

Winter Edibles: Tap Into the Power of Season Extension

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Growing edibles begins in earnest in March as our Maritime Northwest soils warm up and the days become longer. Here are three questions to determine when you can start.

? Is your soil warm enough to plant?

- **Calculate the soil temperature.** Find out the soil warmth by watching the daily highs/lows. Add the daily high and nightly low together, then divide by two. That's the approximate temperature of open soil. (e.g.: 50day + 40night = 90 ÷ 2 = 45) It's more accurate if you chart numbers over the course of a week and then average those, because the soil temp doesn't move with just one warm day.
- **Measure it.** A soil thermometer will tell you right away if the soil is warm enough to sprout seeds. Most seeds require soil warmed to a depth of 3" to germinate.
- **Know the germination temp.** Our coolest vegetables (lettuce, peas, chard, parsley, mustard greens, beets, carrots) will sprout in soil as cool as 40 degrees F. Other crops (corn, tomatoes) need at least 50 degrees F, while others (beans, peppers, melons, squashes) need 60 degrees F minimum. Of course, all will sprout faster in soil a little warmer than the minimum.
- **Warm up your soil.** You can cover the garden bed for a few days with plastic sheeting to warm it up—but remove the plastic when you begin to plant. That will increase the soil temperature a few degrees above an open garden bed.



? Is your soil dry enough to plant?

- **Test your soil for readiness.** Here's an easy test to find out if your soil is ready: Dig up a scoop of soil and pack together a softball-size clump of it in your hands. Hold it in one hand and throw it up in the air about two feet, letting it fall back into your open hand. If it lands with a "splotch!" and water sprays everywhere, it's still too wet for planting. If it breaks apart easily and crumbles in your hand, it's dry enough.



Pro Tips NWFGF 2022

? Can your early gardening benefit from season extension?

- **Try a raised bed.** Are you growing vegetables in a raised bed? If so, the soil may already be getting warmer and drying out. Those are the two key indicators that it will be ready for seeds.
- **Cover the bed.** If you have “season extension” covers for your bed, like a plastic cloche or a glass cold frame, they will really help you get the soil ready. After being in place for a week, a cloche will raise the soil temperature 2-3 degrees, while a cold frame will raise it 4-5 degrees. Those results will vary depending upon your weather conditions, especially the number of sunny days, but season extension devices work even in cloudy weather.
- **Get started earlier.** You can plant under season extension two to three weeks earlier than in an open garden bed. Of course, you’ll need to water by hand so the seeds are kept moist (but not too wet) while sprouting. Also remember to open the device regularly so that it doesn’t get too hot under there on sunny days, which would cause your tiny plants to wilt.



“When your hands are turned to the soil, you will be full.”



-- Hawaiian proverb

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