

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

May 22, 2013

Thinking of winter yet?

Spring planting: While cool weather crops, such as lettuce, cauliflower, peas and onions are growing beautifully, this has been a confusing year to figure out when to plant out tender plants. Some people dashed ahead and set out tomatoes, squash and other warm season plants in that hot spell at the beginning of the month. I took a risk on trying for super-early zucchini and actually harvested my first fruit last night, setting a record for zucchini harvest in my garden (the key to success is growing a parthenocarpic cultivar 'Partenon', which can set fruit without being fertilized; seed for that one is available from William Dam www.damseeds.ca/).

Other gardeners are still holding back, wondering if it is warm enough to plant. In case you are new to gardening in this area, just to let you know it is not too late if you haven't put these plants out yet. In some years this is as early as we can safely plant the most tender plants outdoors, which is why a lot of coastal gardeners grow these in cloches, tunnels or greenhouses. That said, soil temperatures warmed earlier than usual this year so many gardeners have already put out tomatoes and squash as well as beans and corn that were started indoors. At least in cool coastal zones, the soil is probably still too cool for beans or corn seeded directly. Germination of these is best at 15-20oC, but once the seed has germinated, the little plants will grow in cooler temperatures.

You may want to hold back some of the tenderest plants (melons, cucumbers, basil) as long as the plants are still growing well in their pots. If they are getting too large they will be stressed and would be better off taking their chances outdoors. The selection of tomatoes may be getting rather thin at suppliers, but you should be able to find lots of squash and cucumber plants. On Salt Spring, Chorus Frog's farm stand (Rainbow Road) has an interesting variety of summer and winter squash, pumpkins as well as bean and corn plants.

Winter Planting: Believe it or not, it is time to plan what will fill your garden next winter. Brussels sprouts, winter cabbage and parsnips are crops that should be sown very soon (last week of May to first week of June) because they take quite a long time to develop.

I sow Brussels sprouts at the end of May so that plants develop their sprouts in October, which is late enough to avoid damage from cabbage aphid in the sprouts. For a photo of cabbage aphids go to: http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/sap_suckers.html#49 and scroll down to the photo. If you have started Br sprouts earlier or have already bought plants from a nursery, watch out for aphids in August because they can make a real mess out of developing sprouts. Blast the aphids off with water as soon as you see them. Sowing Br sprouts after early June usually results in a crop failure because there isn't enough time left in the growing season to produce sprouts. If sprouts don't form before winter, they won't form in the spring. These are biennial plants so after going through winter, they send up a flower stalk where each sprout should have been.

This is also time to start hardy cabbages for winter harvests. There is a lot of variation in 'days to harvest' for different cultivars so check the seed package. Many of the best winter keepers take 100-120 days such as 'January King', 'Danish Ballhead' and 'Langedijker Red'. Savoy cabbages are usually very easy to grow, frost hardy and quick (80-95 days) so you can seed these by the end of June and still have time to have mature heads before November.

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If you don't have the space or time to start Brussels sprouts or cabbage now, you should be able to buy plants from local growers in another month or so.

If you haven't sown parsnip yet, now's the time. They germinate best in cool soil so if we get another sudden heat spell, shade the seedbed with newspaper, burlap, etc. and keep it moist until the seeds germinate. If you started them earlier, they will be fine over-wintering and much larger than later sown plants.

Meanwhile, make sure you have seed on hand for other vegetables to be sown over the summer for eating next winter. In some years it is hard to find desired varieties for winter eating when seed suppliers run short. For a winter harvest shopping list with suggested cultivars, see my May 30, 2012 message: <http://www.saltspringenergystrategy.org/food.htm>

Upcoming Talks: If you are visiting the Mother Earth News Fair in Puyallup, Washington, stop by for one of my talks. I am doing two presentations on Sunday, June 2nd. 1:30 pm: "Keeping up with Food Crop Pests & Disease) and at 3:00 pm: "Your Year-Round Harvest Starts Right Now".

<http://www.motherearthnews.com/fair/info.aspx#axzz2U4Roz18p>

See www.lindagilkeson.ca for info on my buying books, to see the colour photos 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.

You can read all of my previous messages on the Salt Spring Energy Strategy website: www.saltspringenergystrategy.org