

AUTUMN EDIBLES — An Untapped Market

Most home gardeners and garden centers associate vegetable gardening with the spring. There is a great opportunity to extend vegetable gardening into the summer and fall.

By David Kuack

Fall vegetables like Swiss chard 'Peppermint' serve a dual purpose: they can add color to an ornamental flower bed and they can be eaten. Photo courtesy of Sakata.

The National Gardening Association reports that participation in do-it-yourself lawn and garden activities last year increased by 2 million U.S. households (2 percent) compared to 2011.

U.S. households spent \$29.5 billion on their lawns and gardens last year. This was an increase of \$354 million (1 percent) in national retail sales of lawn and garden products from 2011.

Vegetable gardening continues to be an important part of American household gardening activities. Top reasons for Americans growing their own food include: to grow better tasting food, to save money on food bills, to grow better quality food and to grow food that is safe.

Most consumers and garden centers associate planting vegetables with spring gardening activities. However, there are opportunities to extend and expand vegetable gardening activities and sales beyond the traditional spring plantings.

Don't Forget The Fall

Tracy Lee, product manager of Sakata Seed America's Home Grown division, says more garden centers are starting to realize that vegetable sales are a good way to extend the selling season during the summer and fall.

"Consumers are excited about starting gardening in the spring and summer that

sometimes they miss out on the great opportunities for fall gardening," Lee says. "Fall vegetable sales require a bit more planning because there are a lot of places in the U.S. where the fall season is not nearly as long as the spring season. But planting schedules can be tweaked and there are plenty of short season vegetable varieties that gardeners can choose from."

Scott Mozingo, product manager at Burpee Home Gardens, says garden centers looking to attract people to doing fall vegetable gardening have to do everything they can to make it easy for home gardeners.

"Fall vegetable gardening is going to be a more regional activity," Mozingo says. "If you are like me in Chicago, most gardening activities are finished by the middle of October. The idea of doing fall vegetable gardening is probably going to be intimidating to everyone but hard-core gardeners. The average gardeners are not going to know that they can do this."

Misnomer: Fall Vegetable Gardening

Jeannine Bogard, product business manager for garden vegetables at Syngenta Flowers Inc., says many fall vegetables are actually planted during the summer.

"Many of these vegetables are put in the garden during the middle of summer and not

during the fall," she says. "They are harvested in the fall but planted during the summer. Unlike fall flowers like pansies and garden mums, which go into the garden in the fall, people need to realize most fall vegetables are actually harvested at that time."

Bogard says one of the easiest ways for garden centers and home gardeners to determine what they should be selling and planting is to follow what local commercial growers are planting at the time.

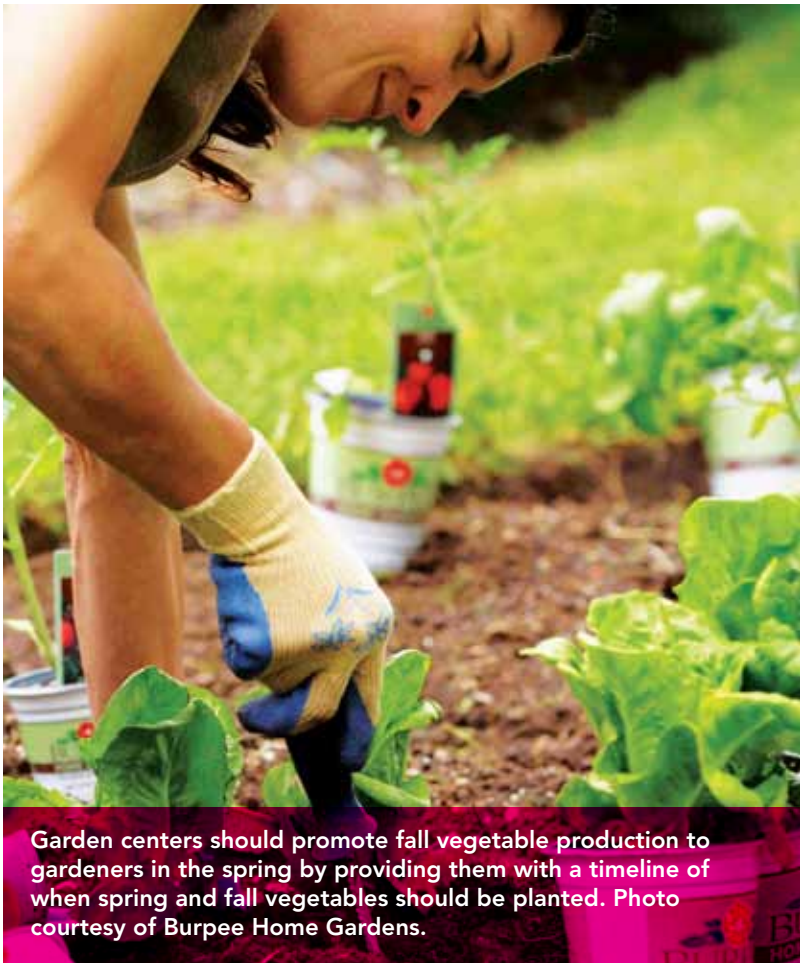
"If they follow the crop cycles of local farmers, they can figure they are growing the right crops," she says. "Garden centers and gardeners can also check with their local extension offices. Most extension offices have good consumer programs related to vegetable planting recommendations for specific areas. Garden centers can team up with local extension agents who deal with home gardening to conduct presentations on fall gardening. This is a part of the educational process that is missing."

Choosing What to Grow, Sell

Bogard says gardeners in parts of the country where the soil doesn't freeze will be able to grow vegetables during the fall.

"Some vegetables like the brassicas, including broccoli and kale, can be grown in mild winter

CONSUMER TRENDS



Garden centers should promote fall vegetable production to gardeners in the spring by providing them with a timeline of when spring and fall vegetables should be planted. Photo courtesy of Burpee Home Gardens.

regions where temperatures don't freeze," Bogard says. "The flavor of some vegetables is actually improved by the cold temperatures.

Lee says because of the shorter growing season in the fall in some areas of the country, garden centers and gardeners should be looking for varieties that mature more quickly and can take colder temperatures.

"Salad greens and leafy greens typically have a shorter maturity period," Lee says. "It's much faster and easier to grow crops like kale, Swiss chard, lettuce and collards than it is to grow broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower and Brussels sprouts.

"There are also plants that can be grown as season extenders in the summer and into the fall up until it snows because they can take colder temperatures. For example, herbs like parsley, cilantro and even rosemary will continue to grow well past summer. I live in Philadelphia and my rosemary actually lasted through the fall and winter this year. I didn't have to replace it until May."

Bogard says variety selection is going to be very important for both growers

producing vegetable transplants and the garden centers selling them.

"The vegetables planted during the summer for fall harvesting have some heat tolerance since they are planted under warmer temperatures," she says. "These summer-planted varieties are able to continue growing under short days and cool temperatures. They won't stall."

Lee says garden centers can help their customers succeed by offering the earliest maturing varieties for fall gardening.

"In choosing varieties for fall sales versus spring, an additional week or two is needed to reach the true maturity date," she says. "With the colder temperatures and shorter day lengths, many plants tend to take a little bit longer to mature. Offering varieties with quick maturity dates ensures consumers can get a fast turnaround time and maximum yields with the crops they're planting."

Not the Typical Garden

Mozingo says while most gardeners may think of the typical 10-by-10-foot or 10-by-20-foot plot for spring



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vegetable gardens, this doesn't have to be the case for fall vegetable gardening.

"There's no reason why vegetable plants can't be placed in a home ornamental landscape," he says. "I have radishes, lettuce and leafy greens as border plants in my landscape. As summer temperatures warm up, I replace them with more heat-tolerant annuals. In the fall, when the annuals die out, I can plant greens and spinach. Spinach can take some heat, but it takes the cold really well. This replanting and replacement can easily be done with annual beds and borders."

Bogard says garden centers should be doing more to promote the planting of vegetables into ornamental landscapes.

"Vegetables don't have to be segregated from ornamental plants," she says. "Garden centers are missing an opportunity with gardeners who come in and say they don't have enough room for a vegetable garden. Retailers sell ornamental cabbage and kale. Why not sell the edible varieties as well? They look just as beautiful as the ornamental ones and gardeners can eat them when they're done growing."

"When I moved my vegetables into my flower beds, the yields actually got higher. The bee activity increased around

the vegetables, so there was more pollination occurring which affected the fruit yields."

Mozingo says garden centers need to be able to show gardeners how to grow fall vegetables in containers and in landscapes as companion plants to ornamentals.

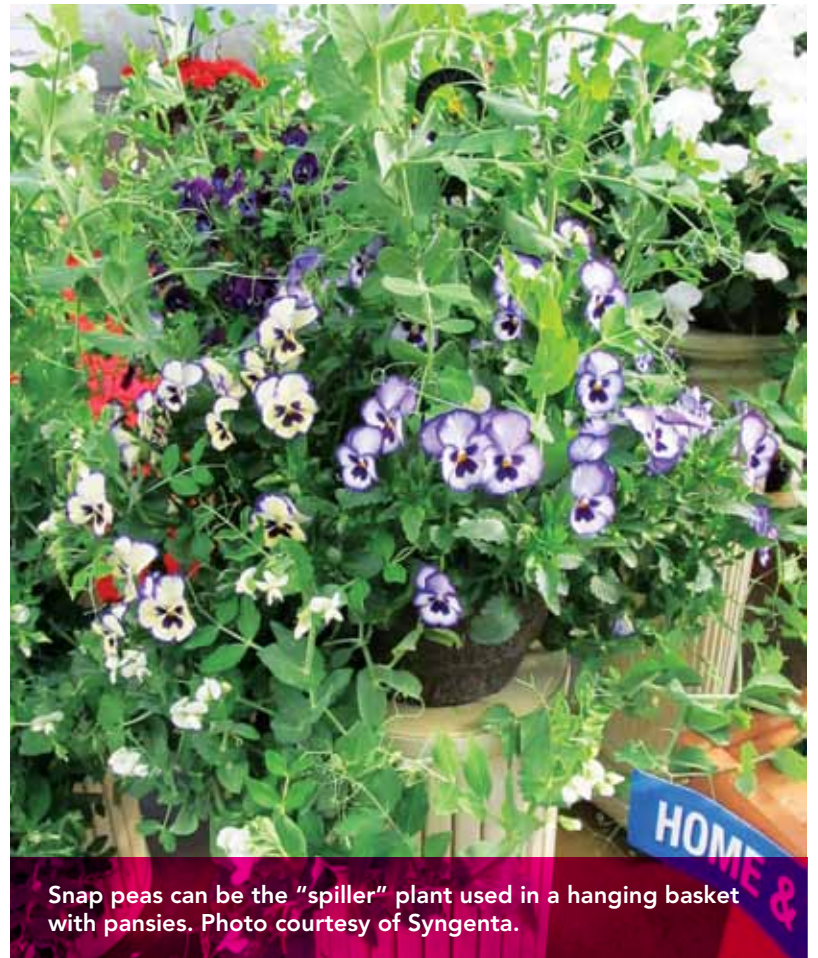
"It takes a lot to ask homeowners to visualize vegetables among their foundation plantings," he says. "Show them how to do a border of greens, lettuce or beet greens and how it will look."

Garden centers need to be able to show gardeners images or demonstrate what these containers and plantings would look like."

Educating Consumers

Bogard says garden centers need to let gardeners know when they are buying their spring vegetables that they can also plant vegetables again in the summer for fall harvesting.

"Garden centers really need to promote fall vegetable production in the spring," she says. "They need to show gardeners a timeline when spring vegetables should be



Snap peas can be the "spiller" plant used in a hanging basket with pansies. Photo courtesy of Syngenta.



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If gardeners are going to grow ornamental cabbage and kale in the fall, they might be interested in trying a couple of edible varieties too. Photo courtesy of Burpee Home Gardens.



planted and when fall vegetables should be planted. The garden centers also need to be sure they have the vegetable transplants ready for sale for consumers, so they can plan their gardens. Garden centers can show gardeners they can have fresh vegetables into the fall. And in some parts of the country with milder climates, gardeners can be growing vegetables year-round."

Lee says garden centers can provide great added value by educating gardeners with seminars or classes on fall gardening.

"This isn't something that consumers can easily look up online and see a general article on fall vegetable gardening that will give them

the appropriate information for their area," she says. "Garden centers are the perfect venue to target an audience in their specific location. A quick class could be offered to provide gardeners with plant selection, growing and harvesting tips. They could also send out newsletters or emails reminding gardeners about fall vegetable gardening and explain the benefits of having nutritious, fresh vegetables at this time of year."

Lee says consumers are eager for more information at the point of sale.

"Most gardeners are not as familiar with gardening in the fall," she says. "Adding additional marketing into the displays, including

more ancillary information, could push sales and give gardening consumers more confidence to try more. There could be eye-catching signage indicating the varieties along with three points or benefits of why consumers would want to 'grow their own' fall vegetables.

"If gardeners know they could be eating fresh salads in 30 days that just might be enough of an incentive for them to purchase additional plants and try growing a fall vegetable crop." **LGR**

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