

# Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

May 20, 2015

## Dry weather, sweet corn and winter cabbage

With the weather stable, warm (and way too dry), I think we are quite safe putting out celeriac, celery, cucumbers, even melons and sweet basil. The first 2 are easily vernalized by a late cold spell (causing them to go to seed) and the latter 3 are very finicky about the cool, damp conditions often found on the coast at this time of year. In fact, for inland coastal areas, it is forecast to be hot tomorrow so watch out for your tiny seedlings and seedbeds: they will probably need to be shaded them to get them safely through the hot part of the day. And it is time to start mulching plants that are large enough or like cooler soil (such as peas, cabbage, lettuce, onion family). With the very dry spring we have had and this long stretch of sunny, warm weather, mulches to slow water loss and cool the soil will be appreciated by plants. I covered mulches in more detail about this time last year so for more info, see my June 6, 2014 message: [http://lindagilkeson.com/gardening\\_tips.html](http://lindagilkeson.com/gardening_tips.html)

Sweet corn: Though we can certainly sow all kinds of seeds directly in the soil now, I still start my sweet corn seeds indoors in individual small containers to get even germination and reduce losses to birds, wireworms, etc. The reason I do this is that I have learned my lesson on the risks of sowing corn directly. What with the vagaries of weather and pests, direct sowing too often result in an uneven age stand of corn. That's a problem because there has to be a critical mass of corn plants blooming at the same time to provide sufficient pollen to fertilize the kernels.

Corn plants have the male parts at the top of the plant on the tassels. Pollen has to fall onto the silks attached to the ear; each kernel has a silk attached and each one has to be fertilized with a grain of pollen in order for the kernel to develop. In a field of corn there is plenty of pollen floating around to ensure good fertilization, but in a small patch of corn it is common to see ears with undeveloped kernels at the tips or even over large parts of the cob. This is worst where there are only a few plants or the plants are set in a row because a puff of wind can blow the pollen sideways so it misses some of the silks. Planting in dense blocks gives the best chance of fertilization for small plantings. I find that a block of 5 plants x 5 plants=25 plants, is about as small as I can go and still get good kernel development. Of course, if I planted all of my corn on the same date, pollination would be less of an issue, but then all of the corn would be ripe at the same time. I sow 3-4 plantings of 25 plants at a time at 2-3 weeks intervals. The batch I started May 4 was planted out today; the next batch will be sown tomorrow and a third batch will be sown around June 8 (all in small pots) to provide harvests to the end of September.

Winter cabbage and Brussels sprouts: It is time to sow seeds of the winter cabbages that take 120 days or more to mature: e.g., January King, Danish Ballhead, Langedijker Late Red and Langedijker Winter Keeper. These need the whole summer and fall to make big, heavy heads for winter. Many main season cultivars take almost as long so check package descriptions to plan your sowing dates.

A good time to sow Brussels sprouts is the last week of May or first week of June (the latter is probably best this year, given that it is forecast to be another hot summer). This timing has sprouts developing in September and October, largely avoiding cabbage aphid damage to the sprouts because aphid numbers drop away in the fall as the insects prepare for winter.

Spring Zucchini Race Winner: Congratulations to Salt Springer Janet Simpson who harvested an 8-inch long 'Partenon' zucchini on May 10 and sent the photos to prove it. Like long English greenhouse cucumbers, flowers of this parthenocarpic squash (from William Dam Seeds, [www.damseeds.ca](http://www.damseeds.ca)) don't need to be pollinated to set fruit so they can produce very early squash. Despite my best efforts this year, I harvested my first 'Partenon' yesterday, a day later than my personal best of May 18th. I know you non-zucchini lovers are wondering why we bother, but for me the first zucc of the year is a treat!

**Upcoming events:**

Salt Spring, May 27. I will be speaking on *Resilient Gardens for a Changing Climate* at the Salt Spring Garden Club meeting. Our regional climate is changing as the global climate changes--but what does this mean for our gardens and landscapes? Learn how to design resilient food and ornamental gardens, choose suitable varieties, how to help your plants survive 'weird weather' and other management tips that will help you become an adaptable gardener. Non-members are welcome to attend. Doors open at 7:00 pm for refreshments and displays, the business meeting starts at 7:30 and my talk around 8:00 pm. Meadon Hall (lower level of the Legion).

City of Richmond, May 30: 2 workshops: 10:15-12:15 *Closing the Loop, Reducing Waste* 1:00-3:00 *Fresh Storage and Easy Freezing*. For more information and to register for any of the above workshops, see: <http://www.richmond.ca/parksrec/about/guide.htm> Workshops are free, but pre-registration is required.

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See my web site <http://www.lindagilkeson.ca> for hundreds of colour photos of pests and diseases to help you identify. All of my previous gardening messages are archived on my Gardening Tips page: [http://lindagilkeson.ca/gardening\\_tips.html](http://lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html)

My teaching and talk schedule is fully booked to April 2016, so check my schedule link on my web site for talks, workshops and gardening classes in your area.