

With thoughtful planning and a few handy aids, your season for raising fresh food can last all year long, even during the winter—no greenhouse necessary! Many crops tolerate cool temperatures and some even survive winter in the mid-Atlantic region. And you can provide other crops with low-tech, inexpensive protection that lets you start them earlier in spring and keep them going longer into fall.

## Cold Hardy Crops

The easiest way to extend your gardening season is to include varieties that thrive in cool temperatures. Lettuce and other salad greens, spinach, kale, radishes, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, and carrots all can be planted in late summer for fall harvest. Let a few leaves stay on spinach until the first frost comes in autumn, then cover the plants with shredded leaves or straw. In early spring, before you can even dig in the garden, the spinach will begin growing again and putting on new leaves you can harvest and eat.

### **Carrots taste sweeter after a frost because the cold temperatures trigger them to convert starches to sugar.**

Before the ground freezes in fall, surround carrots with a loose layer of mulch and you'll be able to store them in the ground until you're ready to harvest them.

Garlic grows when the rest of your garden is sleeping. Each clove of garlic grows into a whole new bulb. Plant the cloves around the middle of October. They typically sprout up before the ground freezes, but don't worry if they don't. In early spring, the garlic greens start growing vigorously and by June or July, you'll have garlic bulbs to harvest.

## Protection Schemes

### Row Covers

The simplest way to keep plants warm in early spring and late fall is to blanket them with floating row covers, woven material that allows water and light to pass through. Row covers come in different thicknesses—the most heavyweight keep plants up to 10 degrees warmer than the air.

### Cloches

The word "cloche" is French for "bell," and it refers to the bell-shaped glass covers traditionally used to protect tender plants from the cold at night. Cloches work best for individual plants with a little space around them, such as tomatoes or peppers. While glass looks good, it can be heavy and prone to breaking. You also have to be sure to lift up glass cloches on bright sunny days so the plants inside don't get scorched. You can find sturdy plastic models that are less costly than glass. You can also make simple cloches by cutting off the bottom of gallon-size

plastic jugs or liter-size soda bottles. Wall o'Waters are flexible plastic products that surround plants with tubes you fill with water for extra insulation from the cold.

### Low Tunnels

Many farmers and market gardeners today extend their growing seasons by setting up high tunnels. These have aluminum or PVC frames and are covered with thick sheets of plastic that allow some sunlight in and hold warm air inside. High tunnels are large enough to walk inside but they are not heated. Low tunnels are a simpler set-up for gardeners. They also have hoop-shaped frames covered with plastic, but they sit only a foot or so above the garden bed. Under low tunnels, gardeners in the mid-Atlantic region can grow and harvest all kinds of greens, carrots, and other cool-season crops throughout the winter.

### Cold Frames and Hot Beds

Another way to provide cover for plants during cold temperatures is to set up cold frames. They are boxes, usually made from wood, that are oriented and slanted to maximize the amount of sunlight the plants inside get. The tops of cold frames have either glass or plastic to let the light through—many gardeners repurpose discarded windows into lids for cold frames. A cold frame may be set up in a permanent spot, with the planting area slightly below grade to trap more warmth. Portable cold frames can be moved to different spots in the garden, depending on where they're needed. **Hot beds are like cold frames, but they have a source of additional warmth.** In earlier generations, rotting manure provided the heat in hot beds. Today, gardeners use heating cables in hot beds. Cold frames and hot beds can add three weeks or more to the spring and fall growing seasons.





## Indoor Growing

### Herbs

Many of the most popular culinary herbs produce fresh growth you can use to flavor your meals inside all year long. Basil, chives, cilantro, lemongrass, mint, oregano, rosemary, and thyme all thrive in pots on a windowsill. Place them in a south- or west-facing window in winter to ensure they get as much growth-stimulating sunlight as possible.

### Microgreens

The tiny sprouts of broccoli, radishes, peas, dill, and many other crops make tasty (and super-nutritious) ingredients for salads, stir-fries, and sandwiches. All you need to grow them are seeds (*some varieties are bred for microgreens*), light potting soil, and foam clamshell containers from restaurant takeout meals. Separate the top and bottom of the containers, poke small holes in the bottom of each, and fill them with the soil. Dampen (*but don't soak*) the soil, sow the seeds, and put the containers in a warm spot. Mist the soil daily to keep it moist. Once the seeds start coming up in a week to 10 days, move the containers near a sunny window. When the sprouts open up their second or third set of leaves, cut them off at soil level, rinse, and eat.

### Belgian Endive

The pale green to yellow shoots from the witloof chicory plant are sold as Belgian endive. The shoots can be separated into crunchy, tangy-tasting leaves that you can eat raw or cooked. To grow your own Belgian endive, plant chicory in your garden in spring and let it grow until after the first frost in fall. (*You can harvest the chicory leaves but must leave a few on so the plant keeps growing.*) Dig up the plants and their long taproots before the ground freezes in fall. Replant the roots in buckets filled with peat, coir, or coarse sand. Keep the buckets in a cool, dark place like a basement or garage and moisten the planting mix once a week. **In three to five weeks, you will see the pale "chicons," or sprouts, emerging.** When they are 4 to 5 inches long, clip them from the roots, rinse them, and they're ready to eat.

## LEARN MORE

[PHS McLean Library Food Gardening Subject Guide](#)

**Members get more!**  
Join today at [PHSonline.org](https://www.phsonline.org)



@PHSgardening • #GardeningforGood



**PHS**  
PENNSYLVANIA  
HORTICULTURAL  
SOCIETY®