

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

March 7, 2010

Timing is everything when starting seeds

With gardeners in a hurry to put in peas and sprout their seed potatoes, it is that time of year again to mention the V-word: "vernalization" and how that relates to early plantings and growing seedlings to transplant into the garden. For fuller details information see my March 9, 2009 message on the Salt Spring Energy Strategy web site: <http://www.saltspringenergystrategy.org/food.htm>

The bottom line that is many vegetables respond to exposure to low temperatures 5-10°C (40-50°F) by flowering prematurely. They can only do this if they are old enough and big enough to have enough food reserves to support their flowering effort--but they can reach that point while they are actually pretty small. Beets, cabbage family (especially cauliflower), onions, leeks, celery, celeriac, Swiss chard are among the most prone to going to seed if they are chilled as young plants. Ironically, because large, well-grown transplants are most at risk, gardeners that starts seeds late or sow direct in the ground can end up with a more successful crop than people who go to the trouble of starting plants very early. I heard from one person last summer whose leeks all bolted to seed in their first season--but it turned out that she had done an unusually good job that year of growing big, sturdy leek seedlings--and they were big enough to vernalize in response to a period of cold late spring weather after they were planted out.

So don't get too antsy to start your plants...some guidelines:

-The stem of cabbage family transplants should be smaller than the diameter of a pencil when transplanted. If you are starting seeds indoors for cauliflower, broccoli or cabbage, sow about 6-7 weeks before you want to plant them out (late April) [I didn't mention Brussels sprouts because I find it much better to start them in early June].

-Plant the smaller onion sets (about 1 cm or ½ inch in diameter) and avoid larger sizes, which are the ones likely to send up seed stalks in the summer.

-For Swiss chard (and beets), I wait until mid- to late May to sow them directly in the garden when the soil is warm. The chard produces a crop all season, over-winters and continues to be harvested until June of the following year. By the time the next crop of chard (sown in May) is ready to pick, the old plants from the previous year are ready to pull out. With that planting schedule it is easy to have chard 12 months of the year without starting plants too early.

Planting reminders for the next few:

Tomatoes and peppers can be sown indoors by the end of the month--later if you don't have ideal growing conditions, sooner if you can provide high light levels for the growth period.

Early cauliflower, cabbage and broccoli can be sown indoors by mid-March.

You can sprout pea seeds in vermiculite anytime now; they will grow fine in vermiculite for 2-3 weeks and then can be planted outdoors--assuming our spring weather is on track, of course.

Seed potatoes for the earliest crop can go on the windowsill to start developing dark green sprouts. You can plant them outdoors anytime in March as long as you protect emerging sprouts from any late frosts (hill up the soil over the sprout or cover with mulch, plastic sheets, etc.).

Soil testing:

Most soils in this region are naturally acidic, but not all. If you are not sure about the history of your garden soil, it is a good idea to get a soil test, at least for pH, which will guide your liming recommendations. Salt Spring has an excellent soil testing lab: **Agrichem Analytical** (they also service all of BC by mail-order). Their soil pH test costs \$15. Check out their web site for instructions and prices: www.agrichem.ca Phone 250-538-1712.

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

March 7, 2010

Timing is everything when starting seeds

Other labs in this region:

MB Labs, 10115 McDonald Park Road, Sidney, B.C. 250-656-1334 www.mblabs.com

Pacific Soil Analysis: #5, 11720 Voyager Way, Richmond, BC, V6X 3G9. 604-273-8226

Norwest Labs: #104, 19575-56A Ave. Surrey, BC, V3S 8P8. 1-800-889-1433; www.bodycotetesting.com

For info on my books or to check my schedule for talks and presentations in your area see:

www.lindagilkeson.ca

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

www.saltspringenergystrategy.org