

How to Protect the

EDIBLE GARDEN

from Early Frost

How to Protect the Edible Garden From Early Frost



It's a forecast all gardeners dread: early frost, often towards the end of what is still technically summer.

What do you do if you still have unripe vegetables still in the ground? How can you protect them from the cold?



What is considered a light frost?

Light frosts occur when the temperature reaches zero degrees Celsius (32°F). (Colder than -2°C or 28°F is considered a heavy frost). When water vapour in the air changes from a gas into a solid due to the cold temperatures, ice crystals build in the walls of plant cells and potentially harm or kill them. Humidity, a clear sky, and calm conditions, combined with a dipping temperature, are a good recipe for frost.

Here are some ways to save your plants from the chill and maximize your harvest even when the weather isn't cooperating.



Frost Protection



If your edible garden is growing in portable containers, it's a good idea to move the pots into a garage during the freezing spell. They can be moved outdoors again when the weather warms.

If frost is in the forecast, cover your plants before the sun sets. You can use old bedsheets or light blankets or horticultural fleece (this can be purchased in most garden centres). Plants that grow along the ground, such as squash, can be covered in a thick layer of straw or even newspapers (but be sure to tack them down if you expect wind). Remove the straw and the newspaper the next morning, when the temperatures warm up again.

Store-bought cloches or homemade ones, such as overturned buckets or empty plant pots, can be used to protect individual plants. It sounds a bit odd, but if you water your garden well during the afternoon before an overnight frost is predicted, you may increase the rate of survival for your plants. Wet soil retains the heat of the sun longer than dry soil.



Harvesting early

Some plants cannot tolerate any cold at all. Summer squash, such as zucchini, should be picked before even a light frost – it doesn't matter what size they are. They can't usually survive the plunge in temperatures so you may as well use them up even if they are small.

Tomatoes can be harvested early – that is, when they are still green – and then ripened indoors. There is a condition, however: they should have just a slight blush of their non-green colour on the fruit for successful ripening. If they are harvested too early and are too green, they may not ripen. That's okay, though – green tomatoes are delicious and can be used in many recipes! If you can't cover your tomatoes and frost is imminent, pick the fruit and bring it indoors to save it. To ripen tomatoes, you can lay them in single layers between newspaper in a shallow cardboard tray, or, if you have a small amount, place them in the bottom of brown paper bags. Keep them in a warm, dry place in the house. (Sunlight is not necessary for them to ripen, but the heat is). Green tomatoes produce a gas called ethylene, which helps them to ripen. Check on them frequently to ensure there are no rotten ones, and to remove the ripened ones for eating!



Should root vegetables be harvested?



Root vegetables, such as beets and carrots, can tolerate a light frost and indeed, become sweeter in taste with the cold, so you don't need to harvest them. Likewise, some cool-weather crops such as kale can also handle a light frost (but covering them never hurts!).

Even if frost is in the forecast, don't despair – the first light frost or two of the season usually heralds nicer weather and we can still enjoy a few more weeks of warmth in our gardens!





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