

THE BACKYARD HOMESTEADER

The Fall Brassica Seed Starting Guide

*Backward planning for broccoli, cabbage, and kale
from seed tray to September transplant*

ZONE 9b · CENTRAL VALLEY · FRESNO COUNTY

FROM MY BACKYARD TO YOURS

Why Timing Matters More Than the Weather Feels

Right now the garden still feels like the middle of summer, sweet one, but the fall brassicas are already on the clock.

In zone 9b, the fall growing window doesn't open on a fixed calendar date. It opens when the heat actually breaks, when daytime temperatures reliably fall below 90 degrees and nighttime temperatures settle below 60. Here in Fresno and across the Central Valley, that usually happens sometime in mid to late September.

Plant a brassica transplant before that window opens and it struggles in ground that is still too hot to support it. Wait too long past it and the shortening fall days leave less time for the plant to reach harvest. The window is real, and it moves on its own schedule, not ours.

The garden doesn't wait for us to feel ready. It opens the door when conditions are right, and our work is simply to have strong transplants standing there when it does.

The Backward Planning Math

Once you know when the fall window opens, the seed starting date isn't a guess. It's a calculation, counted backward from that opening day.

- 1 Fall transplant window opens in Zone 9b: mid to late September
- 2 Broccoli varieties like Waltham 29 need 80 to 85 days from transplant to harvest
- 3 A September 1 transplant needs 6 to 7 weeks of indoor growth first to be strong enough for the ground
- 4 Counting 6 to 7 weeks back from September 1 lands on July 15 to July 22

That is the whole logic behind the date. Not a tradition, not a guess passed down, just the math of the season worked out in reverse.

Your Zone 9b Fall Brassica Calendar

Every brassica works from the same backward math, though the exact seed starting date shifts a little depending on how long each crop needs to mature. Here is how the main fall crops line up for a Central Valley garden.

Crop	Days to Harvest	Indoor Start	Transplant Window	Expected Harvest
Broccoli (Waltham 29)	80–85 days	July 15–22	Early September	Late October
Cabbage	70–90 days	July 15–22	Early to mid September	Late October to November
Cauliflower	70–80 days	July 15–22	Early to mid September	Late October
Kale	55–65 days	Late July	Mid September	Late October
Brussels Sprouts	90–100 days	Mid July	Early September	November into December

A note on Brussels sprouts. They take the longest of the bunch, so if you are growing them this fall, they are the first tray to start and the last crop you will harvest, often stretching into the cooler weeks of December.

What to Have Ready by July 15

- ☐ Seed starting trays or 4-inch pots with drainage
- ☐ A seed starting mix, not garden soil, for the indoor trays
- ☐ A warm, bright spot indoors or a shaded porch, brassicas germinate best between 65 and 75 degrees
- ☐ Seeds for your chosen varieties, ordered or on hand
- ☐ A simple label for each tray so nothing gets mixed up six weeks from now

Starting Your Seeds, Step by Step

Indoor Seed Starting

- ☐ Fill trays with moistened seed starting mix, not garden soil
- ☐ Sow seeds a quarter inch deep, two per cell in case one doesn't sprout
- ☐ Keep the mix consistently moist but never soggy
- ☐ Provide bright light, a sunny window or grow light works well
- ☐ Thin to one seedling per cell once true leaves appear

Hardening Off and Transplanting

- ☐ About a week before transplanting, set trays outside a few hours a day, increasing gradually
- ☐ Transplant on an overcast morning or in late afternoon to ease the shock of full sun
- ☐ Water deeply right after transplanting
- ☐ Add a layer of mulch to hold moisture as temperatures are still warm
- ☐ Watch closely the first week, brassicas will let you know quickly if they are stressed

A Few Varieties Worth Growing

Waltham 29 Broccoli

A reliable heirloom for Central Valley falls, known for producing a solid main head followed by generous side shoots after the first harvest.

Early Jersey Wakefield Cabbage

A compact, quick maturing cabbage that fits well into a fall bed and handles a Central Valley cool season with ease.

Snowball Cauliflower

A classic white curd variety that rewards steady moisture and a bit of shade from its own leaves as the head forms.

Lacinato (Dinosaur) Kale

Forgiving and productive, this one keeps giving through the fall and often well into the cooler months beyond.

A Few Things to Watch For

After a few seasons of running this same backward math, sweet one, here is what tends to trip people up along the way.

Starting Too Late

The single biggest thing that shrinks a fall brassica harvest is simply starting later than the six to seven week window allows. A smaller transplant in September means a smaller plant working against shortening days, and there is no way to speed that back up once the window has slipped.

Leggy Seedlings

If your seedlings stretch tall and thin, they are reaching for more light than they are getting. Move them closer to a window or a grow light, and don't be afraid to bury a leggy stem a bit deeper at transplant time, brassicas root readily along a buried stem.

Transplanting Into Still Hot Soil

Even once your transplants are ready, the ground itself needs to have cooled. If the soil is still baking in September heat, give the transplants a little afternoon shade with a cloth or row cover for their first week or two in the ground.

Skipping the Hardening Off Step

Seedlings that move straight from a sheltered indoor spot into full garden sun and wind often stall out from the shock. A week of gradually increasing outdoor time makes a real difference in how quickly they settle in.

Remember the whole point of July 15. It isn't a rule to follow perfectly. It is simply the latest point on the calendar where the math still works in your favor. A few days late is still worth doing. A few weeks late is where the harvest really starts to shrink.

"While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease."

Genesis 8:22

Every seed you start this week is a small act of trust in a season that hasn't arrived yet. I hope this guide gives you  what you need to meet it well.

From my backyard to yours,
Aunt C

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