

Gardening Newsletter

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June 6, 2014: Get Mulching

Gardeners in this region have to be prepared for anything--and now just look what we have to deal with: warm, sunny, dry weather for days on end!

Delightful though it is, you might have noticed that your soil is getting very dry. Most years I finish putting the summer mulches on my garden by the end of June (much of June is so often cool and wet), but this year is different. If you haven't done so, do get summer mulches on as soon as possible. For seedlings, this cools the soil where the tiny roots are still vulnerable to heat and, of course, it conserves moisture in the soil and reduces watering.

Gardens lose water directly by evaporation from bare soil and indirectly as the plants take up water through their roots and release it from their leaves. The flow of water up through the plant carries nutrients and cools the leaves. When there is a lot of bare soil with tiny plants, most soil water is lost through evaporation so mulches conserve a significant amount of water. In a densely planted bed of full grown plants, 85-90% of the water is removed by the vegetables (and any weeds that might be present). In that case, evaporation might only account for 10-15%, but that still makes mulches worth it to reduce water loss.

What to use for mulch? Any organic material works--the problem is getting ahold of it at this time of year. Some of you will have a stash of fallen leaves that you stockpiled just for this purpose from last fall. But if you don't have that, it can be difficult to lay hands on enough mulch right now for a whole garden. Straw is fine if you can get it, but it is expensive and not always available this time of year. It is so light and fluffy fresh off the bale that it will blow around, but it does make a durable mulch that lasts all year. Some people can get reed canary grass straw, which is very durable. I use leaves for berry bushes, fruit trees and many plants, but for vegetables I like to use straw that I bought in the fall and left out all winter in the rain. By the time I use it in the spring, any weeds in the straw have sprouted (most straw is pretty clean, but some isn't). When I cut the strings and pull the partly decomposed straw off the bale it sticks together in thin sheets of matted straw that are very easy to use.

Although the best place for lawn clippings is on the lawn to feed the grass, you could rob the lawn for a few cuttings to use as mulch around your garden plants. Clippings are mostly water so there isn't much to them when they dry out, but even a light layer will help. Half-done compost, still rough and fibrous, can be used too. When you harvest spring cabbage, cauliflower, rhubarb, etc., use those nice big waste leaves as mulch (including any overwintered kale and purple sprouting broccoli plants that you are sick of eating at this point).

What to plant: Hard to believe but it is time to think about what to eat next spring. Mid-June is good timing to start seeds of overwintering broccoli and cauliflower that will be harvested early next year. For info on cultivars, see my June 17, 2013 message archived at: http://lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html

Salt Springers: Chorus Frog Farm stand has lots of winter cabbage starts, including a wonderful, super hardy, dark red cabbage, 'Langejider Red'; They also have Brussels sprouts and many summer plants with reduced prices for tomatoes, etc. If you need zucchini, they have them, including 'Partenon'--the one that can set fruit without fertilization. It is a reliable producer and I have just picked the 4th zucchini from mine (wasn't able to beat my last year's record though).

The pest du jour: Silver spotted tiger moth caterpillars [see: http://lindagilkeson.ca/leaf_chewers2.html#33] are more common than usual around the region and are wandering around right now causing some concern. They were feeding in webs in conifers earlier in the spring (usually fir, but they can feed on others), but are now looking for a good place to spin a cocoon and are no longer eating trees. Though it may seem like there are a lot of them about when they are at this stage, they don't build up to the huge numbers tent caterpillars do in outbreak years and you may not see any next year.

Upcoming events:

Richmond: Saturday, June 14. 3 workshops 9:30-3:00: 1. Next Winter's Harvest Starts Now! 2. Life After Pesticides: Beautiful Yards and Healthy Gardens; 3. Bugs in Your garden: The Good, the Bad and the Beautiful. In the Board Room, South Arm Community Centre Description. Classes are free but pre-registration is required: <http://www.richmond.ca/parksrec/about/registration.htm>

Salt Spring: Sunday, June 29. 1:00-4:30 pm. I will be giving a community workshop on preserving your garden surplus for Transition Salt Spring. Learn to cure and store onions, garlic, winter squash and potatoes, how to keep fresh roots, apples and other fruit over the winter. We will also cover easy freezing methods, using a dehydrator and a step-by-step guide to boiling water bath canning. Just turn up at the Farmers Institute on Rainbow Rd., on a 'first come' basis, with admission by donation.

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: http://lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html