

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

March 18, 2025

Spring Planting; Parthenocarpic Squash; Pollinating Squash

Spring is moving along slowly but surely, and although recent cold nights and rainy days have slowed down spring flowers, gardeners are fidgety, itching to plant something. With overwintered crops having survived the winter in better condition than usual, year-round gardeners may have enough broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, root crops, leeks, chard, kale, lettuce, etc. in the garden that they aren't fussed about getting an early start (if that's not you, see the end of this message for an online workshop I will be giving in April on year-round harvests for coastal gardeners).

What to plant now: The soil is still much too wet to work outdoors, but in garden soil that is fertile from past years of amendments, you can rake back any mulch, pull weeds and sow a few things without disturbing the soil further. Poke pea seeds into the mud and scatter seeds of lettuce, spinach, radishes, cilantro, dill, arugula on the surface. Press seeds lightly into the soil without covering them or set aside some soil in a bucket to dry enough to crumble a thin layer over the seeds. These crops can come up surprisingly early, but be prepared to sow again if bad weather intervenes or slugs and cutworms get them. Protect seedbeds from birds by covering with wire mesh, screening, insect netting or floating row cover. Climbing cutworms will be a danger to seedlings until about the end of April; after that they are in the pupa stage, with the moth developing inside, so are no longer feeding (for photos of all stages from egg to moth, see: http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/leaf_chewers.html#25).

Other planting this month:

- Start a batch of peas indoors where they will germinate much faster than out in the garden. Planting them out after 2- 3 weeks indoors on a bright windowsill gives quicker results than sowing seeds directly in the garden at this time of year. You can sprout the peas crowded together in a pot of vermiculite, sand or potting soil, but nutrients aren't necessary because the plants have enough food in the seed to grow for several weeks.

- Line up some seed potatoes along a windowsill to start growth of sturdy green shoots and plant them out after 2-3 weeks. Main crop potatoes don't need to be planted for another month, but it is nice to have some really early new potatoes to go with the peas.

- Start seeds of tomatoes, summer cabbage, cauliflower and broccoli indoors under grow lights or in a warm greenhouse. I wait until early April to start squash, cucumber and melon seeds as these plants grow so quickly. If sown too soon they have to be moved on to larger pots if the weather is still too cool to set them out in mid-May.



Other tasks this month:

- By the end of the month, dig up any carrots and other root crops still in the garden and store them in the refrigerator. As the weather warms, they start to grow, which uses up sugars stored in the roots to produce a flower stalk and results in poor flavors and loss of quality.

- Plant strawberries, fruit trees, berry bushes, asparagus as you find them in the garden centres and plant nurseries.

- Don't get rid of Brussels sprout plants even if you have picked all the sprouts: The plants will grow a new set of very tasty and tender shoots where the sprouts were.

Parthenocarpic squash? Some plants can set fruit from flowers that have not been pollinated, which is called parthenocarpy. The fruit from unfertilized flowers don't have seeds, but are otherwise the same as fruit from fertilized flowers. Examples are long English cucumbers, 'Siletz' and 'Oregon Spring' tomatoes. Those tomatoes can set seedless fruit when the weather is too cool for tomato pollen to be viable and go on to set normal fruit in warmer weather. I have relied on parthenocarpic zucchini for many years to produce super early fruit (first week of May) as well as for harvests late into October. Such varieties are great when male flowers are scarce or it is too cool for pollinators to operate. After I planted the last 3 seeds of my favorite parthenocarpic zucchini, which is no longer

available, I discovered studies showing there are other zucchini varieties with naturally high rates of parthenocarp (especially in cool weather) even though that information may not be noted in the variety description. These include: Dunja F1: Can set as much as 80% fruit without pollination, is one of the most disease resistant varieties and especially resistant to powdery mildew.

Black Beauty: Can set 60-75% fruit; one of the few open pollinated zucchinis, but unfortunately, very susceptible to powdery mildew.

Noche F1: Can set 70% fruit.

Costata Romanesco: Can set 60% fruit; an open pollinated, extremely vigorous green striped zucchini (crazy huge, sprawling, productive plants).

Parthenocarpic yellow zucchini: Easy-Pick Gold II: Listed as parthenocarpic; Golden Glory: Can set 100% fruit without pollination, disease resistant.

Fertilizing squash flowers: Since I'm on the topic of squash pollination, here is a common problem: many people are puzzled by a lack of fruit even though their plants have flowers, especially if the little fruit seems to grow a bit and then rot or shrivel up. That happens to fruit from unpollinated flowers of varieties that are not parthenocarpic, including other green zucchini, round zucchinis (e.g., 'Eight Ball'), scallopini or patty pan squash, yellow crooknecks, winter squash and pumpkins. For these, the gardener usually has to pollinate flowers by hand to ensure a good harvest because there are so few pollinating insects nowadays. Pick a male flower, peel back the petals and tap the pollen in the centre structure of female flowers. Male flowers have a narrow stem and there is bright yellow pollen in the centre, whereas female flowers have a miniature fruit behind each flower. Pollinate in the morning when the flowers are fresh as they are only good for the day.

The 3 species of squash commonly grown here are *Cucurbita pepo* (all zucchinis, crooknecks, pattypan, marrows, acorns, spaghetti, Delicata types, some pie pumpkins); *Cucurbita maxima* (most winter squash, some pumpkins); *Cucurbita moschata* (butternuts, Tromboncino). As long as you move pollen between varieties within the same species group, the flowers will be fertilized. This is handy to know if both female and male flowers are not open on a plant at the same time. The species is often listed on the package or in the seed description, but if not, google the variety to find out what species it is. Don't worry about crossing squash as it won't change the characteristics of the fruit you harvest this summer.



Moving pollen to female flower.

If you want to save seed from open pollinated squash, however, you must ensure that the pollen only comes from male flowers of the same variety as the female flowers you want to save. The mixed characteristics from crossing shows up in the fruit of plants grown from the seeds. To prevent insects from leaving pollen on the flowers from other squash, bag both the female and male flowers before they open up. Small organza gift bags work perfectly for this purpose. When the flowers are open inside the bags, move pollen to the female flower and then re-bag the female flower until it eventually falls off the developing fruit. Be sure to tag the fruit so you know which ones to keep to maturity for seeds.

Recycling corner: Rather than rewriting information from previous newsletters, here are some "greatest hits" from the archive of newsletters on my website: http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html

- March 20, 2022 Increase your harvest: Many gardens have lots of potential for increasing the total harvest without using more land. A list of tips to increase the amount harvested from your garden space.

- March 23, 2023 Marvelous mulches: Mulching provides a multitude of benefits; what to use for mulch, where and when.

- ABCs of Gardening Series: Beginning gardeners and new subscribers might want to review the basic information included in these sections in my newsletters from December 21, 2023 to June 2024. Topics covered over the 8 months: Designing beds, compost, lime and other soil amendments, irrigation, weeding, mulching.