

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

February 13, 2020

Planting Seeds—or not; Sweet Potato Update

As February ticks along without serious weather on the horizon, gardeners are getting antsy to plant something. I used to start onion and leek seeds indoors in early February, but have shifted to starting them in early March, with excellent results: the roots are as big as ever and I have fewer weeks babysitting tiny plants. Other things to sow by early March include tomatoes, peppers, celery and celeriac. I always start 2 plants of zucchini the first week of March, too. Although that is too early to start other squash or cucumbers, I keep the early zucchs growing rapidly in ever larger pots and haul them out to my unheated greenhouse during the day (it is usually too cool to leave them in the greenhouse at night). The result is a first squash harvest around mid-May. I also start my first batch of peas indoors in early March and, if I am low on cauliflower or cabbages for spring harvest, I start some of those indoors too. I will have to start early cauliflower this year, because about half of my overwintering cauliflower plants started forming heads in January. They were then damaged in the cold snap we had a few weeks ago and now the heads are rotting (it's always something!).

Starting seeds indoors: For detailed notes, see my message of Feb. 28, 2019

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

The small grow-light unit I tried out last year worked really well. It consists of a 2-foot 'SunBlaster T5' fluorescent tube with a built-in reflector, which rests in a groove on a clear plastic dome made for the purpose. There are larger units, of course, with multiple tubes, but for many gardeners this small unit will be plenty, especially if you have a cold frame or greenhouse to move the seedlings into to grow them on. Salt Springers can find these at Foxglove Farm & Garden (Aikens Rd).; also available from West Coast Seeds and other garden centres:

Don't be in a hurry to plant: A lot of garden failures come from trying to plant seeds or set out seedlings too early. Plants grow slower in cool weather, especially while the soil is still cold, and they are more vulnerable to root diseases, slugs and other pests. You don't really gain much time by forcing an early start unless you are using a greenhouse. Plants started weeks later outdoors soon catch up to earlier sown plants because growth is so better in warmer conditions. Also, the earlier they are planted, the longer seedlings are at risk of being chewed up by climbing cutworms (caterpillars of the Large Yellow Underwing Moth http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/leaf_chewers.html#25). These cutworms spend all winter in the garden and by now they are quite large and can consume a lot of leaf material every night. They reach full size in mid- to late April, then stop eating when they become a pupa, which looks like a dark brown bullet (see photo under the link, above). The adult moths emerge later in the summer. By simply waiting to set out seedlings until late April you can avoid cutworm damage entirely. Cutworms also chew the leaves of overwintered vegetables, but those plants have large, well-established roots and grow leaves quickly when the weather warms up. You will still see ragged holes in leaves until the cutworms pupate, but the plants can withstand the damage and rapidly outgrow it.

Sweet potato update: After I sent my previous message I learned that Mapple Farms is no longer shipping sweet potato plants this year. If you aren't starting yours from a tuber, here are some sources that helpful readers told me about:

- **Dinter Nursery**, Duncan, BC: They will have plants ready in mid-late May and will take orders from mid-April on: info@dinternursery.ca They will have Treasure Island varieties (see, for

example: <https://www.hishtil.com/our-products/concepts-specialties/treasure-island-sweet-potatoes/>)

- **Phoenix Perennials**, Richmond, BC <https://www.phoenixperennials.com/> Look for sweet potatoes on their pre-orders page under the link for "Grafted Veggie & Edible Pre-Order 2020". Starts available in May and they also do mail order. They have the Treasure Island varieties mentioned above.
- **T&T Seeds**, Manitoba <https://ttseeds.com> They list 'Covington' Sweet Potato <https://ttseeds.com/product/covington-sweet-potato/> Slips are delivered by Canada Post when weather is suitable in mid to late-May.

Spotted wing Drosophila: These are still on the wing, some having survived the entire winter so far. I urge you to put out a vinegar trap right now if you don't have one. It really does make a difference in how early these fruit flies build up high numbers in your yard to infest raspberries, strawberries, blueberries, blackberries and cherries. Most of the males have died out by now so you won't see many flies in your trap with the characteristic spot on the wing. If you are catching dark-coloured fruit flies without spots on the wings, those are likely the overwintering (and already mated) female SWDs. See my archives for my October 2, 2018 messages with info on traps.

Upcoming Events: Seeds of Diversity keeps a list of Seedy Saturdays and other seedy events across the country at: <https://seeds.ca/events> There are lots of events still to come in our region!

This Saturday, Feb. 15, is the Victoria Seedy Saturday, 10:00-4:00. Victoria Conference Centre, 720 Douglas Street www.victoriaseedysaturday.ca I will be giving a talk at 12:00 noon entitled "Where Have All the Insects Gone?" Global insect populations have dropped precipitously in the last 40 years. This matters for our food supply, for a healthy environment and the future of birds and other wildlife. I show new research on causes for the decline and discuss ways that gardeners can help prevent the loss of pollinators and other beneficial insects.

New on my web site: See my presentations page www.lindagilkeson.ca/presentations.html for pdfs of my talks on subjects that I want to share freely with as many people as possible.