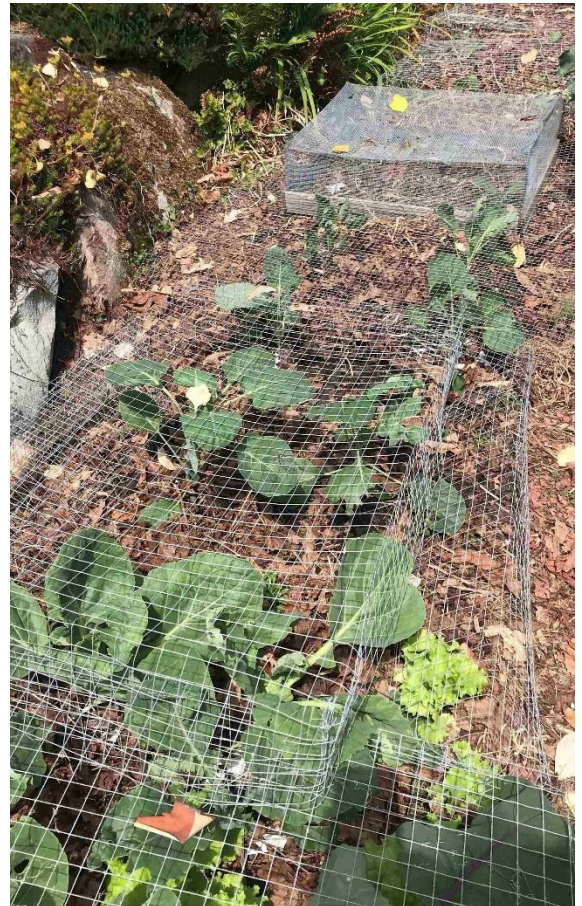


Gardening Newsletter
by Linda Gilkeson
July 19, 2026
Bird Woes; July Sowing; Buying Winter Veggie Starts

A higher than usual population of Purple Finches this year, at least in the Gulf Islands and Victoria area, is making the birds unpopular with gardeners. These finches have a taste for tender vegetable leaves, especially of Brassicas, and they also peck at broccoli heads, fruit tree flowers, pods of peas and other vegetables. Most gardeners know to protect strawberries, cherries, and other fruit from birds and protect seedbeds from birds scratching up seeds. But the damage to leaves has been puzzling many people who are wondering if some really big insects are responsible. Quail, and sometimes other birds, also peck at vegetable leaves, but this year finches are tearing large ragged pieces from tender leaves, nipping V-shaped notches around leaf margins and hollowing out broccoli heads. The 1-inch welded wire cages I made years ago to cover seedbeds work well to keep finches from getting seedlings, but as soon as plants are tall enough to touch the wire cover, the birds rip into the leaves so I have had to go into full birdy security mode. I have made higher wire covers for taller plants and deployed shade cloth and strips of floating row cover over plants. This has worked, but the garden looks like a maximum security “vegi-tentiary”. Other bird-scaring inventions, such as reflective ribbons that flash and crinkle in the wind or strings with dangling bits of foil or old CDs should work too. Insect netting also keeps off birds, but just lay it loosely over tops of the plants and don’t try to completely cover Brassicas (cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, kale, etc.) down to the ground. Doing so traps pests already on the plants under the netting and prevents insects that would eat the caterpillars or aphids from reaching their prey. With the next few day’s forecast to be quite hot, laying shade cloth over Brassica beds is ideal to cool the plants while foiling finchies.



Bird security!

July seeding continues: You can sow arugula, winter lettuce, mizuna, collards, kale, leaf mustards and mustard spinach/Komatsuna, Bok choy, Napa cabbage and other Chinese cabbage varieties, spinach and broccoli raab/rapini now if you haven’t already done so. You can also sow winter radish/daikon and hardy onions (sweet Spanish onions, scallions) by the end of this month. If you like spinach, make sure you have seeds on hand to sow in the first week or two of August for spinach plants that will produce a fall crop, then overwinter and produce a good crop in the spring. Buying vegetable starts: Garden centres and plant nurseries on the South Coast are now selling vegetable starts for fall and winter planting, but buyer beware! Some of what they sell is not going to succeed for winter harvests. After decades of failed crops for gardeners who unwittingly planted the wrong varieties for winter from wholesale distributors, nothing has changed, so you need to be an alert consumer when buying veggie starts. Some of what is sold to nurseries are summer varieties that are not hardy, while in some cases, winter hardy varieties have been grown, but started too late to work for coastal gardens (e.g., Brussels sprouts seedlings planted this late in the summer usually don’t have time to mature their sprouts before winter).

Tips on what to look for: Summer varieties of cauliflower (e.g., ‘Snow Crown’, ‘Snowball’, ‘Amazing’) and summer broccoli varieties are not hardy—these are annuals and after being frosted they won’t make heads (you may have better luck planting them in an unheated greenhouse). Winter cauliflower and winter broccoli are much hardier

biennials that produce their heads starting in February or March after they have been chilled over the winter. For winter cauliflower starts, look for 'Galleon', 'Aalsmeer', 'Purple Cape' or 'Walcheren'. For winter broccoli, look for purple sprouting broccoli, especially 'Red Spear'. For winter lettuce, which withstands temperatures below freezing, look for 'Continuity', 'Rouge d' Hiver', 'Winter Density', 'Arctic King' (google varieties you are not familiar with and read the description). Summer/fall varieties of lettuce on sale now are not frost hardy, but are fine for planting now as they will be harvested by the time it gets too cold for them. There is plenty of time to sow frost hardy lettuce varieties from seed directly in the garden. They produce a good crop for winter when sown as late as the end of August to early September (or later in a greenhouse). [Cool fact about 'Continuity' lettuce: It was originally known as 'Merveille de Quatre Saisons' or 'Marvel of 4 Seasons'. It is a red-and-green-leaved, butterhead type, a French heirloom variety first marketed in 1885. It is best in spring, fall and winter, but holds up pretty well in summer if shaded during heat waves.]



'Continuity' lettuce is frost hardy

While some vegetable starts from wholesalers are problematical, others are fine for winter harvests: All varieties of kale, chard and most spinach are generally hardy enough for our winters, as are most cabbage varieties. Cabbage starts planted out this late in the season, however, should be an early variety (50-80 days to harvest) so they can form a good head by late October. Like Brussels sprouts, if cabbages don't make heads before winter, they never will because they go to seed in the spring.

Some local nurseries grow their own winter vegetable starts or supplement what they buy from the wholesalers with plants they grow themselves. Look to these to supply the right cauliflower, broccoli and hardy lettuce for winter harvests in our climate:

- Chorus Frog Nursery, 190 Jasper Road, Salt Spring Island. Open daily 10:00-5:00. They have a large selection of organically grown winter vegetable starts that they have grown themselves, including purple sprouting broccoli, 'Galleon' cauliflower, kales, cabbage and winter greens <https://thequarryfarm.ca/chorus-frog-nursery>
- Victoria Compost Education Centre, 1216 North Park Street, Victoria is holding a Fall Organic Plant sale from August 8-15. 10:00 am to 4:00 pm. They will have vegetable starts suitable for fall and winter growing as well as native plants, berry bushes, medicinal herbs. www.compost.bc.ca
- B. Dinter Nursery Ltd., 2205 Phipps Road, Duncan, has purple sprouting broccoli, 'Galleon' cauliflower, kales and leafy greens, sweet onions. www.dinternursery.ca
- Russell Nursery, 1370 Wain Road, North Saanich, will have starts of cabbage, kale, spinach, lettuce, scallions and are growing their own 'Red Spear' purple sprouting broccoli, 'Galleon' cauliflower, 'Continuity' lettuce. <https://russellnursery.com/>

My next webinar open to all: Sunday, August 30. 3:00-5:00 pm. **Simple Food Preserving: Fresh Storage, Easy Freezing, Dehydrating.** This webinar is for anyone who wants to save garden surpluses for winter eating—or put by a stash of delicious, nutritious food for emergencies. I will cover four easy ways to preserve your harvest without complicated preserving. Learn which vegetables can be stored out in the garden all winter and how to cure and store produce like onions, garlic, squash, potatoes and apples to keep them fresh for months. I'll also cover energy-saving freezing methods and how to use a dehydrator to preserve fruit and vegetables. This is a pay-what-you-can workshop as a fundraiser for Transition Salt Spring. All registrants will receive the Zoom recording. To register: <https://transitionsaltspring.com/simple-food-preservation-fresh-storage-easy-freezing-dehydrating-2/>
A reminder for new readers: Check my list of messages archived by date on my website for additional information that might be useful for this time of year. https://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html