

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

May 3, 2011

Tomatoes for 2011

Ah, tomatoes....

Varieties: As one of the coldest springs we have had on the coast continues to keep on giving us cool weather, you might want to revise some of your tomato plans. For example, by adding a few plants of parthenocarpic varieties, such as 'Oregon Spring' and 'Siletz', to your tomato patch. These can produce fruit even though night temperatures fall to 7 degrees C because the flowers can set fruit without fertilization. The early fruit is seedless, but later, when the weather warms they produce normally fertilized fruit. Both varieties produce a medium-sized red tomato with good flavour. If you are planning to grow some of the large, potato leaved vine tomatoes, such as the Brandywines, or other long-season indeterminate tomatoes such as beefsteak varieties, Moneymaker, Black Krim and others, I would consider them experimental this year unless you have them in a greenhouse (or we get lucky with a lot of warm weather starting pretty darn soon). To hedge your bets, grow a few of the earliest, short season varieties so you can get at least some ripe fruit. Many (though not all) of the small-fruited varieties ripen early, such as Tumbler and various cherry tomatoes. Cold-tolerant beefsteak tomatoes that sound worth trying are Gregori's Altai or Sasha's Altai/Sasha's Pride and there are others with promising earliness and cold-tolerance characteristics. It is too late to start your own plants from seeds, but not too late to make some smart choices among the variety of tomatoes that nurseries have for sale. Do a little research first in online seed catalogues for descriptions of varieties so you know what to look for when you get to the shop or farmer's market.

Late Blight Alert: The other thing this cool, damp weather might bring is an early outbreak of late blight. Last year some people lost all of their tomatoes in August, just as they were ripening. There are no truly blight resistant varieties so the most certain way to avoid infection is to ensure that your tomato leaves stay dry all season--no rain, no condensation from inside a plastic tunnel, no irrigation water on the leaves. Tomatoes in pots, lined up along a deck or patio, just far enough back to be under the overhang of the roof fare much better than plants sprawling on the ground out in the garden subject to dew and rainfall. So, anything you can do to keep the foliage dry will delay infection, including spacing plants out and staking and pruning them so there is good air circulation to dry leaves quickly. For plants under greenhouses or plastic tunnels, ensure the maximum ventilation (e.g., roll up the sides of the tunnel as well as leaving open ends). You don't want condensation to form inside to drip on the leaves. Note: Some people have heard that removing all the leaves of the plants will prevent late blight. Unfortunately, the infective agent (called a water mould) spreads so quickly that by the time you see infected leaves, the plants collapse within a few days. The organism can still get into the stems so that all leaf removal accomplishes is to stop plants from growing since they can no longer photosynthesize. Fruit on leafless plants continues to ripen because once tomatoes have turned from dark green to lime green, they will continue to ripen.

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Last chance to sign up for my last Organic Gardening Course of the season (otherwise known as 'How to Grow the Most Food in the Smallest Space with the Least Work!') Saturday May 14, 2011. 9:30 PM - 4:30 PM. UBC Botanical Garden Reception Centre, 6804 SW Marine Drive. \$55 public, \$50 garden members (includes students). There are still spaces left. More about the class and how to register:

<http://www.botanicalgarden.ubc.ca/2011/courses/organic-gardening>

For info on my books or to check my 2011 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