Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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At this time of the year the majority of gardeners are almost finished harvesting and processing the fruits and vegetables they've been growing all summer. Many have also been looking ahead to the fast-approaching fall and wondering if maybe this year they should finally bite the bullet and plant for the very first time a fall crop of some type. For years they've put off trying to grow a crop in the fall, because they are concerned about whether or not what they plant will survive that first big ugly plant killing frost. Well, quit putting it off and instead quickly research the many books that are now in print which describe in fine detail which plants will survive that first frost and will also survive and continue to grow on into the winter months.

There is another big question in many a gardener's minds too: Are there ways of extending the growing season for those plants which haven't completed their growing cycle? The answer is a great big resounding, "Yes!" What is interesting is that both of these legitimate concerns and questions have similar answers because many home gardeners have been working around these types of adverse conditions for years. And more recently huge agricultural manufacturing conglomerates have done extensive research into discovering radically new farming processes that minimize all late fall crop failures, in breeding and then making new seed varieties available to the public, and in producing new farm equipment and products that truly extend the growing season.

So how does a gardener extend the growing season? By simply mulching around the root area of your plants with grass clippings and/or with fall leaves you help in staving off frost damage. Another fairly simple method is to cut the bottom off a plastic milk bottle, and place it over the top of shorter plants. In Europe for centuries farmers and growers have been using glass bottles, called cloches or bell jars, which in effect do the same thing as a milk bottle: they protect the plant! But it is time consuming to put a bottle over each individual plant in ones yard.

Commercial farmers, university resources, and agricultural manufacturing companies have been experimenting for years with various methods to replace the cloche and bell jars with something that was both fairly cheap and could also be quickly placed over long rows of commercial crops. They have come up with something called a row cover, which is now readily available to the home grower too.

Row covers are simply tunnels made from various materials that are placed over the crops. Instead of only being placed over a single plant, they are typically placed over the full length of a row of crops. Several types of material are used for different purposes but basically most are manufactured from a clear, light-gauge polypropylene which comes either unvented, slit or punched. The tunnels are supported by a series of hoops, which can be made of either metal or a bendable plastic pipe. They are placed at intervals along the row and the cover is laid over them and weighted along the edge. A small mound of dirt will do it, so the wind won't blow the cover off. The ends of the tunnels also need to be closed.

Some gardeners have recently been experimenting with row covers in their greenhouses and cold frames and report that they've found that they can reduce the amount of heat that they need to keep the plants warm. The air under the row covers in many cases is ten degrees warmer than that found in the rest of the greenhouse. A new type of row cover, called a floating row cover, is now being manufactured also which has the added advantage over the older style in that it can be placed directly on top of the plant without the need of the hoops. An additional advantage to row covers is that they will protect the crops from pests and airborne diseases.

Come spring, these same methods can also be used for all the very same reasons as to why they are used in the fall. They can just as easily protect new young seedlings from an unexpected late frost early in the spring.

This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.