

Down on the Farm

by Randy Arnowitz

Winter Bounty

Winter crops are just the best.
So much easier than the rest.
Lot less work, there ain't no doubt.
That's because the rain helps out.

Poppies, pansies, stock and snaps
In the garden fill the gaps.
Pansies have those kitty faces
In pots and beds and other places.

Violas are a little smaller
But snap-dragons are much taller.
English primrose for bright shade.
Deadhead flowers as they fade.

There's winter stuff that you can eat
But snails assure it's no small feat.
Tasty when the sprouts are new
Pests will munch 'em 'fore you do.

Taste so good that you'll want more.
So much fresher than the store.
Whether starts or seeds you're sowin'
Better when you grow your ow'n.

While most of the country has put their gardens to bed for the winter, we Montecitans can enjoy a complete second season of both vegetable and flower gardening. The selection and possibilities for winter growing are probably as numerous as those for our warm season with even a few advantages.

With the cooler weather, soil does not dry out as fast as in the summer so you don't have to water as often. Also, if we get our winter rains, they relieve us of some of our watering duties. Keep in mind though, that when veggies and flowers are newly planted, their little root balls dry out fast – sometimes in just a day so they do need to be babied along a bit. A light rain here and there often does not do the trick.

Weeds are not as pesky in the winter, and if you do get some, a thick blanket of mulch makes them easy to yank out.

Most of the rules of (green) thumb for summer growing apply to the winter season.

- Some vegetables and flowers are easier than others to grow from seed. Consult a nursery or online source for specifics, but generally most winter crops can be planted from seed or transplants. Naturally, you would germinate seeds weeks earlier than the time that starts would be planted. With some crops such as snow, sweet or snap peas, you can plant both for a staggered yield.
- When buying starts, avoid overgrown, root-bound ones that already have fruit or flowers on them. If necessary, before buying, gently knock one or two out of their pony packs and check out the conditions of the roots. You can see why the nurseries love me.
- Protect your garden from predators. Sometimes younger plants are more desirable to birds and other wildlife. Cover newly germinated peas, lettuce and other tender vittles with screening or netting to protect from snails, slugs, rats, rabbits, squirrels, chipmunks, wildebeests and others. *Sluggo* brand snail bait is touted as being safe enough to use around pets. Use at your own risk. Older or more mature crops are vulnerable too so take precautions.
- Before planting vegetables or annual flowers, always amend soil with your own homemade, backyard compost or a quality organic brand from the nursery. Add some organic starter fertilizer to the mix.

Winter Color

Hopefully by now you've gotten your cool-season flowers planted and may even be enjoying the beginning of your bloom. Of course, the nurseries still have color packs, four-inch and gallon-size color plants, but for a longer blooming season, it's best to have them starting in the beginning of September. Seeds can be started in flats or containers weeks earlier and planted out in the garden at the time you'd have planted the starts.

Some examples of cool season color that can be planted in the fall and enjoyed through the winter and into the spring are: calendula, candytuft, foxglove, Iceland poppies, nemesia, pansies, snapdragons, stock, sweet alyssum, sweet peas, sweet William and violas. These color plants do best when grown in full sun.

Cauliflower

Not a collie. Not a flower.
What can this thing be?
It's "brocklee's" second cousin.
That's how it seems to me.

It always gets the aphid
And needs a lot of rain.
And no one can deny it.
It looks just like a brain.

But it's loaded up with fiber
And vitamins B and C.
And unlike that sneaky 'sparagus
Won't wreak havoc with your pee.

Use it in a medley
Of carrots, squash and kale.
But stay away from okra
'cause it's slimy as a snail.

Looks healthy at the market.
You want some, there's no doubt.
And, it's really good for you
But you always throw it out.

Winter color that flourishes in bright shade or full morning sun are: cineraria, cyclamen, English primroses, fairy primroses and obconica primroses.

These are some of my favorites:

Iceland poppies – It's better to buy these small, like in pony packs, rather than in larger 4-inch pots, which is also less expensive. Buy lots and amass them in groups among your other winter flowers or do an entire section of your yard with just these poppies. 'Champagne Bubbles' is one of the most common varieties that you'll find for sale and the mix includes shades of orange, pink, scarlet, apricot, yellow and creamy white poppy blooms atop 15-inch stems.

'Wonderland' is usually available, too, which is a dwarf variety and has 10-inch-tall flowers.

Ranunculus – Although the name sounds like something the doctor has to remove, ranunculuses or ranunculi (I looked it up) are actually a very prolific winter flower. Planted from tubers or starts, these are best planted in November rather than early fall. Although susceptible to overwatering – especially when first planted out from tubers – these are the Cadillac or rather the Lexus of winter flowers and are well worth the extra attention they initially require. They're long lasting when cut, come in fashion colors and the name is fun to say and will impress your friends.

Pansies and Violas – Something about the "cat faces" on those pansy flowers remind me of being a little kid, which I like. But, it seems to me that many of the new pansy flowers are so big these days that when they get wet either from the rain or from being watered, those big ol' flowers fall over and you don't really see them.

Violas, on the other hand, have all the charm of pansies, but since they're smaller and you get more of them, you get more charm. And, they don't tip over when wet. I love it too, that sometimes they'll reseed and occasionally you'll find one in an unlikely place like in the dry, hot crack in your driveway.

Snapdragons – Snaps come in every color and size: little short ones that are ideal for the front of your flowerbed and really tall ones that you should probably stake when planted toward the back of your garden. Get them in early and you'll get a very long season. In fact, if you deadhead and feed regularly, you'll probably find that they last long into the time that you want to start your summer garden.

Primroses – The three types that are grown in the winter are English primroses, fairy primroses and obconicas. I've never had much luck with

Carrots: The Long and Short Of It

In my TV dinner
They never were a winner.
But later when I ate them raw
I found myself to be in awe.

In my lunch box, I was six.
They were married to the “cel-ray” sticks.
Later on I learned to juice ‘em
But the pulpy mess was a such a nuisum’.

Some are crooked, some are straight ‘n
some are perfect just for gratin’.

On a salad, in a stew
For a snack I’ll grab a few.

Heirloom shades at farmers market
Really took off like a rocket.

Come in purple, white and yellow
But good ol’ orange’s really mellow.

Bunnies love ‘em, “What’s Up, Doc?”
Anyone will say “they rock”.
It’s said that they’ll improve your sight
And help you when you drive at night.

So much fiber, I’m not bluffin
When you eat them in a muffin.
But best of all is when you bake
‘cause nothing beats a carrot cake.

them in dark shade but instead, in our area, they do best in bright, filtered light or morning full sun. The English type sport bright, crayon-colored blooms while the fairies and obconicas are available in bright, pastel shades.

Winter Veggies

Like winter color, you still have time to put in cool season vegetables. Beets, carrots, fava beans, lettuce, mesclun, onions, parsnips, peas, radishes and spinach are some edibles that can still be planted from seed.

Planting seed now will insure a later harvest rather than if you plant from transplants.

Broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, celery, parsley, spinach, and Swiss chard among others can be planted out from starts.

Artichokes, garlic and strawberries are at the nurseries now, too.

These are some tried-and-true ones that I have good luck with. All are grown in full, winter sun:

Peas – The climbing type of snow, shelling and snap peas can be grown on a chain-link fence, stakes, chicken wire frame or you can build a deluxe cage out of that heavy construction wire with the 6”x 6” squares. It takes about 7-8 feet of the stuff to make a sturdy tower that doubles as a great tomato cage for when you switch to warm-season veggies.

Carrots – Seed in rows throughout the season for a staggered and continuous harvest. The orange ones seem to be passé. They now come in yellow, purple and white. Easy to grow and fun to pick and eat right out of the garden.

Lettuce – Seed is easy but for a quicker salad, grow from pony or cell packs, too. Either harvest leaf by leaf or wait for the head varieties to develop and take the whole thing into the house. Romaine, butter, oak leaf seeds and dozens of others are at the nursery or can be found online. 

Ode To A Fava

At first I didn’t botha
to grow the humble fava.
But when I sowed some seeds
they sprouted up like weeds.

The birds use them for nests
and they don’t get any pests.
‘Drink very little water.
They make a lovely border.

Some would think it odd
that I’m smitten with this pod.
To sing its many praises
I could go on for “days-es”.

Good for carbo-mixin’
and also nitro-fixin’
and what a heady bloom
on this generous legume.