

Beyond kale and glasshouses

For Canadian gardeners, extending the growing season is a big deal. When you only get a few weeks of beefsteak tomatoes before the frost kills your hard-won crop, even a few more days can make a difference. Growing well into the fall is a luxury that only happens during a few lucky years. There are plenty of stories of expert gardeners who bring melons to perfection just before Christmas, but the effort, expense and planning required for such feats are only worthwhile when they can win a show prize, or the grudging admiration of green-thumbed rivals. Otherwise, it's so much easier and cheaper to pay for imported produce. What's a grower to do?

Traditional season extension relies on two principles: grow crops that withstand early spring or late fall frosts, and create your own sheltered microclimate to keep your crop from freezing. There are just two problems: by and large, people have lost (or never really had) their love of turnips, parsnips and kale, and most of us don't have enough greenhouse and cold frame space, and never will.

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Keep them longer

We're constantly looking for more ways to stretch the precious Canadian growing season. One trick is to grow some varieties that store well beyond the end of the season. There are several varieties of tomatoes that have been bred for storage, though not all have been selected for the best flavour. Longkeeper is one that's better for the gardener than others, intended to be picked green and stored until it ripens off the vine. Any tomato with even a slight pink blush will ripen after it's picked, so most gardeners know to harvest those before a hard frost, and keep them indoors for several weeks until they turn red (or whatever colour they're supposed to turn). Unfortunately, they never really ripen, because they're separated from the mother plant, and can't gain the essential nutrients that they need for real tomato flavour.

Longkeeper is special because it ripens on the inside first, sometimes turning deep pink in the center when it's still green on the surface. The result is that the tomato is able to ripen in the center, but still store well for weeks while the outer flesh turns from green to pink. They don't rival fresh summer tomatoes for flavour, but in November, they're probably the best local, non-hothouse tomatoes that you can put on your table.



Fruits with high sugar content tend to keep well too. Try ground cherries, a sweeter, smaller relative of tomatillos, which form blueberry-sized yellow fruits inside papery husks. When the husk falls to the ground, the fruit inside is ripe. And it's delicious, very sweet, with an indefinable but delightful fruity flavour. Use them any way you'd use blueberries. Though they normally ripen in August, they store for months in a dry cooler, or even in the open air, because their sugar content prevents spoilage. We've even tried to make them spoil (to get the seeds out) and failed more than once!

More choices, more enjoyment

Mid-autumn greens are a mainstay of the season-extended garden plan. Kale and Swiss chard tolerate many light frosts, and can be freshly harvested for six weeks or more after the first frost kills your tomatoes. But chard does get boring after awhile, and kale is not everyone's favourite.

Liven up your autumn greens with some spicy cold-hardy sprouts! Though a September frost can kill your tender plants, there are often at least a few weeks of warm weather right afterward, before the next frost, and a few more weeks after that. In most parts of Canada, you actually have enough time after the first frost to grow cold-hardy sprouting greens



Some people just play with their kale!

like arugula, mustard, radish greens and peppergrass. These grow quite nicely in fall weather, because there is usually enough rain to keep them lush and tender, and the cool nights tend to prevent them from developing a fiery bite. As well, they tolerate light frosts easily, so you can keep them growing well into the late fall.

Also, beet greens make an excellent substitute for the usual kale and chard, though some varieties are better than others. Many people dispose of their beet greens because they don't look properly edible.

If you prefer spinach, try spinach beet, also known as Perpetual spinach. It's really a beet, but it doesn't produce a root. That means, like all beets, it doesn't bolt (produce stems and seeds, during its whole first year of growth). That makes it a great

variety for hot summers, when real spinach bolts and becomes inedible. Instead, it grows lush, tender green leaves that are more like spinach than beet leaves, and more delicately textured than Swiss chard. You can also find a variety called Lutz beet, which is very similar, and might be the same thing (if you know for sure, please let me know).

Spinach beet leaves are most tender when young, but the plant produces them all season. By harvesting

a few leaves from each plant, they will keep producing all season, right into the fall, when the new leaves are just as good as ever, and withstand quite a few fall frosts. You can achieve a similar result with several timed plantings of regular spinach, but not as easily, and not as long into the cold weather.

Old perennials are new again

Rhubarb is one of my favourite spring vegetables (yes, it's a vegetable because it isn't technically a fruit, or is it?) and I've always loved the tangy-lemony flavour of spring sorrel, a perennial green that pops up in April. I was delighted when I discovered that they're great fall vegetables too!

Edible perennials often become tough, bitter or harsh-tasting in mid-summer, which is the reason that we normally use them in the

spring. But many edible perennials grow tender and mild again in the cool of the fall. Pick the newest rhubarb stems in September and October, and discover how good they are—just like spring again! It's always important to leave most of the leaves to grow, because they keep the plant alive, and help it to store energy for the next year, but by the end of the season most of the leaves are surplus anyway, and they're a delicious treat that your neighbours have never thought of eating.

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Use all means possible

These are just a few tricks that make use of certain plants, or certain varieties, to extend and diversify your fall harvest. On their own, they can give you a more interesting home-grown selection in the late season. In combination with other practices of season extension, such as cold frames, cloches, row covers, and so on, you can go as far as you want. Even having your own melons at Christmas dinner. Just don't make all the guests eat kale.

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