

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

April 23, 2019

Planting and pest prevention (the usual suspects)

Carry right on planting anything that tolerates or thrives in cool weather: cabbage/mustard family plants, onions and leeks, lettuces and leafy greens, peas, broadbeans, carrots, beets, parsnips. A note about parsnips: make sure you sow fresh seed (packaged for this year). Parsnips seeds are only viable for a year or so. Parsnips germinate best in cool weather, but by the time you wait long enough to discover that old seed is never coming up, the soil could be too warm for good germination.

It is still too cool at night in most places for peppers, squash, cucumbers, melons, corn and beans. When tomatoes can go outdoors depends on your garden microclimate and how prepared you are to protect them with cloches or floating row covers if it turns cool after you plant. Tomatoes are more robust than other warmth-loving plants and some people have already planted theirs. The general rule is to plant tomatoes when nights are mostly staying above 10°C (50°F) and most coastal gardens are cooler than that right now. If the leaves on your outdoor tomatoes turn purplish, it is a sign that it has been too cold for them. This is a temporary nutrient deficiency and they should recover when it warms up.

Beans and corn: While it is still too cold to sow corn or bean seeds outdoors, you can start both indoors anytime. Around May 1st, I start beans in a tray of vermiculite. I also sow the first of my three successive batches of corn in small individual pots, 1 plant per pot. I sow sweet corn at least 3 times, 2-3 weeks apart, to spread out the harvest so that all the ears are not ripe at once. By the time seedlings are ready to go outside in 3 weeks it should be warm enough. Even later in the season I still start beans in vermiculite to avoid pillbug damage. If your bean seedlings end up looking like leafless green sticks [<http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/other.html#127>], that's a sign that pillbugs have been nibbling. The jaws of pillbugs are quite weak, however, and once bean plants have grown for a couple of weeks, they are no longer tender enough to be damaged by pillbugs. By the way, cherish the funny pinkish spider in the photo below the one of damaged beans: they are pillbug predators!

Spring pests and diseases:

Peas: I sow peas every month from March until the end of June to ensure fresh peas into October. If you are seeing tiny notches on the leaves of your pea plants right now, that is pea leaf weevil. See my April 30, 2018 message [http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html] for details on how to deal with them. To avoid another common problem, pea enation mosaic virus (EMV) [<http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/foilage.html#146>], plant varieties resistant to the virus. This is most important for peas sown in May and June because the virus is spread by aphids that usually don't show up until mid-summer. Early peas are usually finished cropping by the time aphids show up, but if you have seen distorted pods and mottled leaves earlier in the season, then choose resistant varieties for all of your plantings. EMV resistant varieties include: Pod peas—Maestro, Aladdin. Snap peas—Cascadia, Sugar Lace II, Sugar Sprint. Snow peas—Oregon Giant, Avalanche, Sweet Horizon.

Currant sawfly/Imported currantworm: Right now is the time to control the eggs of those caterpillar-like green larvae that chew up leaves of currants and gooseberries. The insects lay eggs along veins on the underside of leaves from mid-April (warm years) to the end of May (cool years). All you need to do is check the leaves in the central and lower part of the bush for what looks like tiny stitches of dental floss along leaf veins [http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/leaf_chewers2.html#36]. If they have already hatched, you will see a dense group of tiny green worms feeding together. Simply remove and destroy the leaves with the eggs or larvae. There is only one generation per year so catching them now avoids a whole lot of damage later. And by the way, those pinkish, puckered areas showing up on currant leaves are due to currant aphids [http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/sap_suckers.html#49], but not to worry. Despite the weird appearance, the plants are not harmed and there isn't anything you need to do about it.

Wireworms: These [http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/root_feeders.html#83] bore into potatoes, carrots and other roots as well as large seeds, such as corn. They are very fond of boring into lettuce roots. Clearing them out of a bed before you plant can be done with potato baits. First, remove all crop debris and weeds so the bed has nothing growing in it. You can prepare the bed for planting first (picking out any wireworms you see) and then put in the baits or you can prepare for planting after using the baits for a week. Skewer chunks of potato on short sticks (they act as markers so you can find them again), then bury the potato piece an inch or so in the soil. Check the traps every day or two and destroy wireworms. Some bore right into the potato (just pull them out); others are in the soil beside the bait. I use a trowel to scoop up each bait chunk so as not to miss those nearby wireworms. Wireworms can move several feet through the soil so placing the baits at 1-2 foot intervals in the bed is close enough. Once a bed is cleared, the potato chunks can be re-used elsewhere. Wireworms are common in sod and readily migrate into garden beds adjacent to lawns or weedy pathways; along the border of such beds is a good place to put the bait potatoes.

Climbing cutworms: I found the first pupa case this week, which means that their depredations are coming to an end. There won't be another generation of those caterpillars until fall [http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/leaf_chewers.html#25]. Now if the slugs would just evaporate...

Speaking of slugs: I ran into someone recently that had not heard of iron phosphate slug baits. In case you haven't either, these work very well and unlike the old toxic metaldehyde baits are safe for birds and other animals that might eat a pellet. BUT you need to use them correctly: scatter very small amounts over a wide area, frequently. Putting a ring of the granules around plants you want to protect can backfire because the granules (pasta pellets) are meant to attract slugs. When they eat the iron in the pasta, it interferes with their ability to make slime—so they dry up. The bait does not work by toxicity and the attracted slugs have plenty of time to eat your seedlings before they eventually feel the effects of the iron. I find these baits are most useful after I prepare a planting bed, before I put seedlings out or right after I sow seeds so the slugs are controlled by the time seeds come up. Some brands are certified for organic growers (check for the OMRI logo).