

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

October 8, 2010

Garlic planting, sprout pinching and last harvesting

Given the way the fall has been going, this is a good weekend to make sure that plants are well staked or supported against wind. This is especially critical right now for apple trees that still have a load of fruit and for big, top-heavy vegetable plants, such as cabbage, broccoli and Brussels sprouts.

Garlic: This is also a good weekend to plant garlic if you haven't already done it (if you planted in September that's great). Do try to get it planted by the end of this month because garlic needs all winter to make a nice big root system before the increasing day-lengths in the spring give it the signal to form bulbs. Fall planted garlic has much longer than spring planted garlic to grow a large root system before bulbing up. Many people reported they grew particularly large garlic this summer, no doubt helped by the unusually warm winter which would have allowed the plants to grow larger root systems. If you are looking for seed stock, Salt Spring Seeds has a locally adapted varieties:

<http://www.saltspringseeds.com/> Click on 'Garlic' on the top right side of the page for varieties, ordering and information on how to grow garlic.

Pinch Brussels sprouts: To get the sprouts to plump up well it helps to break off the cluster of leaves at the tip of the plant (you can use these in soup or stir fries). Do that right now if you haven't done it already. If your sprouts are still quite small, never fear, they will grow noticeably larger over the next few weeks once you snap off the tops. If your plants already have full sized sprouts along the stems removing the top leaves is optional.

Last harvests:

Tomatoes, potatoes, winter squash, beans: While last week's sunny weather was great to ripen the lingering crops, this spell of wet weather pretty much marks the end of the season. The prolonged rainfall forecast this week will only damage these crops so get them in.

Tomatoes: You can store blemish-free mature green tomatoes for several months at 15 degrees C (a tried and true method is to wrap each one in newspaper). They ripen when taken out and placed at room temperature. Tomatoes ripen best at about 20 degrees C and exposure to light will increase the colour somewhat, but is not required for ripening. You can just pull the whole vine and hang it up in a shed to allow the fruit to ripen (spread newspaper below to catch the drops). Check often to remove ripening or rotting fruit.

Potatoes: Allow the dug tubers to dry off for a few hours (in this weather it will have to be indoors, on the floor of a shed, garage, etc.). Brush off the dry soil and store the potatoes in cool, completely dark conditions. Burlap bags or heavy cardboard boxes are good for keeping out light.

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Fruit: It is getting to be the time to pick winter pears (Bosc, Anjou, Comice, Seckel) and kiwi fruit. Pear are ready to pick when you lift them upward gently and the stem snaps cleanly off the twig. Store these in a refrigerator or under the coolest conditions you can manage. They finish ripening when you bring them out of cold storage and hold them at room temperature.

Mulch alert: The leaves are starting to fall so it is time to collect them for mulching the garden and making compost. Any kind of leaves are fine, including big leaf maple, oak, arbutus. The only exception is black walnut leaves, which should be composted before being spread on a garden as some plants are sensitive to the compounds in the leaves. Straw is cheaper now than at other times of the year so now is the time to buy it if you plan to use that.

For those of you inquiring about my courses and talks this winter, I have updated my schedule on my web site: www.lindagilkeson.ca

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