

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

May 10, 2012

Sweet Corn and TCs

The recent warm days and sunny forecast for the rest of the week is certainly welcome! The La Nina weather pattern has finally faded so we might see a return to warmer temperatures this summer. We can go ahead and plant all kinds of seeds and started plants now. I would still hold back on setting out tender plants unless you have them under plastic tunnels or have a particularly warm and sheltered garden. It is still too cool to sow sweet corn and beans directly outdoors, but you can start seeds for your first planting indoors right now and set them out in a couple of weeks.

Sweet corn tips: Which variety to grow is a matter of taste: some people prefer the super sweet varieties (labelled as 'sh2', 'triplesweet' or 'supersweet'). Others prefer the old-fashioned corn flavour of 'sugar normal' corn. An advantage of super sweets is that ears hold their sweetness without turning to starch for several days after picking. A disadvantage is that they are delicate and should be sown in very warm soil (21oC). All corn needs soil temperatures of at least 15oC or higher to germinate, so getting an early crop usually means starting seeds indoors. Many gardens in this region are just not warm enough to be successful with corn varieties that take 85 days or more to harvest. For my garden, look for varieties listed as 62-70 days to harvest. Sugar normal and super sweet varieties should not be grown together because cross-pollination results in tasteless kernels. To avoid this complication I find it easiest to grow one variety, planted at 2 or 3 intervals to spread out the harvest (e.g., May 15, May 30 and June 15). To aid pollination, plant corn in dense blocks, rather in a few long rows. That way the pollen from the top of the corn plants has a better chance of falling onto the silks at the tips of the ears. If you only grow a few plants or sow them in a row, a puff of wind can make the pollen miss the ear entirely.

Tent caterpillars: Top of mind for many gardeners right now is the outbreak that is continuing to move through the region. This year they are peaking in the Gulf Islands, Saanich Peninsula and southern Vancouver Island. The eggs have hatched and now the tiny black caterpillars are spinning small webs at the tips of branches and over fruit buds. I was shocked to find 18 developing nests on my dwarf apple tree last week--after I had already removed over 40 egg masses earlier in the year.

As there is some confusion about timing of controls I thought I would review your options:

- The 'do nothing' option is the best approach for natural areas, alder bush and other forested areas. Just wait it out as disease, predators and parasitic insects will eliminate the infestation over the next year or two. Defoliated trees will leaf out again after the caterpillars are done feeding by the end of June.
- The 'do something' option makes sense to defend fruit trees, rose bushes and other garden plants. While the nests are small, physically removing them is most effective. Pull the nests off by hand (wear gloves) or prune out the branch tips with nests.
- Sprays of BTK (*Bacillus thuringiensis*, the bacteria in Safer's Biological Insecticide) work best when the caterpillars are small, but still a little bigger than they are now. The caterpillars need to be big enough to consume sufficient spores to infect themselves. Once sprayed on leaves, the bacteria only last for a couple of days so repeat sprays are needed. BTK sprays don't harm beneficial insects, birds, etc.

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- Some people have been trying soap sprays, but these work only on contact. Once the spray is dry it has no effect, therefore you have to get the soap directly on the caterpillars. It won't affect them when they are inside their webs. Soap sprays also harm other insects so be careful to direct the spray just to the caterpillars.

Tent caterpillars feed until mid- to late June (depends on weather) and then start to wander looking for a place to spin cocoons. Although it will seem like we are being overrun, they don't actually eat much in one place as they are mainly grabbing a snack on their travels.

Last of my gardening courses for 2012 is May 12th. There are still some spaces left in this Saturday's class at Vancouver Island University, Duncan: **Backyard Bounty: Small Garden--Large Yield.** 9:00 to 4:00. \$69+HST. See: <http://www.cc.viu.ca/ce/brochS12.pdf> To register, contact VIU 250-746-3519 or Toll free: 1-888-747-3519

To order books or to check my schedule for talks, workshops and gardening classes in your area see: www.lindagilkeson.ca

You can read my previous messages archived on the Salt Spring Energy Strategy website: www.saltspringenergystrategy.org