



Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

Looking ahead to fall.

I arrived in Davis to go to college on a hot, dry, dusty day in late September in the 1970s. The air was full of smoke, and the farmers were harvesting alfalfa and tomatoes with their distinctive fetid smells. Some things don't change much, although in those days it was the rice farmers who were filling the valley with smoke. Even to this seasonless Southern Californian, it sure didn't feel like fall.

Gardeners new to the Sacramento Valley are often perplexed by our early autumn weather here. Days still in the 90s are common. Significant rain is rare before November, and leaves don't turn color until later in that month.

Something else that is new to beginning and newly arrived gardeners here, especially those from cold-winter garden zones, is that we have two full gardening seasons, each with its own crops and planting schedule. Our winter weather is perfect for many vegetables and flowers that prefer the cool days, and despite frequent light frosts, we don't get cold enough to harm them.

Ok, about that summer vegetable garden.

This was a hot summer.

How hot was it? We had five heat waves between the end of May and early September, and another as we enter October. Compare that with two each in 2018 and 2019.

We hit 101F in late May, 100+ twice in July, and then the main scorcher August 8 – 19 when we exceeded 108F two days in a row and were above 100 degrees six other days. And if that wasn't enough, we got to 107 again in early September.

The episodes of extreme heat, not to mention the soot and ash from the fires, definitely affected the growth and yield of our favorite summer edibles. Many people reported poor harvest from tomatoes, sun scald on peppers, lack of pollination of beans, issues with apricots and peaches damaged by direct heat on the fruit as they were ripening, apples dropping before they were ripe, citrus fruit splitting, and more.

Bottom line: if this was your first summer growing vegetables here, don't get disillusioned if you didn't have great results. This wasn't typical.

What was going on?

When temperatures are in the 90's and above, tomato flowers don't pollinate (the pollen tubes fail) and the blossoms just drop off. Many of the popular heirloom tomatoes are not as well acclimated to our summer temperatures as are hybrids, and some gave few or even no fruit. Hybrid tomatoes generally did better, but still didn't meet our usual harvest expectations. The same principle affects beans.

Run your system longer or more often when it's hot.



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Unfortunately, a lot of gardeners simply weren't watering their vegetable gardens deeply enough or, in the case of raised planters, often enough.

The advent of modern drip systems has led to an increasing number of gardens where plants are kept in near-drought conditions. Drip systems are great in that they water very efficiently, with little evaporation, and the slow rate of flow allows infiltration into denser soils. But that low rate of output means they have to run for a long time to water the soil to a sufficient depth and allow roots to grow more deeply. Plants that are stressed during a heat wave are even less likely to set and hold fruit. The combination of high temperatures and insufficient irrigation led to poor yields for many gardeners.

When I see that the weather service is predicting unusually hot weather for a period of several days, I run all of my irrigation systems sufficiently to provide about a week's worth of water all at once. Then I can use my judgment about when to water again, comfortable that there is extra moisture in the root zone for the plants to draw on if it gets extra hot, or, even more important, windy (plants dry out and use more water when it's windy). Those deep soakings kept my tomatoes growing well, and they flowered and set fruit enough during our cooler spells to give an adequate yield.

You can't water deeply with raised planters. Since they're usually filled with fast-draining soil, the water moves down and out of the root zone rapidly. So during an unusually hot or windy week, you may need to add an irrigation cycle or two.

What to plant now?

One of the great things about gardening in the face of one season's adversity is that there's always another season. And that begins right away here.

Right now in the vegetable garden we plant:

- Brassicas: broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower (including Romanesco), collards, kohlrabi, mustard greens, pak choi.
- Legumes: peas, including snow peas and snap peas, and fava beans.
- Leafy greens: corn salad, endive, kale, lettuce, radicchio, spinach, swiss chard, and spinach.
- Root vegetables: carrots, radishes, turnips.
- Garlic and shallots, and in early November we'll be planting onions.
- And for those of you who like it, this is a great time to plant cilantro.

Areas of the garden that aren't in use for those listed above can be planted with cover crops: fava beans, annual ryegrass, clover, and vetch are planted from seed now and grow to suppress weeds, add organic matter to the soil, and fix nitrogen from the atmosphere into the root zone.

Some frequently asked questions about fall-planted vegetables.

Is it ok to plant while it's still warm and dry?



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Yes. The young plants will adjust very rapidly, and so long as watering is consistent they will begin growth right away.

Do they need special soil or fertilizer?

No. None of our winter vegetables have special requirements. Adding some new compost on the surface around the plants, preferably containing an organic source of nitrogen, will enrich the soil sufficiently. For an added boost, fish emulsion or any soluble plant food can help young seedlings get growing faster.

How often do you water the new plants?

Check daily, water as needed. When you first plant out the seedlings, they may need water each day for about a week. As they adjust and their roots grow, you can water longer and less often. Once the rainy season begins you can stop watering unless there are long intervals without rainfall. Plants in raised beds or containers should be checked if we go a week without rain or overcast.

Any special pests to watch out for?

Aphids and caterpillars are common on members of the cabbage family (the brassicas). Aphids can be blasted off with water, and the caterpillars can be hand-picked or sprayed with organic BT sprays. Both pests diminish as the nights get colder. White-crowned sparrows can wreak havoc on young beds of seedlings. If you see them doing damage, consider putting bird netting over the young plants.

When can you start to harvest?

Leafy greens can be picked almost immediately. With lettuce, arugula, spinach, Swiss chard, etc., you can pick leaves any time you want, and the plant keeps growing all winter. Side shoots of broccoli and broccoli raab can be harvested starting several weeks after planting and all the way into spring. Root vegetables are likely to develop in late winter.

They aren't harmed by freezing weather?

Nope. We get a number of light frosts each winter, but rarely get below 28 – 29 degrees F. Even when nights dip down into the mid-20s, they'll be fine. Major freeze events in 1990 and 1998 did damage peas and the leaves of lettuce. Even those cold episodes didn't hurt the brassicas. In fact, light frosts improve the flavor of many winter vegetables. The starches in the roots and leaves turn to sugar and they become sweeter.

When is it too late to plant?

That varies by crop. You can keep planting leafy greens and sprouting broccoli right through the winter. Peas can be planted directly into the garden by seed through October. As the nights get colder, you can still plant them – just pre-germinate them indoors, or transplant seedlings from nursery packs. Many cool-season vegetables can be planted again in February for late winter and early spring harvest.



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When do we plant onions and potatoes?

From seedlings in nursery packs in October, or (much easier) from bareroot plants in the first couple of weeks of November.

What's super easy? Ok, novice gardeners: try lettuce, swiss chard, broccolini, and radishes.

Flowers for the cool season

Just as with winter vegetables, there are easy annual flowers that grow and bloom in winter and spring that we can plant now.

Some are familiar, such as pansies and violas, paludosum daisy, snapdragons, stock, and cyclamen. These will bloom right away and keep flowering all through the winter and spring. Ornamental cabbage and kale have bright leaves whose color intensifies with colder weather.

Some others to consider:

Sweet peas are kind of old-fashioned and less commonly planted nowadays, but worth revisiting for their special fragrance. Now is the best time to plant them. Give them a short trellis or section of fence. They make very lightweight vines that begin blooming in February and continue until we get hot in May.

Poppies are planted in fall for late winter and spring bloom. California poppies are best direct seeded where they are going to grow, and it's important not to cover the seed as it needs light to germinate. In fact, the easiest way to grow California poppies is to scatter the seed on bare soil areas just before a rainstorm.

Iceland poppies can be transplanted from nursery packs now for winter and spring bloom. Others such as Danish flag, breadseed, or Shirley poppies can be grown readily from seed. Just be aware that the seedlings are fragile and need to be transplanted with care. All of the different types of poppies are very attractive to bees.

Winter flowers mostly need full sun. Cyclamen are an exception that will bloom in partial shade. In fact, cyclamen flowers look best if they are kept out of the rain as their petals can mildew and rot if they are wet for extended periods of time. Cyclamen can be great choices for a planter near the front door, under an overhang.

What winter flowers are easy? Johnny Jump-ups, paludosum daisies, dwarf snapdragons.

Fall is almost here. Let the change in weather guide you toward a whole new season in the garden!



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_Fall%20planting/broccoli%20raised%20bed.jpg

Broccolis is the most popular of the brassicas (aka cole crops) that we grow in the winter. Farmers look for varieties with big, uniform heads. Home gardeners like varieties that make more side shoots for longer harvest, such as De Cicco, or types with tender stems for stir fry such as Artwork. If space is tight, plant Green Magic which allows closer spacing.



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_Fall%20planting/Swiss%20Chard.jpg

Swiss chard is one of the easiest vegetables to grow! Plant any time and harvest the leaves nearly year-around, but they are more tender and flavorful in winter.



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_Fall%20planting/Snapdragons%20in%20May.jpg

Flowers for winter and spring: snapdragons are easy-to-grow flowers that bloom from February through May. Plant any time September through February for bloom in late winter and spring. New dwarf types will bloom even into the summer.



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[http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_Fall%20planting/snapdragons%20semidwarf%20yellow.jp](http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_Fall%20planting/snapdragons%20semidwarf%20yellow.jpg)
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Snapdragons are easy-to-grow flowers for winter and spring bloom. Plant any time September through February for bloom in late winter and spring. New dwarf types will bloom even into the summer.



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_Fall%20planting/Sweet%20peas%20at%20dusk.jpg

Flowers for winter and spring: sweet peas are old-fashioned favorites that have wonderful fragrance. They are best planted in October for bloom February through April, even into May. Give them a light trellis to scramble upon, or plant against a fence.



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_Fall%20planting/poppy%20California.jpg

It's time to plant California poppies! Scatter the seed on bare soil in a sunny location, and don't cover the seed. Water daily until it rains, or just scatter seeds right before a rainstorm.



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California poppies bloom in winter and spring, and can grow as perennials for two to three years. They also reseed very readily.



http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_Fall%20planting/California%20poppy%20Mikado.jpg

It's time to plant California poppies! Most people plant the regular species, but there are some 'strains' or varieties you can plant that have different flower colors. This one is Mikado, with petals lightly striped with red.

Scatter poppy seeds on bare soil in a sunny location, and don't cover the seed. Water daily until it rains, or just scatter seeds right before a rainstorm. California poppies bloom in winter and spring, and can grow as perennials for two to three years. They also reseed very readily.



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_Fall%20planting/Poppy%20Danish%20Flag%20with%20bees.JPG

Bees like poppies! This is the Danish Flag poppy. Planted from seed in October, it blooms in spring.