

The Gardening Seasons of Santa Cruz

— by *Orin Martin*

Santa Cruz Spring — March 15 - May 31

This time of year reminds us of why we live in Santa Cruz. Usually by the middle of March, the pattern of winter storms abates, giving rise to warm sunny days with daytime temperatures in the 60's and 70's and nighttime temperatures in the mid to upper 40's and low 50's. Rain usually comes in the form of moderate to gentle spring showers.

In a mild climate such as ours, it has always seemed that we should be able to harvest more than we do from our gardens in the spring, but in truth these months are some of the year's slimmest. Overwintered brassicas, root crops and leaf crops have either been harvested, succumbed to the cold, long wet stretches of January and February, or bolted in reaction to spring's lengthening, warming days.

As the soil warms and dries, gardeners can turn their pent-up energy lose on bed preparation and sowing. Late March into April are prime dates for planting cool-season leaf crops—spinach, arugula, and salad mixes—directly in the garden, along with root crops such as beets, carrots, radishes, and turnips. March and early April are among the premiere dates for sowing peas, be they the delectable snowpea, the “eat the whole thing” snap pea, or the yeoman-like pod pea. Although peas are a “whole lotta vine” and only a handful of pods at harvest time, they still rank as worthwhile on a garden scale.

Spring also offers perfect lettuce-growing weather, and is the time to transplant starts of kale, chard, leeks, scallions, and the unsung and under-appreciated Asian greens. Late spring (May–June 1) opens the door for sowing warm-season crops—beans, corn, and transplants of pumpkins, winter and summer squashes, tomatoes, eggplants, and peppers.



Summer crops for sale at the Farm & Garden Market Cart.

Santa Cruz Summer: Phase One — June 1 - August 15

Usually coincident with Memorial Day, that dense, heavy mound of air we call the “Pacific High” parks itself off the coast of Central California. The exact strength and position of this dynamic air mass are principal determinant of our early summer weather. If the Pacific High is large and stationed close to the coast, we have long bouts of fog punctuated by cool, sunny days. If the air mass is minimal and positioned farther south, Santa Cruz can have a warm, sunny June and July.

This time of year sees the results of our spring labors, with bountiful harvests of beets, carrots, leafy greens, and peas. July sees the first of the bush beans for the kitchen larder and in most years, garlic lives up to its name as “Holiday plant”—planted around Thanksgiving, offered supplemental fertility on Valentine's Day and St. Patrick's Day, a withholding of water around Memorial Day, and harvest on (or around) Independence Day. Onions follow the same annual cycle.

Phase Two — August 15 - October 15 (and sometimes through Thanksgiving)

These months, which are characterized by the warmest air, soil, and water temperatures of the year, make up our true summer. The fog abates and daytime temperatures climb into the 70's and 80's, with several episodes in the 90's and an occasional day topping 100°. In a good year, tomatoes, peppers, corn, beans and even eggplants will begin to grace our kitchens in early August. In cool years, September and October share these hallmarks of the summer season.

One of the bounties of our Mediterranean climate is that we can grow the cool-season crops in amongst and at the same time as the warm-season crops. As unlikely as it seem, late July through mid September is the time to establish a foundation for the fall–winter garden (fall–winter implies the time of harvest, not the time of planting). Transplants of broccoli, cabbage, and other brassicas set out in August–September will grow to large plants that yield big, sweet heads in October–January.

In Santa Cruz, the ground acts as a refrigerator as the weather cools in late fall. Root crops such as beets and carrots sown in August–September will keep in the ground and can be harvested along with leeks, scallions, and green garlic through late winter into early spring. Winter lettuce transplants can be set out by mid October for winter harvest.

The Progression of Summer Fruit

Late June to early July usually heralds the first of the Japanese plums—Santa Rosa, Mariposa, Satsuma, and others. These plums are slightly acid over sweet in taste and

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are best eaten out of hand or made into jellies and jams. Next come the European and prune plums, which are much sweeter than the Japanese types. The flesh separates easily from the stone and they are often blue- or purple-skinned. These plums are great for eating fresh or drying, and for baking into tarts.

Late June through late July brings us the European butter pears—Belle de Guigno, B.P. Morettini, Araganche, and Ubileen. Unlike winter pears, they can ripen and be picked fresh off the tree. The excellent winter pears—D’Anjou, Comice, Bosc, and others—ripen (off the tree) in September-October.

The first apples arrive in early to mid August. Making the earliest appearance are Tydeman’s Red, Chehalis, William’s Pride, and Pristine. Late August through mid October features the more complex-tasting varieties, such as Elstar, Gala, Cox’s Orange Pippin, Jonagold, Mutsu, Spigold, etc. Beginning in mid October, the late-season apples appear—Fuji, Pink Lady, Braeburn, Yellow Newtown Pippin, Granny Smith, and finally in December, Hauer’s Pippin.

Santa Cruz Fall — October 15 - December 1

This period of the gardening year often is indistinguishable from “Phase Two” of summertime. In the kitchen, the last of summer’s bounty of tomatoes, peppers, corn, and beans are canned, dried, or smoked. This is also the time to cure and store winter squashes. The first of the late summer- and fall-planted crops can be enjoyed,

including peas, carrots, beets, lettuce and broccoli. In the garden, cover crops are sown to protect the soil and ensure organic matter to turn under in spring or harvest for compost piles. The final cool season crops are seeded and transplanted, and garlic and onions are planted for next summer’s harvest.

As for the weather, October usually sees one to three significant wet systems lumbering in from the Gulf of Alaska (with or without a mix of tropical warm moisture). The days cool down, and the nights become longer and colder, often dropping into the 30°s and 40°s. After the first several rains the early mushrooms spring up—Agaricus, oysters, and Boletus.

Santa Cruz Winter — December 15 - March 15

In Santa Cruz, late November through February are the only truly quiescent months in the garden. Now is the time to be thankful for the energy mustered for fall sowings and plantings, and for putting food by during the previous two months. As winter brings higher market prices on produce, it is especially satisfying to be able to eat out of the garden and larder.

December through February are Santa Cruz’s coldest and wettest months of the year, often averaging more than 10 inches of rain per month, and in excess of 20 inches per month during El Niño years. This is a good time for leafing through seed catalogues, reflecting and planning to ensure next year’s bountiful harvests, and of course, for refining one’s cooking skills.