

# TIPS on growing edibles in Autumn/Winter

**Y**ou might think that the colder months aren't great for growing veggies, but in South Africa, April until the end of August is a great time to plant vegetables to grow in winter. Actually not only edibles but all plants. You can be enjoying home-grown veg and a new garden, lovely jubley.

One of the reasons we love our winter vegetable garden is that snails and other pests are much less of a problem. Plus you usually don't have to water as much because of the cooler temperatures, a bonus in a drought. The edibles also will become more established in the cooler months, especially perennial herbs which will flourish come spring.

## How to grow your own vegetables from seed

If you're sowing these winter growing vegetables from seed, you may want to cover the ground with perforated polythene to encourage the seeds to germinate, but seedling should be able to cope without protection, if put behind a window in morning sun.

### 1. Shallots

All onions are easy to grow over winter, but shallots are the best money-saver as they're more expensive in the veggie shop than ordinary onions. Plant the mini bulbs, called sets, so the tip just protrudes through the soil. Leave a space of 18cm between each one. Harvest in June after the leaves turn yellow. Please remember shallots and radish are not nice if watered by grey water, purely because of the layers the onion has and the rough skin a radish has.

**TOP TIP:** To keep shallots growing, you'll need to make sure the soil drains well so they stay quite dry.

### 2. Cauliflower

Did you know, the head of the cauliflower is called the curd? Cauliflower is one of the best vegetables to grow in winter because you don't have to worry about caterpillars eating your crop when it's cold!

The seedlings must be planted about 60cm apart and grown in richly fertilised soil, which should never be allowed to dry out. Sow at intervals so that you can have fresh cauliflower throughout the year.

**TOP TIP:** Don't let sunshine reach the cauliflower curds. This will cause them to discolour. Tie the leaves closed, over the curds, with string.

### 3. Broad beans

Autumn is the best time to sow delicious broad beans as they get established in the still-warm soil and can be left over winter for an early taste of spring later in the year. Sow seeds at a depth of 5 to 10 cm, with about 15 to 20 cm between plants, and pick to eat from August.

The podded beans are best eaten young. You can also snip off the green tops after the first pods appear – they're delicious when simply wilted with butter.

**TOP TIP:** Broad beans grow best in a sunny spot sheltered from wind. They enjoy rich, moist, well-drained soil.

### 4. Thyme

This hardy herb is low-growing so it makes great ground cover in a border, or it can be planted in pots together with other evergreen herbs like rosemary. Buy it now as small plants, water well, dig a hole and plant in a garden border. Firm it in well and water again. Make sure this herb is not over watered much like all herbs.

If it's going in a pot, plant slightly deeper than the plastic pot it came in, and leave room for it to fill out as it grows. Thyme is so versatile and can be used to pep up meat, veg, soups and stuffings, it is a yummy herb.

**TOP TIP:** Thyme can also be used as an edible ground cover. Buy seed in bulk to create a thyme lawn. It also grows well between rocks and paving. If you have no time for seeds then purchase a punnet of time... personally I prefer a more established herb, growing from seed is time consuming.

### 5. Garlic

Garlic is one of the easiest vegetables to grow in winter. Start it off in seedling trays so they take root before you transplant them outdoors. Break the bulbs into cloves, push each clove into the compost and put in a warm bright spot. Keep the soil moist until shoots form, then plant outdoors later in May.

Your garlic should be ready to harvest in September, but you can also snip the green garlic shoots and use them in recipes as you would chives.

**TOP TIP:** Garlic does best in well-drained, rich soil with lots of compost, in a raised bed.

### 6. Spring onions

These mini sweet onions are easy and cheap to grow, but make sure you choose a variety that's hardy in winter. Sow seeds from early autumn and they'll be ready to harvest in late winter to early spring. They're a must for your salads. If you buy the spring onion in a punnets, then split each individual spring onion... grows so much better.

**TOP TIP:** Spring onions thrive in loose soil that's well-fertilised and drains well.

### 7. Winter gem lettuce

This lettuce latest variety can be grown right through the winter and forms a crunchy sweet heart, so it's an excellent choice. Sow a few at a time directly into the ground at two-week intervals from the end of April through to the end of July. This ensures you get a continuous supply. The hearty lettuce is ready to harvest 8 to 12 weeks later.

**TOP TIP:** Lettuce grows best in rich, cool and moist soil, as it's 95% water. Most lettuce is not overly full of nutrients however add spinach, kale, watercress and rocket then you have your salad full of nutrients.

### 8. Micro Greens

Micro-leaf varieties are a new variety of salad — they're basically seedlings of plants, such as broccoli or radish, picked very young. They're popular as they make salads look so exotic and the hardy leaves are full of nutrients. They'll happily grow on a window sill over winter. These lil gems are full of goodness.

Follow the directions on the packet to sow — the leaves grow quickly and are ready to eat in just 12 to 15 days. Pick for salads and sandwiches, usually at the first leaf stage.

**TOP TIP:** Keep the soil damp and remove weeds so the greens don't compete for water.

### 9. Spinach

This popular vegetable doesn't do so well in summer, but loves autumn weather to grow. Sow spinach seeds thinly, 15mm deep in rows 30cm apart and, as long as the weather isn't really cold, they'll germinate in 5 to 9 days. Make successive sowings for a continuous supply. Harvest from July, picking smaller leaves for salads.

**TOP TIP:** The trick to good spinach is a good start. Keep it moist and cool and don't be shy about fertilising.

### 10. Snap peas

Snap peas are some of the easiest vegetables to grow in winter. Sow the seeds directly into the ground, about 10 cm apart, then keep them moist to encourage germination. Make sure each pea plant has something to climb up — a stake or trellis will do. Once they start producing pods, make sure you pick them regularly, because the more you pick, the more the plants produce.

### Bonus: Fruit trees

Most fruit trees, like apple and pear, should be planted any time from April through winter. You need to buy a small but established tree, as it's hard to grow good cropping trees from seed. Bare root trees are cheaper as it saves on bulky delivery, or small potted trees are a good choice. Plant now and harvest the fruit from late next summer.

**TOP TIP:** If you don't have much space, mini trees such as dwarf citrus trees thrive in pots.

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