

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

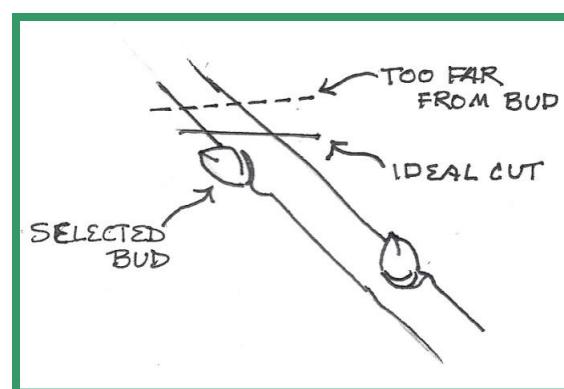
January 20, 2026

Pruning Fruit Trees, Gardening Resources, Seedy Saturdays

I was suddenly prodded into action last week to get going on fruit tree pruning after I noticed that buds on my peach tree were swelling. It shouldn't have come as a surprise given the warm winter we have had so far.....So if you can, take advantage of this spell of dry weather to prune fruit trees. Pruning while it is dry avoids spreading diseases, such as European canker or bacterial canker. Do sanitize pruning tools between trees to avoid inadvertently spreading diseases, even if trees don't look diseased and sanitize tools between every cut if you are working on a tree that shows signs of cankers [for photos see <https://www.lindagilkeson.ca/branch.html#155>]. To sanitize, dip tools for a few minutes in a solution of 1 part eco-bleach (hydrogen peroxide) or chlorine bleach to 4 parts water or wipe tools with rubbing alcohol; dry and oil pruners afterward to ensure they don't rust.

Pruning fruit trees: This may seem a daunting task, fraught with rules—but don't worry: Your trees don't have to be pruned according to professional orchard standards to benefit. The point of pruning is to maintain strong branches, open up foliage to air circulation and sunlight, keep trees a manageable size for picking, pest control, etc. and to prevent them from outgrowing their space. If you prune every year, there is usually no need to remove more than 10-15% of wood, which is quite a small job on a dwarf tree. In any case, don't remove over 25% of branches of a tree in a single year as that risks shocking it to death. To gradually re-shape a neglected tree, carry out major pruning (such as removing large branches) in stages over 3-4 years. Pruning while trees are dormant (late January to mid-February) stimulates new growth in the spring. If you have an overly vigorous tree—one that has been shooting up several feet of new growth every year—plan to prune it in summer (late July to mid-August) rather than now as summer pruning reduces vigour.

Start simply by removing broken branches, weak branches (obviously thinner than other branches) and watersprouts (branches that grow straight upright along more horizontal branches). Then look for branches pointing into the centre of tree and prune them out. If the tree hasn't been pruned for a few years, that's all you might do this year. If you haven't trimmed out much wood so far, look for branches that are crossing or crowded, choose the best one to keep and prune out the others. 'Keeper' branches are those growing outward from the trunk or main branch at a roughly 45-degree angle. Take some time to study a tree and decide which branches to remove, keeping in mind that you want to open up the canopy to sunshine and air circulation. Finally, cut back the tips of branches to keep trees compact. Cuts at the ends of branches should be made just above the bud that has a tip pointing in the direction you want a new shoot to grow. Fruit buds occur in a regular spiral pattern around the branch so you have a choice of



buds pointing in 4 different directions: Choose a bud pointing outward, not up or sideways, and cut 5-10 mm (1/4 inch) past the bud to avoid damaging it.

If you don't know where to start, find a more experienced gardener to help or ask to watch while they prune their trees. Or look for a pruning workshop and sign up. In Victoria, for example, both the Compost Education Centre and the Horticulture Centre of the Pacific list public workshops on pruning this year. Local garden clubs and Seedy Saturday events (see below) sometimes also put on pruning workshops. If you opt for hiring a professional service, make sure they are knowledgeable about fruit trees as pruning them does differ from pruning landscape trees.

Note: None of the above applies to fig trees, which are pruned entirely differently from other fruit tree and also differently from figs in warmer regions (so don't try to follow California fig-pruning info on the web). Learn how to prune figs in this region in this video

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RB0D_tuKgtQ from Fruit Trees and More in North Saanich.

Hairy Bittercress (*Cardamine hirsute*) reminder: No January note would be complete without the usual warning to weed out the all-too-common Hairy Bittercress. If you aren't sure what it looks like, do a browser search on the name. It is a small winter annual that sprouts at this time of year. It grows in small rosette of bright green, cress-like leaves. In another month, they start producing tiny white flowers, which will soon be followed by a shower of seeds that pop from the tiny pods and scatter [very] far and wide. A thick mulch on garden beds over the winter prevents bittercress (and other weeds) from germinating, but they are often found in pathways, along driveways and garden edges, in rockery and other crannies where seeds have landed. Tweak out tiny plants right now and compost them or rinse off the best leaves and use them to give a peppery boost in a salad.



A thought for 2026: Join (or start) a food gardening group. Growing your own food is good for us for many reasons (health and nutrition, sanity, saving money, fun, community and national food security and so much more). If you are new to food gardening or new to gardening in the unique climate of this coast, there are food garden groups throughout the region that would welcome you to join and learn. Many, such as our Incredible Edibles group on Salt Spring are special interest groups within the local garden club. Others, such as the long-running Comox Valley Growers and Seed Savers [<https://cvgs.org>] are separate organizations that promote food security and spread the word on the year-round harvests possible in our climate. I recently heard from an inspiring group on Gabriola Island focusing on gardening for food security. According to coordinator, Mary Wilson, they are doing it "partly because we like getting together to talk about gardening — and partly because what we are learning is helping us to succeed". To learn more: https://blueheronlearning.ca/?page_id=216

Seedy Saturdays are coming soon to a community near you! These are great places to get in touch with local food gardening groups, seed vendors and other resources. For locations, time and activities for an event near you, see this list of events (which includes links to websites) kept by Farm Folk/City Folk:
<https://farmfolkcityfolk.ca/findseeds/community-seedy-saturdays-sundays/>

Events coming up are:

Qualicum Beach Feb. 7

Bowen Island Feb. 14

Port Alberni Feb. 14

Saturna Island Feb. 14

Victoria Feb. 14

Salt Spring Feb. 21

Sooke Feb. 28

Coming up in March: Nanaimo, Mayne Island, Squamish, West Shore (Langford), Saltair, Campbell River, East Vancouver (note that an event scheduled for VanDusen Gardens is postponed to 2027).

Recycling corner: Rather than rewriting information from previous newsletters, I refer you to the archive on my website: https://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html

- See Feb. 27, 2024 For how to grow sweet potato starts: It takes several months for little plants ("slips") sprouting from a tuber to grow big enough to pot up so now is the time get started. BTW: In addition to the dark orange sweet potatoes (often called "yams" in grocery stores), there are also light orange, white and purple varieties of sweet potatoes (look for the latter in Asian food markets), all of which can be grown in the warmest places in a garden.

-See Feb. 20, 2023: Gardening on the cheap: A list of ways to keep costs of gardens, supplies and tools as low as possible.

Upcoming webinar open to all:

Wednesday, February 18. *ABCs of Gardening, Part 2*. The webinar will cover year-round planting schedules, sowing seeds, irrigation, mulching and managing common pests. This is a pay-what-you-can fundraiser for the Salt Spring Farmland Trust. To register: <https://www.ssifarmlandtrust.org/post/abc-s-of-food-gardening-with-linda-gilkeson> Everyone who is registered will receive a link to the recording.

ABCs of Gardening, Part 1 was presented in November for the Salt Spring Farmland Trust. It is the first of a 2-part series I am doing for beginning gardeners in the Root to Bloom Learning series and is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9mFUp7WXJg> If you would like to learn more or to donate (which would be greatly appreciated!). <https://www.ssifarmlandtrust.org/about>.

More Information for beginning gardeners: You might want to review the basic information included in sections entitled ABCs of Gardening sections in my newsletters of December 21, 2023 to June 2024. Topics covered over the 8 months: Designing beds, compost, lime and other soil amendments, irrigation, weeding, mulching. See the archive of those messages at:
https://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html