

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

April 4, 2015

Catching Currantworms; Cutting Broccoli Confusion

If you are starting seeds indoors, you could sow the most tender plants now: squash, cucumbers and melons. If you are keeping cucumbers and melons in a greenhouse, you might have started them earlier. On the other hand, plants for greenhouses can be started even later than this, if it fits your schedule better, because they grow so quickly in the warmer conditions. And everyone, let's all remember that this has, so far, been an exceptionally warm and early season so if you haven't planted potatoes, set out strawberries, put out the peas and generally gotten your gardening act together--don't worry! you are not too late...in fact, in some years we could be just barely getting going in early April.

Nurseries are setting out an expanding selection of hardier vegetable starts. If you plant them out now, do cover them at night with plastic or use cloches or floating row covers to keep them warmer. It is still pretty cool at night with ground frosts still occurring in many gardens this week.

Broccoli confusion continues! As I was browsing through veggies starts on nursery and grocery store racks last week, I saw plants labelled 'Purple Broccoli' and 'Rudolph Purple Broccoli'. The latter is certainly a winter broccoli, meaning that if you plant it now, you won't see heads until next February or March no matter how big the plants grow this summer. This is the opposite of the problem I often rail about in August, when I see starts of summer broccoli being sold late in the season, supposedly for winter harvests. The plants labelled 'Purple Broccoli', could be either a summer or a winter broccoli. There is a 'Purple Peacock' summer broccoli (actually a cross between broccoli and kale). It produces both kale-like leaves and small purple heads like other sprouting broccoli. West Coast Seeds this year lists a 'Summer Purple' sprouting broccoli as well. But other purple sprouting broccolis are winter types and won't produce heads until spring after spending the winter in the garden so buyer beware.

Confused yet? Here is a list of broccoli types:

1. **Summer broccoli** produces a crop in the same summer that it is sown. There are 2 general types:
 - a. Central head cultivars, which grow a large head and have a few side shoots later (some cultivars more than others). Examples are 'Goliath', 'Gypsy', 'Everest' and many others (many are hybrids). This is what you see in the grocery store and is the most common type you see in nurseries as starts.
 - b. Sprouting cultivars, which have a smaller central head, but continue with lots of side shoots all summer. There are few cultivars around, but they are mostly open pollinated so you can save your own seed. I like these for a small garden, because they never stop shooting out sprouts so I think they produce more over a season than the central head types. These tend to be hardier than central head cultivars and can survive over a mild winter or in sheltered gardens, sometimes for several years. Examples: 'Calabria', 'Calabrese', 'Green Sprouting'. There is also a purple sprouting 'Summer Purple' as I mentioned, above.
2. **Winter broccoli**, which produces heads after a winter chill. These are sown in mid- to late June to grow medium-sized plants by fall. Starting in late winter they produce a small central head followed by many side shoots. They continue producing more and more, but smaller and smaller, shoots until you tire of harvesting and remove the plants (June-ish). Most are purple sprouting cultivars: 'Rudolph Extra

Early' is very early (often starts in February), but does not produce many later side shoots. 'Red Spear' starts a few weeks later and has a long period of excellent side shoot production; 'Cardinal Late' heads form later still; it has the largest initial head and excellent production of side shoots. There are also a few white sprouting cultivars, such as 'White Star'.

The same confusion reigns with summer vs. winter cauliflower. Summer cultivars, such as 'Snowball' and 'Snow Crown', produce heads the same season they are sown. Winter cultivars, such as 'Galleon', 'Purple Cape', 'Aalsmeer', produce heads after a winter chill. There is no point in planting Snowballs in August or September since the cold weather will either kill them or cause them to produce 'button' heads the size of a loonie.

That said, some broccoli and cauliflowers do not clearly fall into one category and unusual weather can cause plants to do atypical things, such as heading--or not heading--when they are supposed to. There are also gradations between cauliflower and broccoli (Purple Cape is really a 'brocco-flower') and seed houses are bringing forward ever more interesting and new crosses, such as 'Purple Peacock' as well as broccolini, broccoli raab and Romanesco broccoli cultivars. If you you have unwittingly planted a winter cultivar this spring, all is not lost. If you have the space to leave the plants in the garden until next spring, they usually produce a (huge) crop. They will be very large plants before winter, however, so will need careful staking to survive winter winds.

Are you growing currants? If so, this is the month when eggs of imported currantworms are laid. Also called current sawfly, these are green larvae that look like caterpillars (though they aren't) that chomp up large quantities of leaves, often leaving only veins behind. You can avert damage entirely if you catch them before the eggs hatch. Have a good look at these photos of damage, eggs and larvae:

http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/leaf_chewers2.html#36

The eggs are laid on the undersides of leaves, along the leaf veins; they concentrate on leaves on the lowest part of the bush. The photo of eggs also shows what the attacked leaf looks like from the top, with discolouration along the veins. Eggs are laid in large numbers, but on only a few leaves. All you need to do is destroy those leaves to control currantworms. In my garden, eggs are laid from mid- to late April. Start checking this week and when you see them, write down the date so you will know when to look for them again next year. If you miss the egg-laying period, you can still catch the larvae before they do much damage by searching in the lower and interior leaves of the bush in May.

My Upcoming Workshops:

City of Richmond:

April 11: Backyard Bounty: Organic Harvest Year Round. April 11, 9:30-4:30 Richmond City Hall. Grow vegetables and fruit with the least amount of work, all year round. Soil fertility, composting, planting schedules, cold protection and pest control will be covered.

April 18: Food Preserving Workshops: 9:30 Fresh Storage and Easy Freezing. 1:00-3:00 Getting Started with Preserving. Steveston Community Centre.

For more information and to register for any of the above workshops, see:

<http://www.richmond.ca/parksrec/about/guide.htm> Classes are free to people in Richmond, but pre-registration is required.

See my web site <http://www.lindagilkeson.ca> for hundreds of colour photos of pests and diseases to help you identify problems (many more photos were added recently). All of my previous gardening messages are archived on my Gardening Tips page: http://lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html