

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

March 25, 2012

Spring planting signals

I always think the best thing about growing vegetables over the winter is that you can relax in the spring. You don't need to plant in cold, wet soil when it is an uphill battle for tender seedlings that 'suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' ...which, in this case, means root rots, slugs, wireworms, cutworms, pillbugs....

The first purple sprouting broccoli is beginning to grace the dinner table (what delight!) and I am eagerly awaiting the first cauliflower in a few weeks. The growth rate of overwintered lettuce, Swiss chard, kale, spinach and other greens is clearly picking up and there are still leeks, carrots, beets and other roots for harvest. With the exception of leeks, which can stay in the garden, I dig remaining roots by the end of March and store them in the refrigerator. A thick mulch helps keep the soil cool for longer, but if roots are left in the garden until they start to grow again the flavour quickly deteriorates as they use up stored sugars to grow seed stalks. In contrast to root crops, when leafy greens start to go to seed this spring, the leaves are OK to eat until you discard the plants (usually in June unless you are saving seeds).

Lettuce leaves get bitter as the plant ages and leaf stalks forms--they are still edible, but the flavour is like endive.

Frost Free Dates? New gardeners to the coast often ask what they should use as an average last frost free date. This is a concept with little meaning here (unless you happen to live at your local airport, where weather records are kept). In this region there are big differences in frost patterns over very small areas because of the complicated geography from sea shores to mountain slopes. While some sheltered coastal gardens may see only a few days of below freezing all winter, gardens farther inland or those in low-lying land might still have ground frosts into May. And while we might think of this region as having a 'warm' climate compared to the rest of the country, it is only a warm winter--definitely not a warm summer. Late frost doesn't matter for the hardy crops we grow because once they get used to outdoor temperatures (are hardened off), even small seedlings tolerate several degrees of frost. But for warmth-loving crops, we are in the same boat as other northern gardeners. The May long weekend is the target date for planting tomatoes in much of the rest of Canada and we often can't do any better than that, especially in cooler than normal weather or in exposed coastal gardens. In my garden it can be early June before I put out the really delicate plants such as sweet basil and cucumbers.

The best indicator of when to plant for coastal gardeners is soil temperature. If you wait until the soil is warm (ideally 15oC), seeds germinate and grow quickly past the stage when they are most vulnerable to root diseases and slugs. Right now, climbing cutworms are still feeding and they are HUGE (I turned up a couple of monsters in my garden yesterday), which means they devour a lot of leaf material each night. The cutworms transform into pupae (their next life stage), in April and May. The pupae are those reddish-brown, bullet-shaped things you find in the soil. They don't eat in that stage and the moths that emerge from the pupae later don't eat leaves either, so it is safe to plant seedlings once the cutworms become pupae.

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

March 25, 2012

Spring planting signals

Last 3 Backyard Bounty courses: There is still space in the last of my one-day gardening classes this year. They are scheduled for City of Richmond (April 21), the UBC Botanical Garden (May 5) and in Duncan at VIU (May 12). For details and contact info, see my talk Calendar on my web site.

For info on my books 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: you can read all of my previous messages on the Salt Spring Energy Strategy website: www.saltspringenergystrategy.org