

Gary Comer Youth Center Rooftop Garden
Three Seed to Table Gardens
March 2008
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Winter term: 8 Jan – 28 March:

Salads Under the (Artificial) Sun & Spring Seed Starting

Start seeds 2nd week of January

Grow leaf lettuce and herbs under lights

- Leaf lettuce (buy seeds for baby leaf lettuces; www.underwoodgardens.com has a nice selection)
- Put lights (we have wide spectrum) on timers. Be sure to have lights off around 8 hours a day. Lettuce grown under lights can get bitter. Taste as leaves develop; if getting bitter, keep lights off longer (9 hours, 10 hours ... you'll have to see).
- We use seed starting kits from Gardeners Supply. They have water reservoirs so the seeds/seedlings stay watered over weekends. We use the 12-packs. (www.gardeners.com) sells at a 40 percent discount to school groups/non-profits)
- Herbs: we have grown basil with very good results. Try any small leaf variety, including those such as lemon or cinnamon basil.

Salad party about 4 weeks later.

Seed starting for outdoor garden under row covers:

We started seeds Jan. 31, and have been planting every two weeks since then. We targeted week of March 3 as the date we would start hardening-off seedlings in the row covers. We had the plants out for about an hour each day. Plan to plant Jan. 31 seedlings into the ground week of March 10.

Seeds: We asked our community seniors, staff and youth to give input. Based on their input and the growing conditions, we started:

Mustard (Purple Wave, Florida Broadleaf)

Turnips (Purple Top White Globe)

Collards (Georgia)

Kale (Winter Red, Squire)

Spinach (Winter Bloomsdale)

Feb. 14: planted same varieties again

Feb 28: Replanted spinach as crop failed; may not like warm conditions indoors

March 1: Have seed order submitted. (See attached seed order)

March 6: Started lettuces in the seed starters emptied from the salad party.

March 13: Order strawberries, potatoes and sweet potatoes, peanuts (see seed order)

March 20: Start early season tomatoes

- We are planting determinate (grow to a determined size, set fruit for a period of time and then plants are done) varieties this year. The indeterminate (continue to grow throughout the season, producing fruit throughout the season).
- Why? Determinate are lower maintenance: no or minimal staking or pruning; Some varieties start bearing fruit in 60 days (can subtract about 10 days if started indoors); So if we plant out in mid-April we may have first tomatoes before school lets out.
- Determinate varieties will fit under the row covers until mid-May when weather should be warm enough.

- Select an early, mid and late determinate tomato so you have fruit all summer. We are mixing it up: red and yellow cherries as early tomatoes; a mid-season all-purpose tomato with a roma (paste tomato, good for cooking) and one long-season tomato.

Spring term: March 31 – June 12

Spring Forward to Summer

- Six weeks until May 15 (average last frost date in Chicago). In ground gardeners may start winter term seeding schedule
- March 31: Start mid-season tomatoes indoors; keep hardening off and transplanting plants started in February;
- April 3: Start last round of cool season crops indoors; depending on weather may transplant out just after setting 2 sets of leaves. (We continue to germinate seeds indoors due to rocky soil conditions; however, depending on your soil conditions and weather, you may be able to start direct seeding outside)
- April 3: Turn over winter rye to prepare beds for early potatoes in two weeks
- April 10: Start direct seeding root crops: carrots, beets, turnips, peas, lettuces, onion sets (baby head lettuces; can be harvested in about 28 days or left to full size in about 50 days)
- April 17: Plant potatoes (harvest in 7 weeks – June 5); plant strawberries
- April 24 – May 8:
 - Direct seed lettuce, carrots, mixed greens, broccoli and cabbage outdoors (if row covers are available);
 - start cucumbers and peppers (if space allows) indoors;
 - Cucumbers don't generally like to have roots disturbed; start in 6-pack APS from Gardeners Supply; Early cucumber can be harvested for pickles or let to grow to full size; (Summer camp starts in about 8 weeks)
- May 15: buy in peppers and any other warm-season transplants (Chicago Park District's Kilbourn Park & Organic Greenhouse has great plant sale around this time. For more info: 3501 N. Kilbourn Ave, Chicago, IL 60641, tel 773 685 3551.) Bring your seed order with you to know varieties you are looking for.
- May 22: Plant herbs: basil, oregano, thyme, mint (plant in a container or it will spread), dill, chives, rosemary, the list goes on ... Herbs are versatile, providing several seasons of activity including cooking, drying and crafts.
- Keep in mind: parsley and dill are host plants for caterpillars),
- Plant peanuts when soil is warm
- May 29: Start planting warm season seeds outdoors: Okra, Beans (Pole), sweet potatoes
- June 5: Plant summer blooming flowers: cosmos, sunflowers (variety: dwarf to shade cool season vegetables such as spinach, lettuce), zinnias, marigolds, nasturtium; select clumping/mounding varieties or cut-and-come again;
- Plant summer blooming bulbs: lilies, gladiola – many choices, provide great cut flowers with minimal care. Many are perennials.
- Plant tall sunflowers for vining plants such as morning glories or pole beans
- June 12: Harvest party: potatoes, lettuces, mixed greens

Summer term: June 16 – Aug. 15: Baby It's Hot Outside

Ground-level gardeners: You may want to start your garden at one of the spring term weeks outlined above.

Planting plans:

In June: Spring bulbs should be finished: plant in these beds: summer varieties of quick growing crops planted in the spring: carrots, lettuces, spinach, radishes, etc.

By June the soil should be warm; There's still time to plant summer and fall harvested vegetables or transplant out warm-season plants started indoors:

- Beans (bush beans or pole beans) Popcorn
- Broccoli (can buy in as transplants) Potatoes (late season)
- Cotton Okra
- Cucumbers Sweet Potatoes
- Dill Tomatoes
- Gourds
- Peanuts
- Peppers (sweet, chile)

Also in late July to mid-August (depending on weather), start planting for fall garden:

- Collards
- Broccoli
- Succession planting of lettuces, spinach, radishes, carrots, kale, etc.
- Potatoes
- Sunflowers
- Snapdragons
- Order garlic
- Order spring blooming bulbs for planting in October

Programmatic theme ideas for summer gardens:

- Historic garden: peanuts, cotton, okra
- Snack garden: sunflowers, popcorn, potatoes, sweet potatoes
- Pizza garden: tomatoes, basil, peppers, onions
- Three sisters: Sunflowers, pole beans and squash
- Butterfly garden
- Native plants

Co-teach summer gardens with other departments:

- Tech Garden (1/2 time indoors using computers; 1/2 outdoors in garden)
- Art in the Garden (signage, maps)
- Tasting Good (culinary department)

Community outreach:

- Community members (invite families, neighbors)
- Senior program (seniors in the community garden 2x week 9-11 a.m.)

Partner with other organizations:

- Bronzeville Historic Society (African Heritage Gardens)
- Swahili Institute
- Chicago Cultural Alliance / Leave No Child Inside

- Field Museum (fabulous lending program)
- University of Illinois Cooperative Extension (bug zoo)
- Yoga instructor

Volunteer work days

- Master Gardeners
- Chicago Cares (www.chicagocares.com)
- University of Chicago
- City Year

Fall Term: Sept. 2 – Oct. 31

Pretty Perfect - At First

For the fall term, you will inherit lots of plants from the summer garden and still have time to get cool season crops going. The winter/spring planting plans can be adapted for the fall garden. Plants to harvest: Potatoes, sweet potatoes, peanuts, popcorn, flowers

The September and early October garden is generally very nice weather. Start any winter crops by mid-September as mid-October usually marks the first frost.

This is the time to start closing down your garden and planting cover crops. We planted winter rye every two weeks starting in October. Tip: Don't plant too thickly as it will come up in the spring and really take off. We planted in batches so we could try to stagger the spring work load. If rye is let to grow, it develops very thick roots and can be a big job to remove. Plan to turn it over 2 to 3 weeks before you want to start growing.

Planting bulbs: Nothing gets the spring off to a good start like bulbs. DeVroomen.com sells to most non-profits/schools at wholesale.

Winter Term: Nov – February

You don't have to have a rooftop garden to try winter gardening. Selecting the right plants for the conditions is the key to success. Over the last two years, we have used row covers (unheated, uncovered, no additional lights). We have had the best success with spinach and mache (corn salad). Plants were established by mid-October.

Even though we didn't harvest a lot during the winter, the plants got off to a very early spring start (harvesting in March).

For more information, you may find these resources useful:

“Farming The Backside of the Calendar,” by Eliot Coleman, www.fourseasonsfarm.com

Michigan State University Horticulture Department and MSU Organic Farm: Dr. John A. Biernbaum, professor of horticulture, MSU, East Lansing, MI 48824 , email: biernbau@msu.edu ; Dr. Biernbaum offers a series of one-credit classes on passive solar greenhouses and season extending gardening. Organic Farm offers certificate program, tours: www.msuorganicfarm.com

Locally, Angelic Organics Learning Center offers excellent classes and resources about food production: 6400 S. Kimbark Ave., Chicago, IL 60637, www.learnrowconnect.org

Supplies:

www.Johnnyseeds.com

www.gardeners.com (Gardener's Supply sells to non-profits and schools at a discount; current catalog has a nice rowcover for raised beds)

www.flowerhouses.com (Discounts are extended on a case-by-case basis)