

## Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

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### Planting timing, testing, testing, testing

This is the first message that will go out to everyone at once through a 3<sup>rd</sup> party mailing service, very much thanks to Dave on Lasqueti, who set it all up and walked me through it. It took me 4 days to send out the last message to stay within Shaw's daily email limits--which is why some of you received it days late (and why I received all those messages wondering how come your friends had theirs and you didn't....). So let's test this thing today!

**Soil Temperature:** To continue the theme of testing, right now I am checking a soil thermometer out in a garden bed. It shows that the soil is far too cold to plant anything (and of course our soils are far too wet to be handled at all). As of today my soil temperature had come up to 4 degrees C (38 degrees F) by afternoon, but is lower in the mornings after overnight frosts. So we are a long way from the 12-15 C (45-50 F) minimum for planting cool season crops! Bear in mind that the optimum germination temperatures for even cool season vegetables is minimum 21 C (72 F); peas, for example, germinate best at 24 C (76 F). Which is why sprouting early peas indoors is such a good idea, giving them a nice warm germination period, after which they can go outdoors to cooler weather. To hasten soil warming, rake off any mulch on the surface and lay clear plastic on the soil to trap heat. Black plastic won't heat the soil nearly as fast as clear.

If you have good growing conditions for seedlings indoors or in a greenhouse, you can start cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, lettuce, spinach and other leafy greens now for later planting out. If you can provide warm conditions for seedlings (and very good light levels), then tomatoes, peppers and zucchini can be started now (some of you will have already started these, especially if you want to try for that first zucchini harvest in May).

**Frost Free Dates?** I discussed this a few years ago, but thought it would be worth a reminder for new subscribers. Unlike in interior regions and areas with relatively flat landscapes, average frost free dates are meaningless here. On the coast, there are big differences in frost patterns over very small areas because of our complicated geography. While some sheltered coastal gardens may see only a few days of below freezing in a typical winter, others in valleys away from the water or at higher elevations might see ground frosts into May. Since official weather records are only taken at a few sites around the region (often at airports), any calculations based on long-term weather records would only apply to those sites--if they apply at all, given our increasingly variable weather as the climate changes. Rather than going by particular dates for spring planting, I think it best to go with soil temperature and adapt to whatever each year brings. If you just moved here in the last couple of years, I have to break it to you that the last 2 springs were unusually warm, early and wonderful for spring gardens. While this winter was indeed colder than usual, a cold, wet spring is actually "normal" for the region. Interestingly, Environment Canada meteorologists forecast that we may be in for record-breaking heat this summer, but after a cold spring...

**Soil tests:** While waiting for things to warm up you could get a test of soil pH done. This test tells you whether you need to add lime to the soil before planting. You don't need to test the soil every year (I test at 5-6 year intervals), but if you are starting a new garden it is always a good idea to test the soil first, before amending it. For established gardens, an indicator that you should check pH would be poor growth of beets, but a good crop of potatoes in the same garden. Potatoes do fine in acid soil, but beets

are particularly sensitive to it. While ideal soil pH is in the 6.5-6.8 range for vegetables, another reason to test the soil is if you plan to grow blueberries as they need acid soil (pH 5.1 or so). Vancouver Island gardeners can send sample to MB Laboratories in Sidney, BC. See <http://www.mblabs.com/> for instructions on how to collect soil samples and where to drop off or mail samples. There are other labs, elsewhere, of course, including Pacific Soil Analysis, 11720 Voyageur Way, Richmond, (604) 273-8226, which strangely in this day and age still doesn't seem to have a web site. For US gardeners, PNW soil labs and lots of soil information can be found at <https://puyallup.wsu.edu/soils/soils/>.

Note that the pH test kits and probes you can buy are not worth bothering with: Consumers Reports tested them a few years back and found none were accurate. Also, such tests can only show pH for the small bit of soil they are in contact with. This doesn't tell you much, because soil pH naturally varies widely from one spot to the next, even over a small area. A properly mixed soil sample tested at a lab provides a more accurate reading of the average pH for the test area. The results from the lab include advice on whether lime is needed.

**Upcoming events:**

Saturday, April 8: A full day, year-round gardening workshop: Backyard Bounty (9:30-4:30): Richmond Nature Park. These workshops are free for Richmond residents, but pre-registration is required: <http://www.richmond.ca/parksrec/about/registration.htm>

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Check the calendar on my web site <http://lindagilkeson.ca/> for talks, workshops and gardening classes in your area, also for book sales 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](http://lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html)