garden, a good practice is to rework the garden in the fall in preparation for spring seeded crops. Take soil samples prior to tilling, then add lime and fertilizers according to the laboratory recommendations and work these materials into the soil. After reworking the soil, plant a winter cover of wheat or oats to hold the soil in place during the winter. This cover crop will also add organic matter to the soil and keep vital microorganisms active during winter months. Very early in the spring, cover crop should be killed with Roundup which is very safe and does not have residual effects on crops. The killed vegetation left on the surface will act as a mulch, discouraging the early growth of weeds.

Another fall garden activity is the accumulation of compost for use next year. A simple net wire enclosure from 8 to 10 feet in diameter is great for a place to throw in leaves, garden refuse, grass clippings, and other organic materials. Don't include materials with large amounts of fat in them because this will disrupt the process of decomposition that is needed to form good compost. Keep some nitrogen fertilizer handy and sprinkle a cupful over freshly added

materials. By next spring you will have a great pile of compost for use in growing crops like tomatoes, and for mulching around other plants. This stuff is great for incorporating into the soil as a way of building the organic matter level that is so vital to growing good garden crops. Composting can be a much more complicated process, but for most people a simple pile is the best way; if you want to get more into it, we have information on the subject.

A fall garden is not just something to keep you busy; it is a great source of healthy food for your family. In a way I was kidding before about the exercise you get, but this is a very important part of the mix, and for most of the period the weather will be much cooler than the last few weeks have been. Rather than allowing your garden plot to grow up in weeds, keep it active, and keep good vegetables on your table. Call if we can help.