

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

June 24, 2011

Celebrate Carrot Day

July 1st-- Carrot Day-- is nearly here! This is the ideal date to sow the large bed of carrots (and beets, rutabagas and winter radishes) to sustain you for next winter. The timing of planting for winter harvest is critical and doesn't depend on weather and soil temperature as planting does in the spring. The number of days left in the growing season are what is important for winter crops--even a long, warm fall can't compensate for planting too late because days are so short that plants grow very little.

If you don't have seeds by now, you may find that suppliers are running low so you may not have a big choice. Don't worry about that: I find that any varieties of carrots and beets can be successful winter crops. The key is to grow them where the soil will be well-drained next winter--sitting in waterlogged soil is particularly fatal to beets, but no plants thrive in those conditions. You might need raised beds for winter root crops if your soil isn't well drained. On the other hand, you don't need to grow them where there will be good sun exposure during mid-winter as they won't be actively growing then and should be covered completely with mulch next December.

Today the cool, cloudy weather is ideal for starting a good stand of carrots, because it is will be easier to keep the bed evenly moist through the germination period. If the weather has changed to sunny and hot (ever the optimist...) at planting time, it will be hard to keep the seed zone moist all day. For summer seed beds, I water well, then cover them with burlap, single sheets of newspaper or old beach towels to keep the soil damp and cool; even in hot weather, seed beds stay moist for a couple of days before they need more water. Check under the cover daily for germination and remove it as soon as the very first tip of a seedling shows. Germination only takes a few days for rutabagas, up to 10 days for carrots.

As soon as seeds germinate, immediately cover the whole bed with a generous piece of floating row cover fabric (sold by the metre at garden centres) to stop root flies from laying eggs in the crop. Hold down the edges of the fabric with boards, sticks, stones, etc. to make sure there are no gaps along the soil line. Carrot rust fly seems to be increasing on Salt Spring, likely with the increasing spread of wild carrot on the island; it is certainly a serious pest elsewhere in the region. In some places, gardeners can get away without covering spring-sown carrots, but I don't think it is wise to risk leaving the winter crop unprotected. There are 2-3 generations of root flies over the summer and the later generations continue to destroy roots as the maggots feed over the winter. Cover rutabaga and winter radish as well as carrots because there is a another species of root fly that attacks cabbage family plants. Adult root flies don't fly very high off the ground so fences of screening around beds can be used to deflect some of them from reaching the crop. This is less effective for carrot rust fly than it is for cabbage root maggot as apparently about half of the carrot flies still crawl over the fence. I have tried both methods and found the floating row covers are MUCH easier to install and give perfect results. After all the fuss of installing the fences one year, I still had a fair amount of damage on carrots. You can roll back the row covers to weed and thin but replace it as soon as you are done; leave row covers in place until end of September.

Beets don't have a root maggot pest so there is no need to cover them. Where you have had a lot of leafminer damage in past years (brown blotches on leaves), you may want to grow the beets under a floating row cover until the end of September to stop these insects from laying eggs on leaves.

Whew-- this is getting to be too long-- so I will save the topic of squash pollination for next time.

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

June 24, 2011

Celebrate Carrot Day

Various notes:

Brussels sprouts: If you didn't start your own plants at the end of May, now is the time to buy seedlings from nurseries. On Salt Spring, the right size of starts are available at the Chorus Frog Farm stand (Rainbow Road, across from the swimming pool entrance). It is getting too late now to start Brussels sprouts from seeds and hope to have a crop.

Purple sprouting broccoli and winter cauliflower: Seed them now if you are growing your own--or wait and buy started plants in a month from local suppliers.

Peas: Still not too late to plant peas for later summer harvests.

For info on my books [including my new best seller (I love saying that!), **Backyard Bounty**] or to check my 2011 schedule for talks and presentations in your area see: www.lindagilkeson.ca

For people getting double messages, this seems to be a service provider problem to do with re-starting incomplete delivery of messages with so many addressees. It isn't something I can fix, but I do code messages for each of my 8 mailing lists so I can check that they are only sent once to each group.

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