

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

December 21, 2023

Solstice, Seeds and the ABCs of Gardening

Well, here we are at the winter solstice and the shortest day of the year, the turning point for daylength. It is always so heartening to see the days start to get longer and brighter! In a couple of weeks, sunsets will be noticeably later and our thoughts can turn increasingly to our next garden. Unlike last winter at this time, when we had blizzards and cold, this year's mild weather has allowed hardier vegetables to keep growing (slowly), so I am still picking sprouting broccoli from summer plants and harvesting celery, lettuce and other greens undaunted by frost; and then there are those Brussels sprouts and a couple of monster cabbages that continue to expand to a daunting size...but enough with the bragging! What I really want to do is wish you all the very best for this holiday season and for the coming year—may your gardens thrive!

Weird flowering: An effect of the warm weather has been some out-of-sync flowering. A few flowers or even whole branches of apples, berries, Rhododendron and other shrubs, etc. have been confused, perhaps by the dry summer or the frosty weather in October, into responding as if they had been through a dormant period. With the spring-like temperatures, rainfall and daylengths in the fall a few buds have been stimulated to burst into flower. Though they won't bloom again in the spring, other buds on the same plant that weren't fooled into blooming will develop normally. If you have perennial plants that seem to be starting to grow new shoots or have swelling buds, there is not much you can do about those. Buds are usually still quite hardy, although new shoots are less so. All you can do is be prepared to throw a tarp over the precocious plants during a cold snap. At the moment there isn't any really cold weather in the long-range forecast, but I never trust Februarys...seems like many of our worst Artic outbreaks happen that month.

On that note: Stay alert to weather forecasts and if it gets really cold, be on top of adding extra mulch to cover over root crops, cover less hardy herbs such as rosemary, and take in the hoses. For more on preparing for a cold blast, have a look at my Nov. 22, 2022 and December 19, 2021 messages: http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html

Keep trapping: Another result of the warm winter so far is that I am still catching high numbers of that dratted fruit fly, spotted wing Drosophila, in my vinegar trap. I keep a trap out all winter because it removes a lot of overwintering adults that would otherwise be out early, laying eggs in strawberries and other soft fruit next year. In case you wondered what the 'wiggles' were in berries last summer, here is what the larvae look like when they infest fruit: <http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/borers.html#95> You can read more about how to make a simple trap for them in my message of October 2, 2018.

Order seeds: This is the time of year to go through your collection of garden seeds to see what you have enough of and what you need this year. Ordering seeds from online suppliers is best done as early as possible to ensure the varieties you want are in stock and suppliers are already shipping orders. Local nurseries will carry seeds, of course, and we are coming very soon to the season of Seedy Saturdays (and Sundays), which are a great place to buy seeds directly from suppliers (especially from local seed growers that come to these events). You can also participate in seed swaps and most events also schedule talks and workshops.

There are usually a few Seedy Saturdays in January around the BC coast, but at the moment I don't know of any (let me know if your organization is organizing one). Check with your local gardening organizations for events in your area and keep checking the Seeds of Diversity website: <https://seeds.ca/events/> which lists information on Seedy events across the country. At the moment the following in events are listed for February with more to come in March:

Feb. 3: Qualicum Beach (20th year!) www.qbseedysaturday.ca

Feb 10: Alberni Valley (Port Alberni) <https://www.avfood.ca/>

Feb. 24-25 (tentative): Salt Spring Island (watch for announcements on the SS Exchange)

Feb. 25 (Sunday): Victoria <https://www.facebook.com/VictoriaSeedySaturday>

New Feature: The ABCs of Gardening

Starting now, I am adding a new section at the bottom of each message called “The ABCs of Gardening”. This is where I will put notes especially for beginning gardeners to help them get started. All you experienced gardeners can just skip that section, but if you know someone interested in starting a food garden, no matter how small, you might pass along the info.

If you are thinking about turning a patch of lawn, a weedy area or even a flowerbed into a food garden, now is the perfect time to get started.

The first thing to do is make sure you choose a site that has enough sunshine from April to September to grow vegetables and fruit. These crops need what is called ‘full sun’, meaning, ideally, 8 hours of direct sunlight during the day. With the sun high overhead in mid-summer, a lot of yards will have at least some areas that fit the bill. Some vegetables, mainly leafy greens, such as lettuce and spinach, can do well on 4 hours of direct sun in parts of the yard where trees or buildings might be shading the ground for part of the day. If most of the yard is shady in the summer, trying to grow food will be disappointing, but you could look for alternatives, such as a community garden plot or a friend you can help in their garden. If you have a deck, balcony or patio where the sun falls, you can grow some crops in containers.

With a lead time of 4-5 months (start this month) you can easily kill existing lawn, weeds or vegetation right in place. This spares you the [considerable!] work of stripping off sod or digging up weeds in the spring and it retains all of that essential organic matter from the dead plants in the soil, exactly where you want it to be. The trick is to cover the planned garden area with something that completely excludes light: a heavy, opaque tarp or flattened, overlapping layers of cardboard (ensure no light leaks between the cracks) both work very well. For small areas, I have even used thick layers of overlapping newspapers (with a sprinkling of leaves over the top to make the area nicer to look at over the winter). Whatever you use, be sure to hold the cover down securely around the edges with rocks, bricks or boards to keep it in place until spring. Don’t spread manure, compost or any other amendments right now—you will only do that in the spring. So this month, all you have to do is mark out the new garden area and cover it carefully and then wait. In the spring, you will peel back the opaque cover, the weeds will be dead, and the soil will be ready to enrich with compost and other amendments.

Next month, I will review design considerations for garden beds, including reviewing the pros and cons of raised beds so that you can decide whether or not you should build them.



A perfect start for a new garden.