

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

March 8, 2013

Chitting, Digging & Sprouting

With the mild and calm winter this year, overwintered crops are going into spring in great shape: purple sprouting broccoli is heading up; leafy greens had little damage and are starting to grow; leeks, carrots, beets and other roots are still in good shape.

Digging: I just dug a bucket of carrots today, however, and found one or two that had started to sprout new little white roots--a sure sign that they feel spring is here. The carrots are still sweet and crisp, but I plan to dig the rest within the next week or two and put them in the refrigerator. A good thick mulch helps to delay this day, but if you have room in your fridge for the rest of your root crops, it would be good to dig them soon to maintain the best quality.

Chitting: Any time now you can start chitting (pre-sprouting) some seed potatoes for the earliest planting by putting them on a bright windowsill. In a couple of weeks they will have grown stubby, dark green sprouts from the eyes and can be set out with a nice head start. Small seed potatoes are planted whole, whereas large ones can be cut into a couple of chunks to plant separately (check that each has at least one eye). If you are cutting up large seed potatoes, don't do it until a day or two before you plant. This gives time for the cut surfaces on the chitted potatoes to seal over, but isn't so long that the chunks shrivel up.

Sprouting: For an early start on peas, start a batch indoors any time this month. Even though peas can germinate at low temperatures, their optimum germination temperature is 24 degrees C. I fit about 30 pea seeds into a 1-litre milk carton filled with vermiculite or Perlite (lay the container on a long side, cut out the top side to make a big container and punch drain holes in the bottom). Put it in a bright, sunny window, keeping it moist, but not soggy. There is enough food in the seed to sustain seedlings for a couple of weeks. Pea roots are wiry and easy to disentangle for planting when they are in a loose medium. If you don't want to use vermiculite or Perlite, however, you can certainly start peas in soil, but give each seed more root space (such as 1 seed per cell of an egg carton) because the soil is heavier and roots are more liable to get broken.

Seeding: If you are starting your own peppers, now is the time. They take a bit longer than tomatoes and some people will have even started their tomatoes indoors by now. There is still time to start leeks and onions from seed too, but don't wait another minute to do it. Be sure to keep moving tomatoes and pepper seedlings into larger pots as they outgrow the ones they are in--it is going to be quite awhile before they can go out.

For outdoor seeding, eager gardeners without overwintering greens are chomping at the bit to sow seeds. While it is still much too cold for good germination or growth, gardeners are gardeners and experiments will be done. Annuals (lettuce, spinach, corn salad, Chinese cabbage) are better bets for early seeding than biennials (chard, beets, carrots, onions, kale, cabbage, etc.) because biennial seedlings can be fooled by a late cold spell in April or May into responding as if winter has passed. This is called vernalization and it means they switch development to making seeds--so in midsummer they bolt to seed instead of producing the crop. Seeding these in late April to May avoids this risk. Newcomers to

my newsletter might want to read my note from April 2, 2011 about this:

<http://www.saltspringenergystrategy.org/docs/Winter%20Gardening%202011%20-%20April%202.pdf>

Squishing: Climbing cutworms (the larvae of Large Yellow Underwing Moth) are rampaging through overwintered greens and other plants right now. If you want to know what to look for, see:

http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/leaf_chewers.html#25

They come out at night to chew on plants, so take a flashlight and go out shortly after dark to look for them on leaves of plants being damaged.

Upcoming gardening classes: There is still space in several of my one-day gardening courses. The next one is *Backyard Bounty: Small Garden, Large Yield* on March 24th, 10-4:00 at the Cowichan Campus of Vancouver Island University in Duncan. See the Continuing Education courses on the VIU website

<http://www.cc.viu.ca/ce/> or pg. 11 of this brochure: <http://www.cc.viu.ca/ce/BrochS13.pdf>.

Workshops coming in April:

Richmond, City Hall: *Backyard Bounty: Organic Harvest Year Round*. April 13, 9:30-4:30 See:

<http://www.richmond.ca/parksrec/about/guide.htm>

Duncan, Vancouver Island University: *Fall & Winter Gardening*, April 27th, 10-4:00 See:

<http://www.cc.viu.ca/ce/>

Others are listed on the calendar on my web site.

See www.lindagilkeson.ca for info on buying my books and to see colour photos of pests and diseases from the new edition of *Natural Insect, Weed & Disease Control*, or to check my 2013 schedule for talks, workshops and gardening classes in your area.