FALL VEGETABLE GARDENING
Blanca Poteat, Frederick County Master Gardener

And you thought the gardening and growing season was almost over? Garden greens and other vegetable crops actually thrive in cooler temperatures. Daytime temperatures are decreasing, mid-Maryland is getting more regular rainfall, and many insect pests are nearing the end of their life cycles. You can also consider row covers to protect your fall vegetables longer and cold frames to extend growth throughout the winter and incubate your springtime seedlings, too.

Greens: In September and early October you can plant cool season vegetables to mature later in the fall. Lettuce, arugula, Swiss chard, Chinese cabbage, turnips, kale, mustard, and spinach are some good choices. Keep seedlings and transplants well watered and mulched; they will require more time to mature because of reduced light and lower temperatures. Spinach and lettuce seeds may germinate poorly in warm soils of early fall and so should be sown more heavily.

Cover crops: To improve your garden soil and to discourage weed growth and erosion, try planting a cover crop of annual rye, oats, or winter wheat in bare areas of the garden or in the walkways. These crops will grow until frost and then will protect the soil until spring when you can cultivate them into the soil for added nutrients and improved structure.

Row covers: To extend your garden’s growing season even more, you can cover your fall garden crops with a floating row cover. If you fertilize seedbeds, keep the soil moist and protect seedlings from pests, the young plants will go dormant in the coldest months, even when covered with snow, and will re-grow in spring.

Row covers are available at many garden supply stores. Or you can construct your own using floating row cover (FRC), a white, light-weight, non-woven fabric made from spun-bonded polyester or polypropylene that allows sunlight and moisture to penetrate. You can drape FRC over plants, with or without hoops, and secure it to the ground with sod pins, boards, bricks, sand bags, rocks, or soil.

Cold frames: Simple low mini-greenhouse structures, these rectangular boxes with low walls slanting down from back to front are designed to retain warmth and moisture. They are also available at garden supply stores or can be built using plywood, poly boards or similar materials and covered with hinged glass panels, clear plastic, or old windows to allow in light. Add weed-free compost and plant seeds or seedlings directly, or place pots of vegetables, herbs, and flowers in the compost. Monitor heat and moisture build-up on sunny winter days, and prop the cover open briefly if needed. For extra protection, you can use rigid insulation or straw bales along the exterior walls. And locate your cold frame against a south-facing house or barn wall for best exposure to low winter sunlight.

For more year round information and fall gardening ideas:
“Grow It Eat It” http://growit.umd.edu/
Floating row covers:
http://www.growit.umd.edu/Improve%20Garden/FloatingRowCover.pdf
http://www.growit.umd.edu/ImproveGarden/FloatingRowCover/index.cfm

Building cold frames:
http://www.popularmechanics.com/home/improvement/outdoor-buildings/4345342
http://www.organicgardening.com/learn-and-grow/coldframes

For more information about the Frederick County Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, visit
www.frederick.umd.edu/mg or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension
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