

The Mid-Summer Reset: Planting Your Second Spring (published 2026-07-25)
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As July heat settles into the ridges of Washington County, most gardeners start thinking about pulling up stakes and waiting for next year. The early peas are long gone, the lettuce has bolted into bitter stalks, and the squash bugs have likely claimed a few victims. It is easy to look at a weed-choked patch and decide the season is over. However, in our part of Northeast Tennessee, we are entering a second window of opportunity. Because our first killing frost typically doesn't arrive until late October, August is the perfect time for a garden reset.

Clearing the Deck

Before you can plant again, you have to be honest about what is currently taking up space. Many gardeners hold onto a single, struggling tomato plant or a row of woody beans out of a sense of loyalty. If a plant is no longer productive or is covered in powdery mildew, pull it. Removing these spent plants does more than just clear space. It removes the habitat for pests that would love to migrate onto your new fall seedlings.

Once the old plants are gone, do not just poke a new seed into the dry hole. Summer crops are heavy feeders. They have spent the last three months mining nitrogen and potassium from your soil. Take a morning to spread an inch of finished compost over the bed and broad fork it in. You aren't looking to deep-till the earth, which can dry out the soil further. You just want to break the surface crust so that water and air can reach the roots of your next crop.

The Fall Heavy-Hitters

To keep this manageable, focus on three reliable vegetables that thrive in the cooling temperatures of September and October: carrots, kale, and snap peas.

Carrots are a staple of the fall garden because they taste better after a frost. When the temperature drops, the plant converts starches into sugars to act as a natural antifreeze. For a fall harvest, sow your seeds by the first week of August. The biggest challenge here is germination. August soil in Zone 7 can be 80 degrees or hotter, which is tough on tiny seeds. To get them started, cover the seedbed with a piece of burlap or a board for the first five days to keep the soil cool and moist.

Kale is nearly indestructible in our climate. While summer heat makes kale tough and unpleasantly pungent, the shorter days of autumn produce tender, sweet leaves. You can transplant starts or direct-sow seeds in mid-August. If you plant 'Lacinato' or 'Curly' varieties, they will often survive well into December, providing fresh greens long after your peppers have turned to mush.

Sugar snap peas are the final piece of the reset. Most people plant these in March, but they often succumb to the sudden heat of June before they finish producing. Planting them in late August allows them to grow as the days get shorter and cooler. They enjoy the damp mountain mornings we get in the fall. Just make sure you have a small trellis or some poultry netting ready, as they will still want to climb.

Managing the Heat Gap

The trick to a successful fall garden is helping your plants survive the first three weeks of life. You are asking cool-weather plants to grow during the hottest part of the year. One effective strategy is to use "nurse shade." If you have tall okra plants or a few sunflowers still standing, plant your new kale or carrots on the eastern side of them. This gives the new seedlings a break from the harsh afternoon sun while they establish their root systems.

Watering is the other non-negotiable factor. A quick sprinkle with a hose won't cut it in August. You need to soak the soil deeply in the early morning. This ensures the moisture gets down to the root zone before the midday sun evaporates it. If you can keep the top inch of soil moist for the first ten days, your "Second Spring" will take hold.

Timing the Frost

In Northeast Tennessee, we generally have about 70 to 80 growing days left starting in August. When you buy seed packets, look at the "Days to Maturity" number. If a variety of carrot takes 75 days, you need to get it in the ground now. By putting in a little work while the thermometer is still high, you can extend your grocery savings and keep fresh food on your table until Thanksgiving.

Resources

"2026 Tennessee Home Fruit and Vegetable Gardening Calendar,"

https://solutions.tennessee.edu/?view_pub_pdf=3040

"USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map," <https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov>

"The Tennessee Vegetable Garden," <https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2023/10/W346-B.pdf>

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