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32. Gardens thrive amid season's chill Community plots use various techniques to keep soil warm, plants growing

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Illustration: Photo

Caption: MATTHEW SCHUELER harvests vegetables Tuesday from the community garden in Ridgefield Park in Albany.

SKIP DICKSTEIN

/TIMES UNION SKIP DICKSTEIN/TIMES UNION MATTHEW SCHUELER, harvesting crops in Ridgefield Park in Albany, uses a fabric to keep soil warm.

By JULIE A. **VARUGHESE**
Special to the Times Union

Community gardens don't always gather twigs and snow when Old Man Winter comes howling.

As gardeners around the Capital Region finished cleaning up their plots this fall, some plants that thrive in the colder weather were left behind to flourish in their desired temperatures.

“There are some crops, like collard greens, that people purposely leave in because frost sweetens the collards,” said Amy Klein, executive director of Capital District Community Gardens, which manages about 45 gardens.

Techniques to keep the soil warm in the winter include building row covers, which are constructed using PVC pipes covered by plastic sheets or Remay, a fabric.

“In effect, you're creating a little mini greenhouse,” said Amy DeShon, executive

director of American Community Gardening Association.

DeShon said laying compost and straw on plant beds also keeps the soil warm.

Albany gardener Matthew Schueler uses Remy, allowing him to continue growing radishes and two varieties of lettuce in below-freezing temperatures.

Schueler still keeps growing his carrots, herb plants and mache (pronounced ma-SHAY), a winter salad green that thrives in cold weather.

With upstate New York's climate growing warmer and more humid, the growing season also is expanding for demanding summer plants.

Schueler said as a lifelong gardener, he can't help but notice the warmer temperatures. He said warm, wet weather made 2007 a good year for gardening.

``When I was a kid, you never planted tomatoes before the 15th of May," he said. ``As a person growing vegetables now, it would be foolish not to get an earlier start."

Three more community gardens are being added next year to feed growing local interest, Klein said.

She said gardeners like being able to plant in organic soil, getting exercise and interacting with their neighbors.

DeShon said she has seen increased interest in community gardening across the country because of the lower cost of production and people's desire to know where their food comes from.

``This is a situation where open space and city ordinances and zoning needs to permit more use of vacant land for this purpose," she said. ``We need to keep it in perpetuity, because when we run out of oil, we're going to have to produce these things locally." Varughese, an environmental journalism fellow from the Metcalf Institute for Marine and Environmental Reporting at the University of Rhode Island, can be reached at 454-5587 or by e-mail at jvarughese@timesunion.com.