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February is a busy month in the garden

By David Blood & Mark Brunell

In most areas of the country, February is a time to read seed catalogs and plan a dream vegetable garden for the coming year. Not so in our Mediterranean climate. Despite what many people think, February is a busy month in the food garden. If a fall crop was planted, vegetables like bok choy, chard, collards, fava beans, garlic, kale, lettuce, peas, shallots, and spinach are now undergoing active growth and require routine pest management and fertilization. Much of the fall crop can now be harvested. In colder, inland areas, or in any area that received a lot of chilling in the last few weeks, there is a risk of bolting (flowering) in several of these cool-season vegetables. If there are indications that the plants are starting to elongate and form flower buds then harvest the plants quickly as the quality of the product will diminish upon bolting.

In preparation for the spring crop, several cool-season root vegetables can be planted directly into the ground (direct-seeded) after preparing the garden soil. These vegetables include beets, carrots, radishes, parsnips and turnips. Making indoor starts of these root vegetables and then transplanting them could injure their roots so direct-seeding is preferred. Fava beans, potatoes, garlic, and shallots can also be planted directly into the ground now. Use certified disease-free seed potatoes. Starts that were seeded and grown indoors, 4 – 6 weeks earlier, can now be put into the ground. These include broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, collards, kale, kohlrabi, lettuce and onion (bulbing). Another crop of lettuce and chard can now be started from seed indoors in pots, grown under lights or in a sunny window. The resulting starts will be set out in March.

February is also a good time to plant perennial vegetable rootstocks and tubers, like rhubarb, horseradish, artichoke, asparagus, and Jerusalem artichoke. Since these species will persist for many years, choose the planting location carefully, allow room for spread, and make sure they won't shade other food plants. It is also a good time to plant new fruit trees and berries as they become available in nurseries and online.

Looking ahead, seeds for some of the upcoming warm-season crops can be started indoors, especially tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant. Starts of these vegetables (actually fruits) will be set out in April. Note that the garden can usually take only a few tomato plants because of their large size, so expect to be giving away some starts if you plant a lot of seed. Other warm-season crops, like beans, corn, cucumber, melon and squash, are best direct-seeded in the garden in April.

The timing of planting for vegetables will vary with the proximity to the coast. In general, gardens closer to the bay will experience less chilling and fewer (or no) frosts, and therefore the bolting of cool-season vegetables, and cold-burn damage, is less likely.

Also, plant growth will be more active during the winter than further inland because of the milder temperatures. For the gardener closer to the bay, the growing season for cool-season vegetables is therefore longer, less risky, more flexible and planting can start earlier and finish later compared to inland sites which will suffer from early fall and late spring heat and a colder winter. Gardeners must therefore experiment with planting times to discover the best schedule for their sites.

It may seem early for pest problems, but the western spotted cucumber beetle has already made its appearance in the inland areas in late January and is already defoliating leafy vegetables. It is important to control snails, slugs, and earwigs, which are all highly active and hungry right now. Weeds are also a problem in February, because many species are germinating from seed, and many overwintering weeds, like chickweed, dandelion, henbit, annual bluegrass, and common groundsel, are all setting new seed right now. To prevent weeds in the future, destroy these weeds before they get a chance to disperse their seeds, and remove all weed seedlings. It is especially important to keep weeds out of the onion and garlic beds. For fruit tree maintenance, begin thinking about dormant pruning before the flower buds begin to swell. For peaches, to help keep peach leaf curl in check, apply fixed copper dormant spray to the trees before the young leaves appear. Ideally, this treatment would be the second dormant spray, following the first one taking place just after leaf fall several months ago. If the garden has apple and/or pear trees, February is a good time to reduce future codling moth problems by cleaning up debris and old fruit from under the trees, and to start thinking about acquiring codling moth traps for deployment in March.

Send comments or questions on this article to acmgfeedback@ucdavis.edu. For more information on food gardening and pest control, visit the UC California Garden Web website, <http://cagardenweb.ucdavis.edu/>, and the UC Integrated Pest Management Program website, <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/>.

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Bok Choy, Shallots, Garlic, and lettuce are common cool-season vegetables that are actively growing in February.