

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

January 7, 2020

Seeds, Weeds, Rodent Deets

As the days are noticeably lengthening, thoughts of garden plans begin to dance in our heads. I usually start pruning fruit trees in a few weeks, but it is not too early to start now, especially of the early blooming peaches and cherries. With the mild weather so far, people are wondering if buds swelling buds on fruit trees, garlic that has come up and other early growth will be harmed by cold. Some people already have snowdrops in bloom! IF we have several more weeks of mild weather, then a really severe cold period occurring after that could injure them, but usually early buds and shoots are hardy enough to withstand late cold spells. Just keep an eye on the forecast and beef up mulches or throw a tarp over plants if the weather looks dicey.

Germination tests: A task for a wet day is to sort out your seed collection and see what you need to replace. It only takes a couple of days to do a germination test to check whether old seed is still viable. For how to do this, see my January 22, 2017 message: http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html

“Yam” starts: If you want to grow sweet potatoes (so-called “yams” are really sweet potatoes) this year, sprout plants from a grocery store tuber, starting this week. Even with them on bottom heat it takes at least a month for the first sprouts to show in time to have good sized plants to set out in May. See my January 22, 2018 message for detailed instructions on how to sprout the tuber. Or order sweet potato slips from Mapple Farms in New Brunswick [<https://www.mapplefarm.com>]. These arrive a bit late for us on the coast, but can still produce a decent crop in a very warm spot in the garden and once you have a plant you can make take your own cutting in the fall and have large plants ready to go the following season.

Weeds: After a friend said she spent the sunny New Year’s day weeding I was reminded to mention ‘tis time to weed out Hairy Bittercress. This all too common winter annual is that small mustard family weed with tiny white flowers that snap seeds all over the place [see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cardamine_hirsuta]. Pull it now while it is small, before it has a chance to set seeds, which appear astonishingly early (often in February). The leaves are edible and really perk up a winter salad. With the mild winter so far, many other weeds, including perennials are also thriving so best to get ahead of these while you can. The soil is much too wet to dig weeds, but most can be easily pulled out. They won’t have seeds yet so just drop them on the soil surface or into the compost bin.

Those dang critters! I have heard from more gardeners than usual this month that rats or voles have chewed into their carrots and beets. Voles (field mice) tend to leave shallow tunnels on the surface as they bore around the surface under the mulch. Rats also will burrow under mulch and chew down into the roots, starting with the shoulders of the roots, which show bigger toothy marks than if voles did it. If this is happening in your garden: For beds with undamaged roots, rake off all the mulch and lay down ½ inch chicken wire or similar wire flat on top of the soil (peg it down tight). Keep the mulch piled to the side, ready to put back on top of the wire cover if/when the forecast is for below freezing. If it continues above freezing or we get snow cover along with cold (as predicted later this week) you might get away little or no mulch for the rest of the winter, which helps to remove favorable conditions for voles at least. Roots do keep for 2-3 months in the fridge so digging the undamaged ones now is a good idea if you can find the refrigerator space.

Garlic? I always get a few emails this time of year asking if it is still OK to plant garlic now. You can “mud in” the cloves right now if you have a bed or large planter ready. The soil is too wet to handle for turning in amendments, but you can pull out any weeds, then poke a hole for each clove. In March or early April, spread a good layer of compost on the soil surface to fertilize the crop. You should still get a decent crop this year, but the bulbs just won't be quite as big as they would have been if planted earlier and may mature a couple of weeks later.

A new feature on my web site is coming soon:

By Jan. 15, I will have a new page working [www.lindagilkeson.ca/presentations.html] with links to pdf versions of some of my PowerPoint talks on subjects that I want to share freely with as many people as possible:

#1 Resilient Gardens for a Changing Climate: Our regional climate is changing as the global climate changes. Learn how extreme weather affects plants and tips for designing resilient food and ornamental gardens. Notes on how to help plants survive 'weird weather' will help you become an adaptable gardener.

#2 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. Find out what may be causing the widespread declines and how gardeners can help.

Seedy Saturdays are coming!

As you contemplate your seed lists and catalogues, here is a reminder to check out Seedy Saturday events near you for seed exchanges, vendors of seed and garden supplies, talks and workshops. The season kicks off this Saturday with the first event in Saanich and continues all spring. Seeds of Diversity keeps a list of Seedy Saturdays and other seedy events across the country at:

<https://seeds.ca/events> Here are the ones coming up over the next month in our region.

Saanich: January 11. 10:00-2:00 Horticulture Centre of the

Pacific Contact: info@haliburtonfarm.org

Galiano: January 25. 9:00-4:00, South Community Hall, 141 Sturdies Bay Road Contact:

seedlibraryofgaliano@gmail.com

Denman Island: January 25. 9:30 -2:30 Denman Community

Hall Contact dannicrenna07@gmail.com or Erika Bland erikaaction@gmail.com

Qualicum Beach: February 1. 10:00-3:00 Qualicum Beach Civic Centre, 747 Jones St, Contact: publicity@qbseedysaturday.ca More information: www.qbseedysaturday.ca

Salt Spring Island: February 8. 10:00-3:00 Farmer's Institute, 351 Rainbow Rd.

Contact: ssiseedysaturday@gmail.com

Victoria: February 15. 10:00-4:00 Victoria Conference Centre, 720 Douglas Street

Contact: info@victoriaseedysaturday.ca More information: www.victoriaseedysaturday.ca

Mayne Island: February 15. 12:00-3:00 Agricultural Hall, 430 Fernhill Road.

Contact: selena.flood@gmail.com More information:

<https://www.mayneagriculturalsociety.com/mias/agricultural-society-events/>