

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

February 23, 2012

Cool Roots & Starting Seeds

If you haven't done so already, pull the mulch back from garlic shoots, leafy greens, strawberries, artichokes and other plants that need to see the light of day. Keep a thick mulch over any carrots, beets and celeriac still in the garden to prevent them from starting to grow again as long as possible (this doesn't apply to leeks). Right now the soil is cold enough that a good insulating layer of leaves completely covering over the plants will keep them in good condition. I usually dig up remaining roots up by the end of March in a typical year to make sure I get them out before they begin to lose their sweetness and grow little hairy roots. This year is starting out with early warmth so if it continues to be warmer than average, I might dig the last of my roots sooner this year.

With this warm weather, the sprouts on the Brussels sprouts plants are starting to grow and become looser. So to preserve their solid little heads, I have just harvested all of my remaining sprouts to keep them in the refrigerator. This will also stop further damage from various critters that are chewing on leafy greens and other overwintered plants. There are slugs afoot now, of course, but climbing cutworms are also doing a lot of damage. Look for these greyish to greenish caterpillars on leaves in the evening or dig around in the mulch or soil at the base of plants where they hide during the day. They are quite large after feeding on and off all winter and we can expect them to continue chomping large holes in plants until late April-early May--so catch them now if you can.

I hope you are finishing up with dormant pruning of fruit trees by now. Pruning as late as March is OK for grape vines as they can be pruned later than other fruit (they leaf out later too).

Starting Seeds:

If you are growing your own vegetable starts, now is the time to start seeds of leeks for next winter's harvest, as well as onions and shallot seed. It is also time to sow celery and celeriac indoors as these tiny seedlings take a long time to grow to transplant size.

Leeks: For harvest next winter, look for really hardy cultivars such as my absolute favourite 'Unique' (Full Circle Seeds: <http://www.fullcircleseeds.com>). Also 'St. Victor', 'Durabel', 'Sigfried Frost' and others are specifically described as winter hardy. There are other leeks for fall harvest, but they won't survive most winters.

I sow leek seeds fairly densely in one small flat on bottom heat. When the leeks come up they look like a thin stand of grass blades. Keep them in the brightest possible light on a south windowsill or under grow lights if you have these set up. When the weather is warm enough, put them out in a cold frame or greenhouse during the day. They should be ready to plant out in late April or early May.

Onions: You can also start onions from seed right now (same method as for leeks). I like to grow big sweet onions ('Walla Walla', 'Sweet Spanish', 'Ailsa Craig') and red torpedo onions ('Tropeana Lunga') as well as some storage onions that aren't available as sets. Onion 'sets' are those miniature onions that you can buy at nurseries in the spring. They are meant to be planted out directly in the garden in April-May. When choosing sets, go for the smallest onions in the bin. The biggest sets (the

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size of a nickel) are likely to reward your efforts by going to seed instead of growing a bulb if they experience a spell of cold weather after they are planted.

Celeriac and Celery: Celery transplants are usually available from nurseries, however, celeriac is harder to find. The seeds of both celeriac and celery are very tiny and take a long time to grow to a useful transplant size so I start mine indoors in February. They are slow to germinate and need the best of care to get going: germinating the seeds on bottom heat is a good idea and move them to excellent light levels as soon as they come up. When planting either of these vegetables out in the spring, wait until the soil is quite warm and the weather stable. Otherwise they may do the same thing large onions sets do and go to seed if they experience a cold spell once they are in the garden.

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