

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

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Sowing winter greens

Right now and for the next week or two is good timing to sow a variety of hardy greens for winter harvests. Think of this period as filling your winter refrigerator. We plant now so that the crops will reach full size by October. Then they stand for the winter in the garden while we keep on picking (and the plants get smaller and smaller and smaller.....). Most grow very little from November to February, so everything you are going to eat during this period has to be grown before this. After February, the growth rate speeds up and greens that have been nibbled to nubs grow a whole new crop.

SO what to sow? Hardy lettuce, arugula, mizuna, collards, many varieties of kales, leaf mustards, Komatsuna (AKA mustard spinach), spinach (any variety), Chinese cabbages and other Asian greens, broccoli raab. Also sow winter radishes (daikon) and Japanese bunching onion for winter scallions. If you have been discouraged with how quickly spinach goes to seed from a spring planting, try sowing it the first week in August: you will be able to harvest from those plants in the fall, winter and then in the spring they produce a really big crop of new leaves from March to mid-May.

The tricky part of mid-summer seeding is getting a good stand of seedlings in hot, drying conditions (just the opposite of all the problems we had in cool, wet spring weather). I like to plant the seed, soak the bed, then lay burlap, newspaper or old beach towels over the soil to keep it moist and cool. I usually don't have to water them again for 3-4 days (but keep checking for germination as all those cabbage family crops come in a 4 or 5 days this time of year. When you do have to water, remove the covers, water the soil and replace the covers until seeds germinate. Once seeds start to come up they are at risk of frying in the mid-day sun until their little roots really get dug in so I still protect them for another week or so with a little light shade. Those plastic latticework trays for seedling flats work well, turned upside down over seedlings to provide partial shade. Branches, laths, strips of cloth are also fine as long as the seedlings get some sunlight. Once plants are a couple of inches high, draw the mulch up around them to keep their roots cool and moist.

Now is the time to plant seedlings of Swiss chard, purple sprouting broccoli, winter cauliflower, cabbage, kale and other plants that are available right now as starts from:

Foxglove Farm & Garden Supply, Atkins Road

Chorus Frog Farm, Rainbow Road stand (right across from the swimming pool)

You can read all of my previous messages on the Salt Spring Energy Strategy website:

www.saltspringenergystrategy.org

For those of you inquiring about buying my books or my talk and gardening course schedule, see my web site: www.lindagilkeson.ca