

HOW TO... GROW IN CONTAINERS IN AUTUMN AND WINTER



Why grow in winter?

- Enjoy freshly picked food all year round. Yields are smaller in winter, but the flavour of leaves is often at its best.
- Adds colour to your containers and the street (empty containers at the front of your house can look a bit sad).
- Helps to maintain soil quality over winter.
- Fewer slugs and other pests.

Tips for successful winter growing



Although called 'winter growing' you'll get your biggest harvests in early spring - March and April – when your plants will grow faster as days lengthen. You also should be able to pick a few tasty leaves in late autumn and throughout the winter.

How well winter crops grow will depend on how cold the winter is (a very cold winter may even kill some), how exposed your growing site is (plants never like wind), and how much protection you can give them. In my experience, over the last three winters in Newcastle, they have grown well.

Container crops in February: cavolo nero, mooli, red giant, Chinese cabbage

Here are some tips for success

1. Sow crops early enough

- Most 'winter' crops need sowing in August or September in the Northern hemisphere – so they are well established before the cold weather.
- Slow growing crops like cavolo nero and chard are better sown in August.
- Fast growing crops like pea or bean shoots or rocket can be started a little later – late September for rocket, October for pea or fava bean shoots.

2. Select the right crops

Good winter crops (that will grow through winter and into spring) for containers include

- Chard
- Kale. Cavolo nero and Red Russian are tasty and pretty varieties.
- Mooli (long white radishes – edible root and leaves)
- Spinach
- Rocket

- Landcress
- Lettuce – winter varieties
- Chicory / radicchio
- The mustards – like pak choi, red giant, Chinese cabbage
- Komatsuna – a fast growing oriental version of spinach
- Winter purslane
- Lambs lettuce
- Sorrel
- Coriander (this is the best time to grow coriander in the UK)

Fast growing winter crops (these are usually ready to eat and harvested in four to eight weeks, depending on how cold it is) include

- Pea shoots
- Bean shoots

3. Containers

You can grow winter leaves in both smaller (eg window box size) and larger containers. Larger containers have the advantage in cold winters that they will be less likely to freeze.

4. Provide protection



Depending on how exposed your growing space is, many winter crops will survive without protection (I haven't protected mine for the last three winters in Newcastle). However, if you can offer some protection your plants will

- grow a little faster.
- survive better if the winter is very cold.

You can make cloches out of transparent plastic or horticultural fleece supported by hula hoops, plumbers piping or old coat hangers. Large, upturned empty plastic bottles can also be used – simply cut the top off.

A cloche made out of a hula hoop (cut in half) and plastic sheeting.

5. Remember to water

When it's cold it can be easy to overlook watering. Most containers do still need watering regularly throughout the winter, particularly in dry winters like 2014. Check by putting your finger 3 -4 inches into the compost – it should be damp (not wet). Water on warmer days (never on frozen ground) if possible, and try not to water just before a heavy frost - the water could freeze in the container, damaging the roots.

6. Harvesting

Let your winter crops get well established and then pick off a few of the outer leaves of each plant in the late autumn, leaving the rest to regrow.

During the middle of winter (December and January) growth will slow and even stop – only harvest a few leaves during these months so that enough of the plant is left to regrow when the weather starts to warm and days get longer.

Most winter crops will put on a growth spurt in early spring, giving your harvests a boost in March.

Happy winter growing!