

As the weather changes, so does the garden. Our first crops of green beans, cucumbers and summer squash have produced and faded, to be bushhogged back into the earth. Later plantings of these crops are just now coming in.

We grow a big fall garden. The old carrot and beet rows now have lettuce and Chinese cabbage in them. I made shallow furrows, about a half-inch deep. With a palm full of seed in my left hand, I walk along the row pinching seed with my right thumb and forefinger, and by rubbing them together sprinkle seed thinly down the row.

Next, I walk heel to toe on top of the row, to firm the soil around the seed. Then I rake loose soil over top. The seed needs moisture to sprout, so pressing the earth and seed together is a good idea. Raking dry dirt on top holds the moisture in.

The cabbages come up good, but the first sowing of lettuce is spotty. So we sow again. Lettuce simply doesn't like hot weather. But eventually we get 5 rows up, each 270 feet long, planted over the course of a month so they don't come in all at once. They don't get watered. It is a dry August and early September with only one rain, but they grow anyway. When they have their first few true leaves, I know the lateral roots are forming off of the taproot and they're ready for transplanting.

A plant out of soil is like a fish out of water. We loosen the soil with the digging fork and gently lift out the small plants. Then we dip them in water to prevent wilting. If there are a lot of leaves we take off the tops, which make a good salad later on. The plants are laid in a shallow box, piled together and kept moist.

New beds are made where the summer crops used to be, and the soil is soft. I insert my finger deeply and pick a plant up by the stem trying to not touch the root. I don't want the oils of my fingers on the root hairs. The root goes in the hole and then I squeeze the soil around it so tightly that you can't pull the plant up by tugging on it. This leaves a depression around the plant, which gets a cup or two of water splashed on it.

Down the row we go. Lettuce is planted about a foot apart, but the Chinese cabbages need 18 inches. We plant in a diamond pattern, three rows to the bed. The plants in the outer rows are opposite each other, and the ones in the middle row are offset. We can hoe lengthwise, and two ways at an angle across the bed. When the plants are mature their leaves will just be touching.

Changing Crops With Changing Seasons

Tuesday, September 23, 2008

Cloudy afternoons are the best time to transplant. If it looks like it might rain, we'll drop what we're doing and transplant. But we get fooled. The soil was so dry, and no rains come, so a few times a lot of our transplants withered away in the hot sun. We peg in more plants later, trying to fill the beds up. There are plenty of plants in the rows we've sown.

Little perky plants now dot the new garden. Cooler days help them, and so do the longer, dewy nights. Gone are the scraggly beans and cucumbers, and those endless summer squash rows. The fall equinox passes, the days are shorter than the nights, and the garden beds have a new look.