

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson
March 13, 2015

Planting for an early spring

This is the earliest I have ever harvested Purple Cape cauliflower at my house. Any minute now I will stop admiring the beauty of those deep purple heads and bring myself to start cutting them for dinner. I am feeling relieved that I CAN eat these and don't have to save them for seed, thanks to the effort of Chorus Frog Farm to keep this cultivar from disappearing. The year before last, we began to notice that Purple Cape was disappearing from seed catalogues. Pauline and Rod planted a large crop for seed in 2013, which was harvested last summer and is for sale this season through Salt Spring Seeds: <http://www.saltspringseeds.com/> I suggest you get your hands on this one--it is an excellent cultivar! Later in the season, people on Salt Spring will be able to buy starts from the Chorus Frog stand (Rainbow Road, across from the swimming pool).

As I suspected, the weather has been way too warm to leave root crops in the garden as late as usual. Even under a thick mulch the carrots are beginning to grow and lose sweetness--so out they all come today. Same for beets and any other root crop still in the garden. I don't harvest overwintered leeks early, though. Even though they also develop a seed stalk up the centre, it is tender and can be eaten with the rest of the leek.

I guess we are just going to skate right into full tilt planting, still weeks earlier than usual--so here are some tips on pests and plantings:

Pests: The soil really isn't warm yet, but the good news is that climbing cutworms seem to be pupating earlier than usual. Some are already in their pupa cases--those mahogany coloured, bullet-shaped cases you find in the soil (for a photo, see: http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/leaf_chewers.html#25). That means they are not going to be wiping out our seedlings as they often do into early May.

So we just have slugs to deal with, which can be kept to low numbers with the safe slug baits containing iron/ferric phosphate. Sluggo Slug & Snail Bait is on the OMRI products list for certified organic growers. Other slug baits include Scott's Ecosense Slug-B-Gone, Safer Slug and Snail Bait. A tip on using these baits: sprinkle very small amounts over a wide area. The products are essentially pasta pellets containing iron, meant to attract slugs. When a slug or snail eats iron, it interferes with its ability to make slime so they die, but not immediately, as they would if they ate a toxin. SO don't put a ring of pellets around plants you want to protect because it will attract the slugs to enjoy a pasta dinner along with your plants. I suggest spreading a tablespoon of bait over an average garden bed (say 4 feet x 10 feet). Renew the bait after rain.

What to start now: It isn't too late to start onions, leeks and shallots from seed (indoors), but do it now. This week I started a few cauliflowers (indoors) as well as sweetheart cabbage. I am impressed with the speedy growth and sweet crunchiness of these small, fast-growing cabbages with the distinctively pointy heads. After a few seasons of growing them, they have become a staple spring crop in my garden. The leaves are more tender than you might think; I end up mostly eating them raw in salads or simply as wedges of crisp cabbage. The two most common varieties are 'Early Jersey Wakefield' and the hybrid 'Caraflex' . They do very well sown the first week of August in case you need to add to your supply of fall

cabbage to eat, but they are not hardy enough to be a reliable overwintering cabbage in all but the warmest gardens in this region.

If you are not going to be inundated with purple sprouting broccoli for the next few months, you might want to start broccoli seeds. In fact, any cabbage family plants and leafy greens can be started indoors any time from now on. If you have a coldframe or cloches to warm up garden soil, you can try sowing seeds outdoors (I am sure some of you are already well ahead of me on this). Seed potatoes and strawberry plants are now in at local nurseries and can go in whenever your soil is ready to plant.

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

My teaching and talking schedule for 2015 is fully booked, so check my schedule link on my web site for talks, workshops and gardening classes in your area.