

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

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Starting Seeds (or not)

This certainly is a different spring than we have had for the last couple of years. I was walking around Victoria on the weekend noting all of the street trees that should have been blooming for weeks by now, without a blossom to be seen. Chirpy little notes in my own garden journals show that last year this time crocuses, Siberian iris and daffodils were all blooming in my yard...and there are none to be seen this year (we still have snow along the roads!)

Starting Seeds: If you are starting your own seeds indoors, you might want to adjust your schedule to take this late, cold season into account. I have always started seeds of leeks, onions, celery and celeriac sometime after mid-February, but this year am waiting until the very end of the month to sow them. I don't want to have to manage plants that are getting larger and larger, while the soil is still too cold for them to be set outdoors in the garden. In fact, I am pushing back all of my planting dates a week or two at this point (unless a miraculous change to substantially warmer weather happens pretty darn quick). Seedlings always do much better if they have never become root bound or stressed by being held in their pots too long or by being set out in cold soil. An older, but stressed, plant will never produce as well as a young, later-sown plant that never suffered a check in growth. What we want to accomplish by starting early is a seedling that has the advantage of quick germination in warm conditions and is able to get a few weeks of growth more than outdoor conditions would permit. Something to remember, however, is that even with a late spring, our growing season is plenty long enough for most of our crops to produce very well all summer. Getting a head start by setting out plants of the most warmth-loving crops (tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, cucumbers, melons) provides a larger and longer harvest so these are important ones to start early. But rushing peas into the cold ground or starting cabbage family crops very early doesn't usually get a substantially earlier or bigger crop on our table. For tips on starting seeds indoors, have a look at last year's note for Feb. 19 [http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html].

A review of the vernalization problem: I mention this every year and you can find more details in messages in previous years, but I find this bears repeating. A good reason to delay planting biennial vegetables (onions, leeks, carrots, beets, cabbage, kale, chard, celery, celeriac) is that when young plants are exposed to a late spring cold spell, they often bolt (go to seed) later in the summer. For biennial plants, the cold chill of winter is the signal that another season has arrived and it is time to go to seed. If we have cool weather in April (5-10oC/40-50oF), plants can be fooled, which causes them to send up flowers stalks in their first summer. I expect the way this year is going that we quite likely could have a late cold spell. Bolting is a common problem for those coastal gardeners who work too hard to get going too early, because the larger a biennial plant is when a cold spell occurs, the more likely it is to bolt. Small seedlings don't have the stored food supply to allow them to produce seed stalks so they don't bolt if exposed to cool weather. The highest risks for vernalization are onions sets larger than a nickel, leeks larger than the thickness of a pencil, celeriac and cabbage family seedlings with more than 5 leaves. So in planning our seeding schedule it is safer to start a little later to avoid this problem. If you are really anxious to get going, try annual plants, such as lettuce, spinach and peas, and consider early plantings as experiments. If they don't work out, be prepared to plant again.

I do need to remind you of climbing cutworms that consume an awful lot of leaf area from now until early May. These large caterpillars have been in the garden all winter and are now coming out after dark to feed on a variety of leaves. They are extremely frost hardy so have not been daunted by this winter—in fact, I have already found a couple of them hiding in the soil around dead annuals I have been cleaning up. Seedlings set out before the cutworms stop feeding in early May are chomped up overnight. The cutworms stop eating when they turn into pupae (those mahogany coloured “bullets” you see in the soil in the spring). Waiting until the caterpillars pupate ensures that this damage won’t happen—another compelling reason to wait a bit. For photos of the cutworms, the pupae and the moth they become later see: http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/leaf_chewers.html#25 Oh, and don’t forget to control slugs as they too get quite lively and damaging as the weather warms. Slug baits for organic growers work really well (Sluggo, Slug B Gone).

Well, enough with the bad news! The days are so much longer, the birds are twittering in the trees and spring will have to arrive, no matter what!