

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

November 13, 2014

Everything should be OK (the vegetables, at least)

I arrived home yesterday from swimming with the fish on a tropical isle to this cold blast of air--and a score of concerned emails from gardeners about the cold weather.

Of course, I am assuming everyone has their mulching done... if so, the roots of plants are just fine. This would be a good time to increase the mulch on root crops by layering leaves or straw right over the whole bed, covering tops and all. AS to whether to worry about leafy plants, here are my thresholds for covering plants:

- Hardy leafy greens are mostly fine to about -5oC (23oF), but if it looks like it could get close to that I throw a sheet of plastic over lettuce, spinach, chard, Chinese cabbage and similar small greens. Of these, lettuce (even the 'hardy' varieties) is the least cold tolerant.

- If the forecast is for lows of -9 or -10oC (14-15oF) or lower, then I like to cover winter cauliflower and broccoli and perhaps the leeks, though it has to be pretty cold to daunt leeks or kale much. I never bother covering parsley or corn salad. Don't worry about young shoots already sprouting from garlic you planted this fall--they are extremely hardy. Even when I haven't been around to cover cauliflower and broccoli at those temperatures the plants have recovered well so you can see that the cold this week shouldn't be a problem.

If you are concerned today because leaves of chard, Brussels sprouts, winter broccoli, etc. are looking limp in this cold, not to worry--they will be fine when it warms up again. In fact, this is the very weather we have been waiting for to make Brussels sprouts, cabbage, kale taste the best. If cabbages are looking fairly icy, then it is best to leave them in the garden for now until the weather has been above freezing for several days so heads thaw through before you harvest them.

The tricky thing is determining how cold it really is where your veggies are growing. Minimum temperatures can be quite a bit colder in your garden than what you see on regional weather reports, especially if you are at a higher elevation, or at the bottom of a valley, or well away from the moderating effect of large bodies of water. For example, lows reported for Vancouver last night were -2, but it went to -4oC in my garden (so it was darn lucky I arrived home in time to put the Christmas tree lights on my outdoor lemon tree!). I think a simple min-max thermometer is a good investment in understanding your garden microclimate. Keep records and compare your actual temperatures with what the weather service reports for your area so you know whether your garden might be consistently colder or milder than official records.

2015 Year Round Harvest Courses update:

-There is still space for a couple of more people in my Salt Spring class for 2015. This 10-month series of classes runs once a month from January to October to take you through the whole gardening season. If you are interested, contact me directly: gilkeson@shaw.ca or 250-537-2503

- There may be room for one or two more in the Victoria course, held at the Horticulture Center of the Pacific, so contact them directly to get on the wait list. See: <http://hcp.ca/events-functions/year-round-harvest/>

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See my web site <http://www.lindagilkeson.ca> to order books and to see hundreds of colour photos of pests and diseases to help you identify problems.

My schedule for 2015 is now fully booked, so check the speaking schedule link on my web site for talks, workshops and gardening classes in your area.

All of my previous gardening messages are archived on my Gardening Tips page:

http://lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html