Season-extending techniques means fresh taste longer

Nothing beats the fresh taste of fruits and vegetables picked right out of the garden. However, as cooler weather moves into the state, gardeners may think that fresh taste of homegrown produce is gone until next summer.

Although the traditional garden typically is done when cold weather arrives, there are some ways to extend the growing season a little longer. Think of it as a winter jacket for the garden, protecting tender plants from the cold weather.

Season extenders trap in the heat from the sun to keep the plants and soil warm. They also protect crops from the harsh winter elements, which will cause damage to the plants. This will allow gardeners to enjoy fresh produce into the winter months. An added bonus is season-extending techniques also can help gardeners get a jump start on warm-season vegetables earlier in the spring.

Not everyone has access to a personal greenhouse, but season-extending techniques provide a greenhouse effect that is beneficial for plant growth. There are several ways in which gardeners can achieve this.

A low tunnel is a technique that involves row covers suspended over the crops and will protect plants from wind and precipitation. Use fabric row covers or clear polyethylene or other sheeting and place over the plants in your garden. The sheeting is supported by wire or plastic hoops and the cover can be vented during the day to prevent excessively high temperatures. Oklahoma weather can be unpredictable with temperatures in 80s one day and the 40s the next.

Another option is the high tunnel method, also known as a hoop house. This method provides an enhanced growing environment and protection from frosts, late freezes, hail, wind and heavy rain. There are a variety of options for structure designs.

The purpose of a cloche, which is a small translucent cover for protecting outdoor plants, is to modify the environment for individual plants or groups of plants. Gardeners create warmer growing conditions to protect plants from brief cold exposure.

Cold frames, which are structures outside of the garden where plants can be placed for temperature modification and protection from rain, snow and ice, can be more complex. A cold frame is used to force spring-flowering bulbs, harden transplants, start cold-tolerant transplants and overwinter semi-hardy plants.
The use of cold frames can be expanded by adding a heat source below the soil, such as electric heating cables, pipes carrying steam and composting organic material below the soil.

For the ambitious gardener, building a greenhouse opens up many more possibilities for gardening, depending on heating, cooling and extra lighting used. There are many options for structures and supplemental equipment and costs will vary.

Gardeners know how important light is to successful gardening. Season extension options help increase temperatures for the plants, but keep in mind light also is a limiting factor during the cool months. In the winter, solar light intensity is low and the days are short. This is why it’s important to place structures where they’ll receive as much light as possible.

Oklahoma State University Extension offers more gardening information online.

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