

## Vegetable Gardening Tasks for December (published 12/07/2024)

By Earl Hockin, Master Gardener

Harvest any remaining fall cool-season crops. Lettuce, chard, and beets can be less cold hardy than kale and spinach in some areas.

Take stock of the completed gardening season and make sure you have good records of problems encountered and control practices that worked well.

Use the information from the completed season and rotation guidelines to plan for next year. Many pathogens infect related plants, so rotation ensures the same families are not planted in an area too often. Rotation is most effective against pathogens that survive in soil or on crop remains for a short period of time. It is recommended to rotate away from a crop family for 3 years, which is called a 4-year rotation. Check out the UT Extension publication W 316 Home Vegetable Garden Disease Control. The link is provided at the end of the article.

Cleanup your garden beds. In vegetable beds you should remove healthy plants and plant debris to be composted. However, any plants or debris showing signs of disease or pests should be removed, bagged, and disposed of in your garbage.

It is too late to start a cover crop, so the next best choice is to mulch with chopped leaves, straw, wood chips, saw dust, dried grass clippings or even shredded paper covered with cardboard to hold the paper in place till it breaks down. This will add organic material to the soil and reduce the infestation of weeds. This is also a good time to add a layer of compost to your beds, working it into the top few inches of soil and then covering with an organic mulch.

This is the time to check out what seeds you still have and their dates of origin. While it may seem early, December can be a great time to order seeds for your 2025 garden, especially those for varieties you plan to grow as transplants beginning in January through-March. If you keep your seeds in a cold location such as the refrigerator or even in a freezer in an air tight container, they will last much longer than if kept in warmer locations. Some seeds such as tomato seeds will last a surprising long time, up to 20 years. You can check out the viability of seeds by placing 10 of them between a layer of dampened paper towels and then putting the towel in a plastic bag that has some openings to allow air in. If kept a room temperature the seeds will begin germinating in less than two weeks. Once you see what percentage of the seeds germinate you can then decide if you need to buy some new seeds of the variety. When ordering seeds, it is preferable that you order from organically grown sources as they will be the result of plants that can grow without a lot of chemical bactericides, fungicides, or pesticides.

Cover cool season vegetables with low tunnels of row cover. Many varieties will survive to 20F or even colder. Plants like kale, cabbage, broccoli, and Brussel sprouts are made sweeter by frost so harvest them as late as possible. Varieties of spinach, chard, Chinese cabbage and winter varieties of lettuce also will survive low temperatures if protected by row cover. Root crops such as beets, carrots, and turnips will survive if covered with straw mulch. After being exposed to below freezing temperatures these root crops will taste sweeter.

Winter months are a great time for enjoying microgreens for salads and sandwich greens. Growing microgreens is a way to reduce the amount of money you might spend buying lettuce or other salad ingredients at the grocery store. Many different seed companies sell microgreen seeds for home production. You can grow the microgreens typically at room temperature in clear plastic containers in which you may have previously purchased groceries. You can also purchase trays that are produced specifically for growing microgreens hydroponically.

## Resources

“Home Vegetable Garden Disease Control,”

<https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2023/10/W316.pdf>

“Grow Microgreens at Home,”

<https://extension.purdue.edu/news/county/allen/2022/02/grow-microgreens-at-home.html>

“The Tennessee Vegetable Garden Small-Scale Microgreen Production,”

<https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2023/10/W346-J.pdf>

“Saving Vegetable Seeds,”

<https://extension.umn.edu/planting-and-growing-guides/saving-vegetable-seeds>

“Storing Vegetable and Flower Seeds – 7.221,”

<https://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/yard-garden/storing-vegetable-and-flower-seeds-7-221/>

For more information about gardening, visit UTHORT’s YouTube site for helpful videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IklH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ>

Or Washington County’s YouTube site: <https://www.youtube.com/@utextensionwashingtoncounty>

### **How do I ask a question?**

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at [www.netmga.net](http://www.netmga.net). Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

*The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.*