

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

June 15, 2010

Time for Winter Broccoli and Cauliflower

What a difference this year is from last year! Are we having summer yet....?

I hope everyone has started their Brussels sprouts by now. We are coming up to the last half of June, which is good timing to start seeds of winter broccoli and cauliflower. Plants should be at least 30 cm (1 foot) high by fall--but I like them even larger than that to get the earliest possible crop next year. People with the warmest gardens can get away with seeding up to mid-July, but don't leave it too late if you are planning on growing your own seedlings.

The way this late, cool spring is going, the beds you thought would be empty in mid-summer may still be full of plants when it is time to plant for winter crops. A couple of ways around this:

-start your winter crops in a small nursery bed somewhere in your garden and transplant them when the spaces open up. After garlic, onions from sets, spring peas and lettuce, etc. are done in July.

-buy transplants later in the summer. An increasing number of garden centres are carrying winter crop plants so this is a better fall-back than it used to be. You still need to be careful when buying broccoli, cauliflower and lettuce for winter to make sure you are being sold suitable varieties (see below). On Salt Spring, Foxglove Nursery is definitely going to be selling a wide selection of winter crops, including the winter broccoli and cauliflower varieties. They are growing the plants themselves to make sure they are ready for island gardens at the right time.

Varieties with the Right Stuff. Purple sprouting broccoli is the best known of the overwintering broccoli; there are also white sprouting varieties. Extra Early Rudolph (AKA Purple Rudolf) is very early--producing the first harvest in February in my garden this year. They have never been as productive overall as Cardinal (AKA Cardinal Late), which is a much larger, later variety. The last Cardinal plant in my garden is still producing lots of good sized shoots right now. I guess it really likes this weather! West Coast Seeds is also selling a mixed "Purple Sprouting Broccoli Collection" to spread out harvest. For winter cauliflower, Purple Cape has been reliable in my garden for years. Galleon is an heirloom white cauliflower from England of outstanding quality; I have been growing it for the last 4 years and it is my favourite by far.

A pest management note: All of these plants need to be protected from cabbage root maggot. Cover seedlings or seed beds with floating row covers or surround the beds with 1-metre high window screen (allow the top 15 cm of screen to flop over to the outside); the latter works because 99% of the root maggot flies fly less than 1 metre above the ground. When you transplant the seedlings make sure each plant has a paper or cloth barrier around the stems. Make barriers from 6-8 inch squares of heavy, water resistant paper, such as Kraft paper or tar paper, or use several layers of newspaper, even stiff fabric can be used. This year I am using squares cut out of a woven plastic feed bag. From one edge, cut a slit to the centre of the square, then cut a tiny X at the centre, where the stem will poke through, so that you can get the paper fitting very tightly around the stem (the paper lies flat on the soil surface). Anchor the barrier with a couple of pebbles or mulch to hold it in place. Leave in place for the life of the plant.

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