

Improve your cash-flow with winter vegetables.

Jan van der Heide
Bejo Seeds, Inc.
1088 Healey Road
Geneva, NY 14456
j.vanderheide@bejoseeds.com
805-689-1783

Growing and selling in summer

For smaller vegetable operations in New England, the production of vegetables during the relatively short summer growing season is combined with immediate marketing of freshly harvested crops. This combination of seasonal production and marketing puts large demands on farm resources and management, and pushes the endurance of human resources to the limit. In addition, the concentration of production and marketing during the summer season results in dramatic fluctuations in the cash-flow of the operation (lots of money going around in the summer and fall, little activity in winter, expenses without income in spring.)

Efforts at creating a steadier stream of income throughout the year have focused on season extension of production in early spring and late fall through the use of frost protection materials to protect tender crops, to hasten maturity for early markets or by extending the harvest of some fall crops. Using these techniques, growers can gain a few weeks in the spring and a few weeks in the fall, depending on weather conditions.

Growing and selling in winter

Some growers have developed winter sales with winter production. Typically, the winter production of vegetable crops is limited to an indoor, protected environment (heated greenhouses, tunnels). Low temperatures and low light conditions in winter, however, often require large inputs of energy (heat, lights). Consequently, only crops with a short production cycle and high potential return (but short shelf-life) are economically viable under these conditions, and easy access to good markets is essential to generate enough income to offset the investments in the greenhouses or tunnels and the costs of operating them (labor, fuel). These crops typically are greens (spinach, chard, lettuce), with few others.

Growing in summer – selling in summer and winter.

Growers can even out the cash-flow of their operations by considering a variety of crops that can be grown in summer and that can be maintained in the field or in storage for sales in the “off-season” while avoiding the high costs of winter production in the Northeast. Growing a mix of crops for immediate fresh-market sales and storage crops during the summer months will still concentrate field labor during the growing season, but will generate opportunities for winter sales without major investments in structures for winter production, fuel and labor. The winter sales can help generate revenue for winter living expenses, and can off-set operating expenses of the coming production season.

Planning for winter sales

Winter crops do not grow in winter, but must be grown in summer! Typical winter crops will need more time to grow than the average summer crops – winter crops grow slower because they make smaller cells, contain less water, have higher dry matter, and often higher nutritional value. This hardy nature of winter crops makes them well-suited to extended storage without loss of quality.

In contrast to summer crops, winter crops must be harvested just before peak maturity. Crops that are over-matured will not store as well as crops that are slightly immature. Crops for storage should be grown to mature in late fall for harvest when pulp temperatures are low. This will help maintain quality in storage, and facilitate the management of the storage without expensive temperature and climate control equipment. Be careful to give the crops enough time to mature, because cooler temperatures and lower light conditions in the fall will stretch the traditional “days-to-maturity”.

Storage in the field and in the barn

Most winter crops are traditionally brought into storage. In most cases, the crops are removed from the field with an excess of leaves and roots, leaving some soil on the roots, and washing should be avoided for best storage. For many crops, trimming is all that is needed to prepare the crops for sale, but some root crops will require washing to remove dirt, of course.

Some crops are hardy enough and can handle enough frost to be kept in the field for most of the winter, such as winter cabbages, winter hardy kales, Brussels sprouts, carrots, winter hardy radicchio, some types of leeks, and some winter cauliflowers. Depending on the winter weather conditions in your area, these types of crops can offer opportunities for winter sales without investments in storage facilities.

Other crops will not take repeated freezing, and need to be harvested and stored in (un-heated) storages (barn, root cellar, etc.). Examples of such crops are beets, celeriac, endives, Chinese cabbage, salad cabbages, rutabaga, root parsley, onions, shallots, etc.

Changing perceptions of winter crops

Not just your grandma’s cabbage and turnips! Winter crops include a wide selection of tastes, colors and textures for tasty and satisfying dishes. Winter crops tend to have high amounts of flavor components and are supremely suited to slow-food dishes, although many can also be enjoyed as raw or minimally prepared foods.

Marketing of winter crops will take a commitment to consumer education, especially when it comes to the types of products that are not familiar to the average consumer (celeriac, leeks, rooted parsley, winter cabbage, kale, etc.).

It is sometimes easier to offer unfamiliar vegetables in pre-selected combinations with other vegetables in packages that explore familiar themes, such as soup and stew packages. For example, a soup packet would offer potatoes, carrots, onions in combination with leeks and celeriac. The consumer takes home all the ingredients for a home-made soup, and becomes familiar with celeriac in the process.

Packaging together vegetables can explore several themes, such as mashing vegetables (pairing potatoes with either celeriac, carrots, endive, or rutabaga), salad vegetables (beets, kohlrabi, salad cabbages, carrots, etc.), or roasting vegetables (carrots, shallots, baby beets, Brussels sprouts, etc.)