Grub's on in the kitchen garden

Keep a fresh supply of homegrown vegies at the ready for easy-to-prepare winter meals, writes **Robyn Willis**

As the weather turns cold, it's a great time for enjoying soups, stews and casseroles. And there's nothing more enjoyable — or convenient — than being able to pop out into your own backyard to harvest fresh ingredients to add to the pot.

Director of Landart Landscapes Matt Leacy says kitchen and herb gardens have attracted a certain cache among foodies keen to showcase their organic credentials.

"People like to show off their vegie gardens now," he says.

"They like to pick herbs and vegetables in front of guests so you know they are using fresh vegies and they are investing more time into growing organic vegies."

Whether you're into entertaining at home or you would just like to provide your family with the freshest possible produce, growing your own food is an achievable option.

And while it is traditionally a quiet time of year in the garden, winter provides a good opportunity to plant a few vegies and leafy greens ideal for warding off seasonal colds.

Matt Leacy from Landart says it's possible to grow leafy greens throughout winter.

Green lights

Leacy says his own vegie patch is still producing salad greens and members of the brassica family such as cabbages and broccoli to share with his wife and three children.

"We eat a lot of salad, so I grow a variety of lettuces all year round," he says. "I also like to grow kale and cabbages because my wife is into kale shakes."

It's also a good time of year for planting radishes, onions, shallots and child-friendly favourites such as peas and snow peas that can be eaten straight off the vine.

Leafy vegetables such as rocket and spinach can be planted now to be harvested within a matter of weeks.

"Even garlic is good to go in now, although it takes about 16 weeks to harvest," Leacy says.

Most of the Mediterranean-style herbs such as rosemary, oregano and thyme will happily go in the ground at this time of year.

Even coriander, which can suffer in summer's humidity or bolt to seed too quickly in the warmer months, is a good option in winter, Leacy says.

If you want your kitchen garden to be successful, proximity is the key, Leacy says.

"How close it is to the kitchen is important," he says. "The further away it is, the more likely it will be forgotten.

"Light is important as well. You need the right amount of sunlight to maintain growth."

If space is tight, pots are ideal for growing shallow-rooted greens such as lettuces.

"You can pack them in together and they will still look good," he says. "If you have mainly greens in there, add a red oak leaf lettuce or a silver curry leaf to make it a little more decorative. "

Ready, set, grow

If none of those appeal, Leacy says winter is an ideal time to prepare your soil for spring. Those living in urban areas may prefer to go with raised garden beds to avoid contact with contaminated soils.

"Built-up vegie gardens are best if you have any concerns about your soil quality because you can never really be sure what has happened before you got there," he says. "You can get your soils tested at a testing laboratory quite easily if you'd like to find out."

For existing beds, dig in mushroom compost and chicken manure.

"Give it a couple of months to settle in," he says. "It's a good idea to heavily mulch your vegie garden to keep it in good condition."

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Pictures Robyn Willis

A small raised garden bed near the house can grow plenty of food.