

Gardening Newsletter
By Linda Gilkeson
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Buying & planting tips for veggie starts

One effect of last year's drought is haunting us this spring as clouds of pollen billow from the huge crop of stress cones on conifers all around the region. We always see pollen from alder, maple and other trees in the spring, but this year, everywhere, there are masses of small reddish brown cones on branches of spruce and fir trees. It doesn't mean those trees are going to die, but they did get a fright and are making an effort to reproduce this year in case it is their last chance. It will be a happy season for squirrels and seed eating birds.....meanwhile back at the garden:

Buying vegetable seedlings: As a greater variety of veggie starts is coming into the nurseries, I thought it would be good to review what to look for when buying seedlings to transplant. The key thing to remember is that stressed seedlings never become the plants they could have been if they had not been stunted by poor watering practices (too dry, too wet), lack of nutrients, or from becoming root-bound. A young plant should not have any discoloured leaves (some lettuce cultivars do naturally have red, lime green or variegated leaves). When lower leaves turn pale yellow, orange or purplish, it shows that the plant has been forced to move nutrients out of the oldest leaves and send them to its new shoots. It is a desperate measure, resulting in the loss of mature leaf area it could have used for photosynthesis. Oldest lower leaves of vegetables will turn yellow and drop off, eventually—but that should be after months of growing, at the end of the growing season. You may see a pair of tiny seed leaves, low down on the stem, fading and falling off, but that is normal. Root-bound plants have roots coming out of the holes in the pots. A root tip or two poking out is fine, but a 'beard' of roots trailing outside the pot shows plants have been in the container much too long. When you remove them from the pot, you see a dense mat of roots against the sides of the pot.

Unfortunately, plants sold in grocery store and hardware store racks are often in sad shape because they have not been watered correctly or fed after they reach the store. Nursery staff usually do better, but I have seen some shockingly overgrown and stunted plants still for sale on nursery benches. SO, buyer beware: choose the youngest, greenest, happiest looking seedlings on offer. If there are several ages of the same variety on the bench, go for the smallest ones, as they grow better than older stressed plants. I have said this before, but there are many new subscribers to this email list so I will say it again: gardeners on Salt Spring are very lucky to have a source of high quality, locally grown seedlings from the Chorus Frog Farm stand on Rainbow Road (across from the swimming pool entrance).

Planting out: Once you bring home your seedlings, try to plant them as soon as possible. If you can't set them out yet, be very attentive to watering and feed them liquid fertilizer weekly (make compost or manure tea or buy fish fertilizer or other organic fertilizer). If you must hold them for more than a couple of weeks, replot them in larger containers.

When you do set transplants outdoors, be ready to cover them with plastic or use cloches or floating row covers to keep them warmer on cold nights. We still have a high likelihood of cool weather (it was pretty chilly up this mountain yesterday) and ground frosts could still occur in some gardens for the next month. Although you will start seeing tomato and pepper plants for sale now, it doesn't mean it is warm enough to put them outdoors yet, though they could go into a greenhouse or sunporch.

Stay alert to weather forecasts these days, because we can also have a heat wave any time too. In 2 of the last 3 springs we have had scorching temperatures in the first week of May. Both times it was hot enough to kill seeds and seedlings so be prepared to shade the planting beds. Horticultural shade cloth that lets in 50% of light is ideal, but using curtain material, newspapers, pots or seed flats turned upside down—whatever you

have, is fine. If you use an opaque cover, best to deploy it for the middle of the day and allow plants to receive early morning and late afternoon sun. Floating row cover fabric is meant to hold in heat so it is not what you want to use in a heat wave!

Broccoli confusion continues: Before you browse the shelves of veggie starts, you might want to review my note from last year on the differences between summer (annual) and winter (biennial) broccoli and cauliflower and the issue of purple broccoli confusion (there are now both summer purple and winter purple sprouting broccoli cultivars): [http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening-pdf/Winter Gardening 2015 - Apr 4.pdf](http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening-pdf/Winter_Gardening_2015_-_Apr_4.pdf)

What to plant: So far, this spring has been as warm as last year, causing blooming plants I monitor as climate markers to open flowers within a day or two of the same dates last year--and weeks earlier than previous years. SO it is another early year, but don't worry if you haven't planted potatoes, set out strawberries, put out the peas, onion sets, lettuce or spinach: you are not too late for any of this, but all of these can be out in the garden now. Also you can set out early cabbage, summer broccoli and cauliflower, Chinese cabbage plants if you haven't already done so. I am waiting a couple of more weeks before putting out my onion seedlings as they are less robust than onion sets.

Insect netting update: On Salt Spring, Chorus Frog farm is now carrying ProtekNet. This is the sturdy, long-lasting netting used to prevent carrot rust fly and cabbage maggot from laying eggs on those crops and is essential for protecting berries, cherries and other fruit against the dreaded spotted wing Drosophila (tiny white maggots you might have seen in your fruit last year...). Vancouver Island gardeners can get it at Russell Nursery on Wain Road and Dinter Nursery, just south of Duncan, also sells sturdy insect netting. You can also get it by mail order from William Dam Seeds <http://www.damseeds.ca> or buy 100-m rolls directly from the wholesale supplier, Dubois Agrinovation in Montreal: <http://www.duboisag.com>. Rumour has it that one or more of the Art Knapp nurseries in the Lower Mainland may stock it. Gardeners go forth and bug your local nursery to bring in these netting products for you!

Upcoming workshops:

Saturday, April 23: Year Round Harvest (11:20-12:20): Just one workshop of many being presented as part of the Salt Spring Community Energy Conference being held at GISS by the Salt Spring Community Energy Group. See the complete program: [http://saltspringcommunityenergy.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/2016 Community Energy Conference Program.pdf](http://saltspringcommunityenergy.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/2016_Community_Energy_Conference_Program.pdf).

Saturday, May 7: West Richmond Community Centre. 9:30-11:00: Beautiful Gardens Without Pesticides; 11:30-1:00: Attract Pollinators to Your Garden; 1:30-3:00: European Chafer and Healthy Lawn Care. These workshops are free, but pre-registration is required: <http://www.richmond.ca/parksrec/about/registration.htm>

My speaking schedule for 2016 and early 2017 is fully booked. Check the calendar on my web site <http://lindagilkeson.ca/> for talks, workshops and gardening classes in your area, also for book sales (including my newest: *Resilient Gardens 2016: Climate Change, Stress Disorders, Pest Update*) and hundreds of colour photos of pests, diseases and disorders to help you identify problems.

All of my previous gardening messages are archived on my Gardening Tips page: http://lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html