

Before the student/teacher break, we completed our lesson set on the planting of seeds and transplants. The benefits of each of these methods adds to our flexibility when planning our gardens. The idea that gardening is just knowing how to plant, care for, and harvest those crops you like is the most casual of approaches to growing the foods we enjoy and that we need to be healthy. Sometimes the crops we like don't lend themselves to a region particularly well. But can still be grown if the gardener takes the time to plan ( or orchestrate) conditions for those crops that are otherwise borderline for a region. Understanding what is/are the controlling factors that make for a good crop in a particular region helps us to grow the garden we want and can enjoy. Irrigation is one such example, arid areas can be made to produce wonderful crops if all that is need is more water. Cool temperature crops don't do well in the South because of the long hot growing conditions. Tomatoes don't set fruit well if temperatures during the day are over the high 90's along with evenings that don't get down below the low 80's. Yet we can efficiently grow tomatoes if we can take advantage of that time of year when the growing season is suited for tomato production. Since the growing season for tomatoes is some what long (2.5 months), fall conditions might not be long enough to have many tomatoes. One can provide for a longer growing season by starting their tomatoes inside in cooler conditions and moving the plants outside when conditions are suitable thereby providing for an adequate growth and fruiting period.

The subtropical character of the Houston area offers us the promise of two growing seasons a year. A fall garden season (cooler days and evenings, but shorter day lengths) and a summer garden season (hot days and evenings, with longer day lengths). So knowing how to bridge these two seasons takes a bit of experience but mostly good planning. In our gardens currently we have the two season blending or transitioning at the time school begins. Even now a month into school, summer crops are still in full swing (e.g. sweet potatoes, okra, and yard long beans, not to mention eggplant. But the days are beginning to be cooler with less humidity, and the evenings are definitely more mild. So you might say fall is in the air. In preparation for the fall garden, we have begun to plant cooler weather crops, such as lettuce, carrots, beets, cabbage, turnips, kale, and collards. Some are planted as seed directly into the garden bed (lettuce, carrots, and beets. Others are transplants such as cabbage, kale, collards and we are trying straight neck squash this year. The squash is an experiment because beside the right growing season (length and temperature) are the questions of pest infestation and adequate pollination. According to Urban Harvest founder Dr. Robert Randall's book, "Year-Round Food Gardening for Houston and Southeast Texas", there is evidence of a slight Northward shift in climate conditions which might favor an elongated opportunity to grow squash into early fall. We shall see!

So knowing how to garden is not just knowing how to plant, care for, and the harvesting of the crops you like, it is so much more exciting than that. One needs to take into consideration germination temperatures, optimal growing temperatures and water requirements, day and night temperatures, and optimal maturation conditions. So the next time you look at our/your garden try to envision the conditions that need to be met in order to have the garden you desire.

Our next lesson set is on Cole crops. You guessed it we are planting for our fall garden. Now I didn't misspell it. It is our Cole crop lesson set and yes these are plants that do well in less heat. See if you can figure out what "cole" stands for and you will see how that ties into some of the crops we are about to plant.