

PLANT SPINACH FOR OVERWINTERING / BUILD A COMPOST PILE / CAULIFLOWER

TO DO THIS MONTH –

PLANT SPINACH

- Spinach by nature is a winter annual - meaning most varieties prefers to germinate in the fall, go dormant through the winter, and then begin growing in early spring.
- Plant no later than 6 weeks before the Persephone period (when day length falls to less than 10 hours per day) Varies with latitude: Munising - Nov. 2, Cadillac Nov. 5 (plant by September 24), Decatur, Ill - Nov. 14
- Bloomsdale and Tye are two of the many varieties adapted to over-wintering
- Best germination happens when **SOIL** temperatures are about 70 degrees
- On sandy soils, it helps germination if you soak the seeds for 8 hours prior to planting
- If you want large spinach leaves for cooking, space plants so that you have one up to four plants per square foot (think about the size of a head of lettuce)
- If you want baby spinach for salads, plant much closer and harvest this fall.
- Over-wintered spinach should be protected with some kind of mulch.

BUILD A COMPOST PILE

- Compost piles can be a great way to recycle plant residues – leaves, garden plants, kitchen scraps
- Things to NOT put in a pile - diseased plants, meat scraps
- Alternate layers of “greens” (high nitrogen) and “browns” (high carbon)
- Ideally three compartments:
 1. Building
 2. Decaying
 3. Using
- Piles need to have some air in them, and be slightly moist (like a wrung-out sponge)
- Can use wire or board fencing, or straw bales to separate compartments
- Ideal size is about 4 feet square
- Efforts such as turning will speed up decomposition, but it's not absolutely necessary

IN THE KNOW – TAKING CARE OF POLLINATORS

Fall is a critical time for pollinators. Two basic needs – diversity of plants for nectar and pollen and egg-laying or nesting sites.

PROVIDE FOOD SOURCES FOR POLLINATORS

- Cultivated plants: sunflowers, fall-bearing raspberries, broccoli and annual herbs that are allowed to flower
- Native plants: goldenrod, asters, black-eyed Susans, coneflowers

PROVIDE OVER-WINTER HABITAT

- Consider leaving some plants standing that have hollow stalks such as sunflowers, elderberry, and sumac
- Although normally we want to keep the soil covered, small patches of bare soil are needed by ground nesting (solitary bees) for them to build their nests

CROP OF THE MONTH – CAULIFLOWER

Cauliflower is great roasted, in soups and curries, and as a potato substitute

TYPES OF CAULIFLOWER

- Many varieties are available now – white, green, orange, purple, and Romanesco. The colored varieties have a slightly milder taste.
- An interesting, but tricky to grow type is the “Romanesco” type. These types are green, spiraled, and pointy. Best suited for harvesting in the fall. The design is a fractal (repeating patterns that get larger in size, like triangles)

HOW TO GROW CAULIFLOWER

- In general, cauliflower grows best when there is consistent moisture, high fertility, and not a lot of summer heat. Which means most varieties do best when harvested in either early summer or in autumn.
- There are both short and long season crops that tolerate different amounts of heat and cold. Pick varieties based on when you want to harvest them.
- Usually cauliflower is started indoors as a seedling, and then transplanted when the seedlings are 4 to 6 weeks old.
- Outside temperatures should be consistently above 50 degrees before transplanting, or tiny “button” heads will form.
- White varieties should have some of their leaves tied up over the head as it’s maturing in order to blanch it. Gather some of the leaves over the top of the head while the heads are still small, and secure the ends of the leaves with a rubber band or twine.
- Harvest before the curds become loose or “rice-y”

A Guide to Winter Harvest Crops & Overwintering for Spring Harvest

Introduction to Winter Growing

The key to scheduling your plantings is to identify when your winter days reach less than 10 hours in length.

Here at Johnny's Research Farm in Albion, Maine, the Persephone Period begins on November 5th or 6th.

Persephone Period

When temperatures and day length drop, your harvest season need not come to a full stop. As more growers construct high tunnels on their farms and participate in winter markets, we are frequently asked, "*What can I plant to harvest in winter, and when should I plant it?*"

To begin, it is helpful to distinguish between the two main winter growing strategies. The first group you harvest in winter, the second group you leave in place over the winter to produce an early spring crop.

- **Winter Harvest Crops** are planted in late summer or early fall, primarily in high tunnels, for harvest throughout the winter.
- **Overwintered Crops** are planted in the fall or winter, often outside in the field or under low tunnels, and left in place for the earliest possible spring harvest.

There is plenty of flexibility and overlap in the methods employed, including a combination of both strategies together.

Producing marketable crops in winter requires learning the correct planting window times for your location. Use the following guidelines while adjusting the techniques and timing to fit your practice. Remember to keep records, to determine what works best and improve upon your successes.



Scheduling Guidelines for Planting the Winter High Tunnel

Ten hours of day light

Use our clickable [Winter Harvest Planting Chart](#) as a guide, staggering your plantings for a seamless winter harvest.

The key to scheduling your plantings is to identify when your winter days reach less than 10 hours in length. It is during this darkest time of the year — referred to by Eliot Coleman as the "Persephone period" — that plant growth essentially stops. (You can obtain exact dates for your location using an app or website such as [Rise](#) or [SunriseSunset](#).)

The goal is to seed your plants so they are at least 75% mature by the time the Persephone period begins.

Though plants may not grow appreciably thereafter, they can be harvested as needed while their maturity holds.

Careful scheduling allows you to control growth incrementally by planting at least two or three sowings at 7- to 10-day intervals. This will allow for crops to mature at different times and provide a longer harvest period. With well-timed, staggered plantings you can create a smooth transition from one harvest to the next for a steady supply through the winter. Multiple seedings also help you identify the best seeding dates for specific crops, and spread out the risk of crop failure due to unfavorable weather conditions.

Two neat tricks to get plants ready for the darkest days in high or low tunnels

- Transplant crops like spinach that are normally direct-seeded. Start the plants elsewhere and grow them to transplant size before planting them in your high tunnel, after your summer-producing crops have been removed.
- Establish hardy crops outside in late summer, then place a moveable tunnel over them, or construct a caterpillar tunnel over the crop as winter threatens.

Squeeze in even one more crop

In late winter, before you have harvested your winter crops, anticipate open bed space and what could be planted once the bed is available. As the end of the Persephone period draws near, you can reseed or transplant the openings. These winter sowings will be ready for harvest by early spring, often long before the same crop when grown outside.

