

Nevada's All-weather Gardening

By Susan M. Botich

Cold-frame gardening has four purposes, says Karyn Johnson, the school gardens coordinator for the University of Nevada, Reno Food For Thoughts program.

- 1 To over-winter plants you want to grow during the winter months that are too sensitive to the cold.
- 2 To start seeds earlier in the season by building a closure over the plants to keep moisture in the soil and keep plants warm enough during that early season.
- 3 To extend the season through the fall by covering with a hoop frame and a sheet of clear plastic, anchored by bricks or large rocks.
- 4 To start plants in a greenhouse and harden them off in the cold-frame.

Many kinds of plants may grow well in a cold-frame, according to Johnson.

"Herbs work quite well," she says. "Lettuces, cucumbers and squash may be planted in cold-frames in early spring – as early as March. You can, basically, extend your growing season by about two months using a cold-frame."

Cold-frames differ from a greenhouse in that they are usually smaller and you don't walk into them, according to Pawl Hollis, owner of Rail City Garden in Sparks.

"Cold-frames are generally buried into the ground," says Hollis. "They are not heated. They rely on the biomass of the soil to keep warm. They collect solar heat during the day and distribute that heat at night."

Some vegetables actually prefer the cold weather, says Hollis.

"You can start seedlings early and go into the winter months," he says, "like lettuce, radishes, herbs, spinach, Swiss chard, kale, carrots – they can all do quite nicely. They like the cold weather. They just can't freeze."

"Late season or cool-season crops do well in a cold-frame," adds Bill Carlos, horticulturist for the Wilbur D. May Arboretum and Botanical Garden, Washoe County Regional Parks and Open Space. Start leafy lettuce and other cool-season crops such as broccoli in October, and time them to mature in early to mid-December for fresh, homegrown vegetables during the holidays.

SOIL

Johnson and Hollis agree that the best soil to use in a cold-frame is organic.

"You want to have a lot of micro-organisms," says Hollis. "You may use packaged potting soil. It can have sand, peat moss and bark. You need it to be porous for aeration, not heavy. You want it to retain water but have good drainage. It should have high organic material."

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– Cold-frames

“Organic soil helps retain the heat better,” adds Johnson. “You can also pile mulch around the base area of the plants in the cold-frame. The mulch is always breaking down, making its own warmth.”

FERTILIZER

“I’m a big advocate of organic fertilizers,” says Hollis. “You want to keep a pH balance of about 6.5. Add the right amount of kelp meal, alfalfa meal or fish meal to keep it in balance.”

Fertilizing when it’s already too cold, however, doesn’t help the plants, says Johnson.

“When the soil is 60 degrees or below, the soil won’t take up the fertilizer,” she says. “If you’re going to plant in the spring, fertilize in October, before it’s too cold. Then, place your cold-frame closure over it. The fertilizer will get taken up for the spring planting.”

AIR

Some gardeners underestimate just how warm it can get inside a cold-frame and how important it is to open it up during the heat of the day to let the plants breathe, says Hollis.

“If we have a real calm clear day, it can get real hot – about 100 degrees,” he warns. “Plants need to dry out and cool off. Some people try to get them too warm. It’s more important that the roots stay warm than the tops of the plants. Keep the root zone warm and the top ➤



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Cold frames

of the plant cool. You'll have less disease that way."

PLANTING TIME

The best time to plant when using a cold-frame can be determined by reading the seed packet, according to Johnson. "Back it up by one month," she says.

WATER

As for how often to water, "Watering depth and ratio should not change when using a cold-frame," says Johnson. "The only thing you change is how often you water," she says. "Give your plants the same amount of water each time you water. Saturate the roots."

"Use a good organic soil, utilize a compost pile and cultivate the ➤

Cold-frames 3 styles

A cold-frame is typically three to four feet wide. It is not designed to climb into. You want to be able to reach all the plants from the outside. The cold-frame should face south, running east to west in length. It can be sloped lower on the south side and higher on the north side.

For extending your plants' growing season into fall, plant in rows first, and then build the cold-frame over it. You may use a plastic hoop frame tunnel system:

- a. Place hoops (like hoola-hoops) into the ground over the planted rows, as a series of rings arching over the planted area.
- b. Cover with clear plastic.
- c. Anchor with heavy bricks or rocks placed around the edges.

Portable wooden or aluminum cold-frames can be easily stored during the off-season and are sometimes collapsible. This type has hinges with a lift-up lid. Plexiglas may be placed over the top. It is sunk down into the ground about four inches so it has a sub-soil surface.

For a more permanent cold-frame, dig down in the ground about 12 to 18 inches. The ground remains about 68 degrees throughout winter at this depth. Line the inner edges with cinder block for support. Cover with Plexiglas or clear plastic.



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What not to grow in a cold-frame

"Anything that grows too high," says Rail City Gardens' Pawl Hollis. "There's nothing (within your growing zone) that can't grow in a cold-frame. It's just that some plants might out-grow it."

"You shouldn't try to grow something in a cold-frame that doesn't grow well at all in our area," adds Johnson. "You have to use your zone guide."

soil with new organic material," says Hollis.

Whether you buy or build your own cold-frame, follow these tips and add two months to your growing year!

Susan Botich is a Minden-based freelance writer.



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