

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

September 6, 2011

Cover crops & fall plantings

Fall planting: Well, the seeding season is about over, but you can still sow corn salad and winter lettuce right now. You can also transplant starts of kale, chard, spinach, lettuce and other greens if you can find them for sale. This last burst of warm days will really help plants develop bigger leaves, but the days are short, so take advantage of it while we have it. To maximize the growth rate: thin plantings, keep beds weeded and make sure plants have enough irrigation water as it is supposed to get pretty warm for the rest of this week.

I have seen some awfully small Brussels sprout plants in gardens lately, too small to produce a crop. Plants should be a couple of feet tall at this point, with at least the beginnings of sprouts showing at the base of each leaf (earlier plantings might have more developed sprouts on them by now). You can still pick leaves from small plants and use them like collards or kale greens over the winter, but I'm afraid they won't be likely to produce sprouts.

Cover crops: I have had several of questions about cover crops lately so here is my take on these for home gardens.

Cover crops, such as fall rye, crimson clover, buckwheat and others are grown to be turned under after a period of growth. When they are digested by soil microorganisms they build organic matter and nutrient levels in the soil. Because they are sown thickly, they also help to some extent to outcompete weeds. There is no question that cover crops are an essential part of an organic agriculture cropping system---but do you need them in a garden?

For a home vegetable gardener, however, cover crops do have some drawbacks: They take up valuable growing space, which could be full of food crops for the upcoming winter (if you have empty spaces in your garden right now, vow to have those spaces filled next year!). Also, grasses (e.g., fall rye) particularly, can attract the adult wireworm beetles to lay eggs. And the final consideration for me is that cover crops must be dug under before the plants get too mature, while the leaves are still lush and green. When I had an organic farm it was my business to make sure I disced in my cover crops at the right time, but all too often cover crops in home gardens get left too late (hey, we are all busy people). Before you know it, the best time to dig them in has passed and you end up with a stinky, bulky mess that is a very hard to deal with.

Since the point of cover cropping is to add organic matter, I figure I accomplish the same thing by collecting a few extra bags of leaves and mulching the soil with a nice thick layer. Leaves are free, they smother weeds all season, they don't attract wireworms and, best of all, there is nothing to dig in next spring (you know I always go for the labour-saving option!)

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Update on my gardening courses:

**Backyard Bounty: Grow the Most Food in the Smallest Space (with the Least Work) Nov. 5-6.
Salt Spring, Harbour House Hotel**

There are just 6 spaces left for this class, which starts Saturday, Nov. 5th, 10:00-3:00 pm, and continues Sunday Nov. 6th, 9:00-1:00 pm. Cost \$145, includes a catered lunch on Saturday. To register, contact me directly: gilkeson@telus.net or 250-537-2503. To read more about it and to see other Salt Spring Arts Council studio workshops being presented on the island see:

http://www.ssartscouncil.com/media/documents/SSAC_AIC_Workshops_Fall_11_2.pdf

Year-Round Harvest sponsored by the Salt Spring Island Garden Club is now taking registrations. The class runs once a month, 7-9:30 pm on a Thursday evening for 10 sessions, from January through October on Salt Spring. For the complete schedule and to register, contact Susan Dann at:

susandann@shaw.ca

Year-Round Harvest for the Urban Gardener at the Horticulture Centre of the Pacific. This one will run on Sunday afternoons (1:00-5:00 pm) once a month, for 10 sessions, January to October. For the complete schedule and to register, contact HCP: info@hcp.ca Phone: 250-479-6162.

For info on my books [including my new best seller, **Backyard Bounty**, or to check my 2011 and 2012 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