



Garden Tips & Techniques: First Frost

Fall makes its mark on the Pittsburgh landscape. Leaves turn to vibrant yellows, oranges, and reds; the air is brisk, and weather stations put out frost advisories. So what's the deal with the first frost – what does it mean for the garden?

Frost

Frost forms when water in the air condenses and freezes. This powdery white coating is actually made up of small, sharp crystals which can damage plants along with freezing temperatures.

How Does Frost Affect Plants?

Some plants, like pine trees, are very hardy to frost and freezing temperatures. They are unharmed by the frost and freezing temperatures. Other plants, like most vegetables and herbs in the garden, will become damaged or die with the frost. A light frost kills most crops that thrive in summer temperatures, and a heavy frost will wipe out a significant variety of plants in the vegetable garden.

What to Do:

If a frost is coming, harvest any crops that are highly frost sensitive (see the list below). If there are peppers on the plant, now's the time to pick all of them (for hot peppers, you can pull the whole plant, then hang inside to dry). Same with tomatoes – once the frost comes it will damage the fruits, so pick the green tomatoes too. (Fried green tomatoes, anyone!?) Also bring in any winter squash and dig sweet potatoes.

For crops that are a little hardier, like lettuce or arugula, a light fabric cover like an old sheet or [“row cover”](#) can keep frost from settling on the plants. A fabric cover may extend your gardening season by keeping your plants alive and harvest-able through several frosts.

Frost can actually improve some crops! Cooking greens become sweeter and tastier after they've gotten good and cold. So leave collards, chard, and kale out in the open. Place a layer of mulch - straw or dead leaves – around the base of these plants, and they may even weather the winter! Carrots and beets are also sweeter after a freeze.

Frost Sensitivity

Very Sensitive: Warm-season crops like basil, tomatoes, summer squash, peppers, eggplants, beans, okra, mustard greens, cucumbers, sweet potatoes, and winter squash.

Somewhat Sensitive: Lettuce, arugula, cilantro, parsley.

Hardy: Swiss chard, collards, kale, spinach, carrots, beets, turnips, radishes, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, sage, thyme.