

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

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What to Do and What NOT Do This Month; Fall Pests

Fortunately for gardeners that might have planted their winter vegetables a bit late, it has been warm and wet enough this fall to stimulate a good burst of growth in root crops, cabbage family plants and leafy greens. Before I left for a trip in mid-September, I gave my cabbages a tug to disrupt their roots a bit in hopes of preventing them from splitting if there was heavy rain while I was away (it seemed there was, indeed, a downpour). This worked for most of the cabbages, but two did split anyway—one of them nearly turning the head inside out. Splitting occurs when plants that have been receiving a moderate or low water supply, suddenly receive a lot of water in a short period of time. The sudden uptake of plenty of water causes the cells in maturing roots and fruit to expand too quickly. At the end of the season splitting is always a risk in this region where dry summers and water scarcity often means that gardens are kept a bit short of water. A heavy rainfall early in the fall can result in split carrots, potatoes, cabbage, late varieties of apples, even cucumbers and zucchini.

According to my garden journal, by this time last year, I had already collected all of the leaves I needed for winter mulching and to stockpile for next summer. This year, however, leaves seem to be dropping several weeks later and I have yet to start raking them. Collecting leaves for winter mulch is a key gardening task this month—along with planting garlic, of course. I don't think I can improve on the list of tasks contained in my October 6, 2024 message http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html so I refer you to that for information on planting garlic, mulching with fall leaves and moving garden plants into greenhouses for a winter supply of leafy greens. With that ground covered 😊, here is another task for this month:

Stake top heavy vegetables: With rain and windy weather forecast for much of the region this weekend, it is a reminder that top heavy vegetables, particularly in the Brassica/cabbage family, are well supported so that wind (and wet snow later on) doesn't uproot them or break the stems. For tall plants, such as Brussels sprouts, driving in a sturdy stake and tying the plant to it might be best as they can really catch the wind. For medium sized plants, such as winter broccoli and winter cauliflower plants, I either use tomato cages carefully slipped down over the plants or I drive in 3 or 4 bamboo stakes around each stem. Cabbages are close to the ground and less likely to be blown over, but a few stakes driven in around each head is a good idea, especially for varieties that have a bit of a longer stem below the head.



Winter cauliflower & broccoli staked up and mulched.

And here are some tasks NOT to do this month:

There may still be some folks following the long-outdated practice of spreading compost or manure on their gardens in the fall. This is just a reminder not to do that. Winter rains simply leach out the soluble nutrients, especially nitrogen, which is a waste and a loss for your plants, but it also pollutes water bodies if it runs off

into ditches and then into streams. If you have a pile of compost or manure, spread a tarp over it to shed rain and prevent waterlogging. It will be in perfect condition to use in the spring.

Don't cultivate soil in the fall. Just do the minimum required to amend the soil where you are going to plant garlic. Any empty beds should be mulched for winter, using leaves, straw, garden waste—whatever you have. Disturbed soil is easily eroded in winter rain, which also causes the loss of nutrients. A thick mulch for winter kills weeds, prevents new seeds from germinating and will be largely digested into the soil by late spring—when it will all be ready to plant with very little effort.

Cleaning up the garden? Fight the urge to tidy up the garden! Only do the minimum, such as cutting down asparagus ferns after they turn yellow. Cut off plants that will decompose quickly and leave them in place on the soil, such as pea and bean plants, squash and cucumber vines. Remember that leaving organic material on the surface of the soil builds soil organic matter faster than digging in compost—so 'chop and drop' works really well. If you don't like the appearance, spread some fall leaves on top of the garden waste—but you would be surprised how quickly the waste material just collapses and turns brown.

Fall pests

Climbing cutworms, the usual suspects.... These caterpillars are small right now, but are climbing up plants to chew on leaves at night. They really like leafy greens, especially Chinese cabbage, but can feed on just about any vegetable, even leeks. If not caught, they continue to feed all winter, whenever nights are a few degrees above freezing. Get a jump on them right now by going out after dark with a flashlight to find and remove caterpillars from the plants. Be sure to also search the undersides of leaves. Such inspections should tell you whether you are dealing mainly with caterpillars or slugs, or both. If slugs, you can use the iron/ferric phosphate slug baits (the bait pellets dissolve in rain, so sprinkle small amounts, frequently, around the bed). If you find caterpillars, continue your nocturnal raids a few times a week until damage stops. There won't be more caterpillars hatching from eggs this late in the season, so once you catch the cutworms that are present now, there won't be more until late next year.

What "critter" is causing damage? Since damage often occurs at night, it is hard to know what has attacked a plant. Sometimes I am sent photos asking what insect could have chewed this plant, when it looks like the kind of chewing that only a mammal with teeth could possibly do. One clue is how tough the plant material is: Caterpillars and slugs can eat holes in leaves between tough leaf veins and they can gnaw on soft stems of young plants, but on mature leaves, a caterpillar usually can't chew across tough, central leaf veins. They can't nip off the ends of woody twigs either, so such damage is likely from a larger animal. Large birds, such as jay, flickers, crows, are also busy poking holes in late apples and pears still on trees. To distinguish their damage from rat chewing, look for holes in fruit that seem to be made by deeper, narrower beak pecks—though once a bird starts in on an apple, they can make such a wide hole that it can be hard to tell who did it. Raccoons are also garden raiders, but they are more likely to steal away whole fruit (and nuts) rather than eat it on the spot. They also dig up things (such as newly planted garlic) and dig around the edges of beds and pathways for grubs and earthworms. Squirrels and rats are common culprits, too—and, of course, there can be several kinds of critters feasting on crops at the same time. For what to do about rats, have a look at my message from November 13, 2024 at http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html



Bird damage to fall apple still on the tree.