

Gardening Newsletter

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Pinch Sprouts, Trap SWD, Stake Crops, Plant Garlic

I am just back from a delightful trip wandering around gardens in Cornwall and Devon for the last 3 weeks with a merry band of fellow gardeners. But now I see there is a lot to do in my garden and that reminded me to get this note out to you.

Pinch the tips of Brussels sprouts: Do this right now to force the sprouts along the stem to develop. Cut or tear off the small cluster of leaves at the tip of the plant (these are tender and edible). You will be amazed at how quickly sprouts will plump up after you do that. If your plants already have well-developed sprouts, this is optional. If your plants are just showing little nubs where sprouts should be, pinching the tips is necessary if you want to have a crop. As I have mentioned before, if you don't get sprouts developing before winter, there won't be any in the spring. In response to spring, the plants grow flower stalks instead of sprouts.

Start staking overwintering plants: With the generous rainfall in September, your winter broccoli and winter cauliflower plants might have grown quite a lot, which is all the more reason to stake them to withstand winter winds and snow. Drive in 3 or 4 bamboo stakes or other stakes around the stem of each plant; or wiggle a large tomato cage over each plant (ideally those should have been put on last month while the plants were smaller); or pound in one sturdy stake for each plant and tie the plant securely to it. Leaves often break off in winter weather, but as long as the main stems aren't broken or uprooted, plants will grow new leaves in the spring.

Keep trapping spotted wing Drosophila: From now until very cold weather occurs (December?) you can catch a surprising number of these invasive fruit flies. [These are the tiny fruit flies that lay eggs in berries, cherries and other soft fruit; if you saw tiny white maggots in your berries this summer, that's what they were]. The adult flies overwinter and are easy to lure to their doom at this time of year before they have a chance to find a safe place to spend the winter. For the last couple of years I have kept my trap out until Christmas, catching hundreds of flies, especially from late October through November. Every fly you catch now is one that doesn't have a chance to overwinter and lay eggs in spring berries. SO far, this seems to have helped to keep SWD numbers so low in my yard that I don't start catching any significant numbers of them in monitoring traps until early September, which is after most of my soft fruit has been picked.

To make the SWD trap: Take a plastic container with a lid, such as a cottage cheese or deli container, and punch 4 - 6 small holes around the rim. The size of a paper-punch hole is ideal, but if you don't have a hand punch to make the hole, cut small square holes that size. Pour about an inch of apple cider vinegar (not apple cider flavoured vinegar) into the container and snap on the lid. Set the trap somewhere in the yard where it will be out of the rain (and out of reach of racoons, which have been known to play with the containers). One trap is sufficient in a small yard, but this year I think I will put out several and see what catches are like.

Plant garlic for next year's crop: Anytime in October works, but certainly try to have them planted by the end of the month. I always get a few emails late in the year asking if garlic can still be planted and, of course it can, but the bulbs won't be as big at harvest as they would with October planting. The more time garlic plants have to develop a good root system before spring, the bigger the bulbs will be. When the long days of May arrive the plants are stimulated to form bulbs regardless of how much of a root system they have at the time.

After planting, mulch the beds with a 3-6 inch layer of dry leaves or straw or other fluffy material before winter. It protects the soil from erosion and prevents the cloves from being heaved up by frost. If you see tips of green shoots poking up in December or January, don't worry—garlic shoots are very hardy and will be fine.