

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

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Frosty Night Alert, Starting Seeds

The weather forecast this morning continues to show a few cold nights this week—ranging from -2 to -5oC [23-28oF] in some south coast areas for Wednesday and Thursday. While in mid-winter such temperatures would not damage hardy vegetables, the warm winter we have had has brought on early, and less frost hardy, new growth. Depending on how low it goes, our usually hardy winter vegetables may be at risk of frost injury for a few nights: lows down to -2oC probably aren't a problem, but -5oC definitely would be damaging. Be ready to spread any kind of tarps, plastic sheets, floating row cover, old bedsheets or other lightweight cover, over beds of celery, lettuce, spinach and other leafy greens. This is well worth doing as this could be the only cold enough weather to spoil the spring harvest from overwintered plants. I have heads forming on my purple sprouting broccoli plants and because heads are less hardy than leaves, I will harvest them today. Depending on our local forecast, I may also throw a tarp over the plants as it would be shame to lose them just as they are coming into full production. Mulched root crops in the ground will be fine no matter how cold. I only have a few beets left, but rather than worry about them I just harvested them along with the last of the celeriac (time for a last hearty leek and celeriac soup!). If you have rosemary, it wouldn't hurt to cover it too as plants are well into spring flowering. Garlic shoots, spring flowering bulbs and native plants with swelling buds are still pretty hardy, at least for the forecast lows, so don't worry about them.

Early fruit trees, especially peaches, with flowers opening now in the warmest gardens are a special concern because a frosty night can end this year's crop before it has begun. Sensitivity to frost depends somewhat on the variety, but generally, most open peach flowers are damaged when temperatures drop to -3 to -4oC [25-26oF]. Peaches growing beside a building under the roof overhang will be a couple of degrees warmer than freestanding trees in a garden, so at the



temperatures currently forecast, their flowers are likely to be safe. Flowers of freestanding trees, especially in low places where cold air settles, however, could be killed unless you can throw lightweight sheets, floating row cover fabric, frost blankets or anything over the tree. The cover should reach the ground on all sides, but even if it doesn't, some cover will be better than none.

Another result of the warm winter is that carrots, parsnips, beets and other root crops are starting to show signs of new growth: small white side roots sprouting from the main root. If that's the case in your garden, you might want to harvest the remaining roots soon, clean them up and refrigerate them rather than waiting to late March or early April as usual. While roots that have begun to grow are certainly edible, their flavour won't be as good as it was during the winter because they use up sugars stored in the roots to make new leaves and flowers. Root crops keep well for a month, or even two, in the refrigerator.

Thinking about growing your own seedlings this spring? you might want review the pdf of my talk, *Grow Your Own Seedlings*, on the list of presentations on my website:

<https://www.lindagilkeson.ca/presentations.html> The main challenge for most people is providing sufficiently bright light for healthy growth, for 16 hours a day. Without enough light plants grow weak, elongated stems that are easily broken or attacked by pathogens and seedlings often fail. Two mistakes I see most often are overwatering the soil (especially during the germination period) and planting seeds way too early. Overwatering risks a seedling disease called damping off and algae buildup in the soil that attracts fungus gnats. If you start too early, plants may be in pots so long that they become stressed. Biennials, such as chard, onion, leeks, celery, cabbage, started too early are also at risk of bolting (flowering) a couple of months after planting out. Bolting occurs when large, well-grown seedlings of biennial plants experience a chilly week or two of 5-10oC [41-50oF] temperatures after they have been transplanted to the garden. Experiencing winter cold is normally the signal that tells biennial plants to produce flowers in the spring of their second season. Even short chill periods can cause plants to 'feel' that their second spring has arrived after [a remarkably short] winter. Gardeners in a hurry to start plants right now can always experiment with early starts of hardy annuals (lettuce, spinach, some cabbage family leafy greens) to assuage their green thumbs this early in the season.

Here is my own timetable for starting seeds indoors:

- February: Celery, celeriac (these very tiny seeds take a couple of weeks to germinate)
- March: Onions, leeks, tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, early crop cabbage (not for fall, winter harvest), broccoli, cauliflower, sweet basil
- April: Zucchini & other squash, melons, cucumbers
- May: Corn, beans (first plantings benefit from an early start indoors when the soil is still cold, later plantings would be sown directly in the garden)

Chitting potatoes: Eager gardeners can set out a few seed potatoes along a bright windowsill for the 2-3 weeks to get an early start developing sturdy dark green sprouts. Use certified seed potatoes, now available in garden centres, from mail order suppliers and Seedy Saturday vendors, rather than grocery store potatoes which risk bringing potato diseases to your garden soil. Potatoes can be planted any time up until May, so there is no rush, but setting out a few of an early variety in March usually works and can reward you with the earliest of new potatoes.

While waiting out this bit of cool weather, here is an excellent short film that I guarantee will change your view of caterpillars completely: *The Extraordinary Caterpillar*. Available for free streaming on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/Ql1zrSUFuvM?si=z-gehSPl1wM3Z9d7> and through the TVO website. Note that although it shows mainly eastern North America species (including in Canada), in this region we also have many very similar, equally amazing, species as those shown.