

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

October 30, 2011

Mulching, Bracing and Apple Trees

The fall weather is finally with us so thoughts of winter are not far behind....

Mulching: Finally, the leaves are dropping, so you can get out there and rake up a free supply of the best thing you can get for your garden and compost bin. Remember: "Mulching is not optional". If you have bare soil, mulch it to prevent soil erosion and control weeds. If you have crops in the garden, it is even more important to mulch to keep the soil surface from freezing in cold snaps and to avoid frost damage to the 'shoulders' of root crops. If carrots, beets and other roots are damaged by frost, that's where the rot starts and spreads to the rest of the roots.

At this time of year, we want fluffy insulating mulches, rather than denser materials, such as crop waste, that pack down into a soggy layer. Leaves are ideal, but you can use bracken fern, straw, reed canary grass or anything else that you can get easily. Any kind of leaves are fine, including big leaf maple, oak and arbutus. The only exception is black walnut leaves, as some plants (e.g., tomatoes) are sensitive to the compounds in the leaves. Straw is usually cheaper at this time of year. You might find a grower locally who is selling baled reed canary grass, which, on Salt Spring at least, cost about half the price of baled straw. But nothing beats leaves for being a free and weed-free, balanced fertilizer.

I mulch in two steps. Starting now, I put the first layer of leaves around all plants in the garden. For closely planted crops, such as leeks and greens, I scrunch up fistfuls of leaves and stick them in between the plants. People always ask how deep and all I can say is that the goal at this point is a layer of leaves covering the soil, maybe a couple of cm or an inch thick.

I put on the next, thicker layer of leaves just before it gets really cold (usually in December, though I was madly mulching in late November last year with that early cold snap). I cover right over the foliage of carrots so the bed looks like a 15-cm/6-inch thick layer of leaves. Be sure to get a good, thick layer over the shoulders of beets, celeriac, turnips and well up over the bulbs of kohlrabi. For cabbage family, leafy greens and leeks, I pile up leaves as deeply as possible between plants.

I also put aside a big supply of leaves for next summer's mulch (keep them dry) and fill compost bins with leaves to break down into leaf mould (let these to get wet).

Bracing: In winter storms top-heavy plants, such as cabbage, Brussels sprouts, broccoli and cauliflower can break off or be uprooted by wind and heavy snow. So, stake these securely. I take the metal and bamboo stakes I use for summer flowers and drive in 3 or 4 around each plant close to the stem, but you can use anything you have on hand, including branches and tomato cages. The latter are great for smaller plants, such as purple sprouting broccoli and overwintering cauliflower. I wrap a tea towel around the plant to pull the leaves together in the centre, making it easy to slide the tomato cage down without snapping off leaves.

While you are at it, check the support stakes on your dwarf fruit trees. Dwarf trees should be permanently supported (preferably with 3 posts spaced out around the tree) because they have small root systems and can be tipped by high winds, especially in fall while leaves and fruit are still on the tree. I was shocked last spring to discover how rotten the cedar stakes

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were on my own trees and ended up replacing everything with permanent steel T-bar fencing stakes. Thread the guy wires from each stake through a length old hose cut long enough to protect the trunk from the wire looping around it.

and speaking of fruit trees, here is a great source of custom grafted apples on Salt Spring, available for planting this fall:

Bree's Trees Custom Grafting Varieties 250-537-4319 breeeagle@shaw.ca Contact Bree for a complete list of the varieties available this year. She has many varieties that can be custom ordered for grafting onto your choice of rootstock in the spring. Below are some of what she has, but I particularly want to draw your attention to these apple scab resistant varieties that she can propagate: Transparent, Elstar, Liberty, Jonafree, Akane

Cider Apples: Bortlinger Weinapfel, Bulmers Norman, Crimson King, Geeveston Fanny, Improved Redstreak, Muscadet de Dieppe, Sauergrauech, Stembridge Cluster, Taylor's. Crab Apples: Dolgo

Cooking Apples: Alexander, Golden Noble, McPhee's Greening

Early Dessert Apples: Astrachan Red

Mid-Season Dessert Apples: Pippin, Golden Precose, Goldgelb, Gravenstein Yellow, Holstein, Jonagold, Jupiter, Kandil Sinap, Kidd's Orange Red, King, Laxton's Superb, Maiden's Blush, Merton Worcester, Mrs. Philmore, Pink Pearl, Prima, Rubinette, Sir Prize-Snow (Fameuse)- Suntan, Sweet Sixteen

Late Dessert Apples: Arkansas Black, Ashmead's Kernel, Baldwin, Belle de Boskoop, Duke of Devonshire, Esopus Spitzenburg, Freyberg, Gala, Grimes Golden, Honey Gold, Kinsei, Lady, Malling Kent, May's Apple, Spartan, Yellow Bellflower, Yellow Newton Pippin

Russet Apples: Brownlee's Russet, Egremont Russet, Knobbed Russet, Orlean's Reinette, Pomme Gris, Royal Russet, St. Edmond Pippin, Swayzie

For info on my books [including my new **Backyard Bounty**] or to check my 2012 schedule for talks, workshops and gardening classes in your area see: www.lindagilkeson.ca

No need to copy and save all these messages as I hear some people are doing: you can read all of my previous messages on the Salt Spring Energy Strategy website:

www.saltspringenergystrategy.org