

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

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Winter Planting Begins, Nitrogen Deficiency, Spying Pests (or Not)

Another wet, cool week stretches before us and my melon plants are looking pretty sad....sigh..... But on the up side, I am sure you, too, are seeing lush growth of your lettuce, cabbages, peas and other cool weather vegetables.

What to plant now: Keep on sowing small plantings of radishes, lettuce and other salad greens to keep a steady supply to your kitchen. Keep on sowing peas, too: I just planted late May peas and will sow my last batch of peas at the end of June to have peas into the fall. The pea leaf weevil is no longer feeding, so if your earlier peas were damaged (for what that looks like, see http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/root_feeders.html#74), you can safely replant now. If any of your tomatoes, cucumbers or other heat-loving seedlings failed because they were planted too early, there is still time to plant again if you can find replacement plants.

If you haven't done so already, right now sow Brussels sprouts and varieties of winter cabbage that take 4 months to develop. It is not too late to grow them successfully from seed, but don't wait any longer to get them started, whether in pots or directly in the garden. Given the large slug populations rampaging around most gardens in this wet weather, it is safest to start seeds in pots so you can bring them indoors at night or keep them on a deck table, safe from nocturnal attack.

It comes as a surprise that so early in the summer we need to start planting for winter, but the vegetables for winter have to do their growing in the summer. For a planting chart showing when to plant what this summer, see: <http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/pdf/Linda%20Gilkeson%20Planting%20Schedule.pdf> Print it out and stick it to the fridge door to remind you when to plant.

Mid- to late June is good timing for sowing seeds of winter broccoli and winter cauliflower. These are not the same varieties grown for summer and fall harvests, so make sure you have seeds for winter varieties. Note that purple sprouting broccoli varieties can be winter varieties ('Red Spear' is an excellent example) or summer varieties (e.g., 'Summer Purple', 'Santee'), which causes confusion. The most commonly available winter cauliflower is 'Galleon' and you might find 'Purple Cape', which is also excellent. Winter varieties stay in the garden over the winter and start producing a harvest from late February onward. I am just about finished harvesting 'Red Spear', which has been producing broccoli since March: the sprouts are getting small and the first summer broccoli is ready to harvest.

If you are not growing your own seedlings, watch for starts of Brussels sprouts, winter cabbage, winter broccoli and winter cauliflower to start appearing at garden centres in June and July. Chorus Frog (Rainbow Road on Salt Spring) always carries a good selection of the right varieties for winter, with plants available starting next week.

Are your vegetables getting enough nitrogen? Nitrogen deficiency is common in new organic gardens for the first year or two. It takes time to build up soil organic matter, which is where nitrogen comes from as it is released by soil organisms. Suspect a deficiency if plants appear to be growing slowly and leaves are turning light green or yellow. The lowest leaves turn yellow first as the plant mobilizes

nitrogen from the oldest leaves and sends it to the growing tips to maintain growth. Severely deficient plants stop growing and turn light green or yellow. Deficient plants often produce flowers in a desperate attempt to reproduce even though they are very small. Very stunted plants likely won't recover, but the good news is that less affected plants can recover if you provide nitrogen as soon as you notice they are looking a little pale.

If necessary, liquid fertilizers can be used weekly for the first year or two to keep plants actively growing. Use commercial liquid fish fertilizer or make homemade liquid fertilizer: soak a shovel-full of manure or fish compost in a bucket of water for 1-2 days to extract the soluble nitrogen (dilute the extract until it is a light tea colour before using). In addition, work a nitrogen amendment (such as blood meal, fish compost) or a complete organic fertilizer into the surface layer of soil around deficient plants to provide nitrogen for a few months. Mulching with fish compost (SeaSoil, Earthbank or similar products) is another way to deliver nitrogen all summer. You should see leaves turning a darker green within 1-2 weeks after starting these amendments. For beds that have not been planted, add blood meal, alfalfa meal, fish compost, carefully composted manures or organic fertilizers before planting to ensure sufficient nitrogen for the next crop.

Diseases: This damp, dribbly, wet weather lately has been a boon to several diseases, including rusts, apple scab and *Botrytis*. Rust fungi live on foliage and most species have spores that are yellow, orange or rusty red (<http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/foilage.html#154>). Each species of rust only attacks particular host plants so the bright orange patches of rust on raspberry leaves won't spread to unrelated plants. The same goes for rust on roses, bean rust, Allium/garlic rust, hollyhock rust, etc. All you can do about rust infections, now, is to improve air circulation around foliage so leaves dry more quickly, usually by pruning out dense foliage and staking up sprawling plants. Don't handle rusty plants while leaves are wet and avoid brushing past them in the garden as rust spores are easily spread on hands, clothes and tools. Sulphur sprays slow rust infections, but have to be reapplied frequently, after rain and as plants grow, to maintain the protective fungicide on new growth. Planting rust resistant varieties, where available, is the best long-term approach.

IS it a pest? I seem to be getting more questions than usual about whether a particular insect is a problem. Keep in mind that less than 0.01% of insect species are pests (estimates vary as does the total number of insect species in existence). In any garden, there are thousands of insect species minding their own business. Most are neither "pests" nor "beneficial" from a human point of view, but if you assume most insects you see aren't pests, you will be correct most of the time. Here are some other tips:

1. Insects flying around your garden during the day are not pests. The only exception is the White Cabbage butterfly, which lays eggs on cabbage family plants and has green caterpillars that eat leaves. Insects that fly during the day include pollinators (e.g., bees, flies, butterflies), predatory insects (e.g., dragonflies, yellowjackets, hornets, robber flies, hover flies) and parasitic wasps and flies that lay their eggs in caterpillars and aphids. During the day, most pests lurk on the undersides of leaves or deep in foliage or hide in leaf litter under plants. Most come out at night to lay eggs or feed (think moths, slugs, cutworms, pillbugs). Despite the stings, yellowjackets and hornets should be considered beneficial: think of how many caterpillars they haul away to their nests!

2. Don't assume you found the culprit when you see an insect on a chewed leaf. Insects that eat pests are frequently found on damaged leaves where they are looking for their prey. Predatory insects are attracted to odors from pests and from injured leaves. Sadly, people tend to notice aphid colonies and

spray at the right time to kill the maximum number of aphid predators that are already present. Of course, any spray, including soap, kills the good guys too...so if you are tempted to blast aphids, wait a few days and see if natural enemies bring the aphids under control.

3. If a soil-dwelling critter moves quickly when you disturb it, it is likely a predator. Beneficial insects (e.g., ground beetles, rove beetles) and other predators (centipedes, spiders) that live on the ground tend to move fast. They hunt their prey and have to be more mobile than the slugs, millipedes, cutworms, root maggots, weevil larvae, pillbugs, etc. they feed on. These predators are mostly active at night since this is when their prey is out too.