

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

June 26, 2010

Carrot Day is almost here! Tomato warning...

Carrot day: with pancake breakfasts, concerts, fireworks and everything! That's July 1st, I am talking about--a good target date for sowing all the carrots, beets, turnips and other roots that you plan to eat over the winter. Be sure to plant a really large bed as you could be eating them from October to May if you plant enough. This is one bed that must be where soil is well-drained so roots aren't sitting in cold water all winter. Grow your favourite varieties and don't worry about searching for winter hardy ones. The key to good winter root crops in our region seems to be more about good drainage and a good thick mulch for the winter than particular varieties.

Take steps to protect this late crop of carrots from carrot rust fly and turnips from cabbage root maggot (they are similar insects, but attack different crops). The late generation of these root pests can attack as late as September and once in the roots, the larvae keep right on boring all winter. Cover the beds before the seedlings come up with floating row covers or use 1-metre-high window screen fence around the bed (most of the adult insects fly below 1 metre). Support the fence on stakes with the bottom edge buried in the soil and allow the top 20 cm to flop outward away from the crop to make an overhang. So the flies zipping along close to the ground hit the fence, fly up, do a loop under the overhang and find they are heading the other way. And of course, make sure there were no carrot family crops or weeds (Queen Anne's lace) in the carrot bed or any cabbage family plants in the turnip bed, before you plant the winter crop. Any root maggots in the soil from a previous crop would be trapped inside the cover or fence with your new crop.

Tomato warning: With the damp weather we have had and the forecast for the next week, I am worried about late blight striking tomatoes. Late blight (a fungus-like organism, called a water mould) used to be a rare, late season problem. In the early 1990's, new strains of late blight got to BC and things changed because it now can overwinter here.

All tomatoes are susceptible and sometimes peppers and eggplants are infected. This is the disease that caused the Irish potato famine so the search for resistant potatoes has been long. As a result many potato varieties are resistant, though none are immune. The search for resistant tomatoes goes on, but so far: nada (the 'Legend' variety that came out in 2003 proved to be susceptible and the flavour wasn't popular either).

Once tomatoes are infected, they collapse in a few days. There is nothing you can do about it at that point.

BUT the good news is that you can prevent the disease entirely if you keep tomato leaves dry all summer. This is usually not hard in our dry summer season, but this year leaves have been spending a lot of time wet. The longer this goes on, the more at risk plants are. In some years I have seen tomatoes collapse by the end of June.

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So, here is the bottom line: you have to keep all rain and irrigation water off of your plants. It helps to grow them staked up and well spaced to ensure excellent air circulation so the foliage dries quickly if it does get damp.

If you can move potted tomatoes under a roof overhang so they don't get wet, do it. For plants in the garden, put a simple roof over the plants to keep them dry. You just need a rain shield, which could be a clear plastic sheet (tightly stretched to keep it from draping onto the plants), a sheet of Coroplast screwed to 4 posts, or anything else you can devise. All four sides should be open to allow maximum ventilation.

If your tomatoes are in plastic tunnels or greenhouses, make sure there is enough air circulation to avoid forming condensation inside, which would drop onto the leaves. Plants in tunnels can actually be more at risk of blight than those outdoors if their leaves are getting wet daily. Roll up both sides of the tunnel plastic and keep the ends wide open.

Oh, and hope for dry weather...

I apologize to the half dozen people I just added to this list who sent requests more than a month or two ago--I only just found your messages buried in a little explored part of my inbox.

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