

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

February 21, 2014 Starting seeds, seed library

After the last Arctic blast of cold, I was relieved to see that my Yuzu, a hardy citrus I got last year from Bob Duncan's, Fruit Trees & More nursery (www.fruittreesandmore.com) seems to have little injury and my 'Sochi' tea bush also made it. The Yuzu is supposed to have a flavour resembling a cross between a grapefruit and a mandarin orange. I don't know about that yet, but any citrus that can survive the winter we just had, with lows to -9oC (15oF) in my garden, is welcome.

Although the weather is still wobbly, with cold nights, you might want to pull the mulch back a bit from around garlic shoots, crowns of chard, spinach, strawberries, artichokes and other plants that need to see the light of day. Just expose the crowns and shoots, but don't bare the soil, which would let weed seed sprouts. As the soil warms, mulches break down more rapidly; if you used leaves most of them will disappear into the soil between now and the end of May.

Now is a good time to renew a thick layer of leaves or straw over beds of carrots, beets, parsnips or other roots still in the garden. We don't want them to know it is spring, because then they will start to grow again using up sugars in the roots to send up a seed stalk. The soil is cold enough that a good insulating layer of leaves should keep roots in good condition until the end of March. By early April, depending on the weather, I dig up the last of the roots and store them in the refrigerator where they keep for another month or two.

Starting Seeds: If you plan to grow your own seedlings this year, this is the month to start seeds of leeks, onions, shallots and other Alliums from seed. Also celery and celeriac, which take a long time to grow to transplant size, should be started by the end of February. If you start a couple of week later, compensate for by giving each seed more space, such as in an individual cell in a tray, so they grow as fast as possible. With the winter cold, losses of lettuce and other leafy greens were higher than usual, so you might also want to start some of those seeds right now too to replace killed plants.

Seeds are best germinated on bottom heat such as a seed tray heat mat (about \$35-40), but can also be started in any really warm spot in your house. Seeds don't need bright sun until they germinate, but as soon as the tiniest tip of green shoot shows above the soil, they must be moved a bright, sunny south window or sunroom or placed under grow lights. Ideal growth temperatures is a few degrees cooler than room temperature. Lack of light, often combined with being too warm, results in leggy, pale, floppy, leaning seedlings. If you don't have bright enough light indoors, set the seedlings out during the day in a cold frame, plastic tunnel or unheated greenhouse and bring them indoors every night. Recently we have had several sunny days that were warm enough in mid-day to set seed trays directly outdoors for a few hours to enjoy full sun.

Allium cultivars: Growing your own is the only way to get some kinds of onions. It also ensures you don't bring Allium diseases into your garden on onion sets or bunched seedlings, which are field grown (nursery seedlings grown in soilless mixes are not a disease risk). I particularly like sweet onions ('Walla Walla', 'Ailsa Craig') and Italian red torpedo onions ('Tropeana Lunga', 'Rossa Lunga'), though they don't store all winter. For outstanding storage ability, I grow the really big shallots ('Ed's Red', 'Ambition F1'). For red storage onions, I have been growing Redwing F1, a beautiful, big round onion that keeps perfectly, but this year I am trying out an open pollinated red storage onion 'Dutch Red' from the Vancouver Island seedhouse, Omega Blue

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(<http://vanislepoultryconservation.org/index.php/seeds>) that looks really promising. A big red OP storage onion would be a treasure!

Once again, this winter's cold showed how hardy 'Unique' leeks are--mulched but not covered, they got through both cold snaps at my elevation. For leeks to eat next winter, look for the hardiest cultivars, such 'Unique' (Full Circle Seeds: <http://www.fullcircleseeds.com>), 'St. Victor', 'Durabel' and others.

Salt Spring Seed Library opens: Seed libraries are sprouting up all over! The Radicle Seed Library is open 12:00-2:00 every Friday until the end of May in the Salt Spring Public Library (follow the signs). When you join the Salt Spring Seed Sanctuary (<http://www.seedsanctuary.com>), you will be able to "borrow" seeds from a selection of approximately 3 dozen locally grown, heritage seeds (among them: peas, beans, barley, wheat, quinoa, tomatoes, lettuce, chard, beets and various herbs). You will be asked to return some of the seed saved to the library in the fall for next year's gardeners to try. SSSS members will be there to help you with any questions on how to grow the crop and save seed.

See my web site www.lindagilkeson.ca for hundreds of colour photos of pests and diseases to help you ID problems, to order books or check my 2014 schedule for talks, workshops and gardening classes in your area. I am totally booked for 2014, but if your group is interested in a presentation, 2015 isn't full....yet....

All of my previous messages are archived on my web site under the Gardening Tips page and are also available through the Salt Spring Energy Strategy website: www.saltspringenergystrategy.org