

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

July 14, 2024

Wasps, Bees, Winter Crop Planting Continues

For the rest of July and through August, your mission is to fill up any spaces in your garden with hardy vegetables for harvest from late fall through winter. With garlic and onions grown from sets maturing this month, that leaves some larger spaces for winter crops. Early peas, lettuce, radishes and other salad greens are likely finished by now, leaving more space to plant winter crops. Have a look at everything growing in your garden now to decide what to 'edit': are there plants that are doing poorly? that no one in the house likes? that are producing too much to use? For example, this week I removed a patch of lettuce that will never get eaten, the last radishes that were getting too woody and what I realized was going to be 2 too many zucchini plants.

From now until early August, sow leafy greens from seed (arugula, winter lettuce, mizuna, collars, kale, leaf mustards and mustard spinach/Komatsuna, Bok choi and other Chinese cabbage, spinach, broccoli raab). You can also sow winter radish/daikon and hardy onions (sweet Spanish onions, scallions). These will be small seedlings over winter but, if they survive, will grow into bulbs early in the spring. If you do it right now, there is still time to sow early cabbage varieties that grow quickly (55-80 days to harvest), such as the small, pointed sweetheart cabbages (Caraflex, Jersey Wakefield, Greyhound) or other early cabbages. Remember to shade the seedbeds until the plants come up to keep the soil cool and continuously moist for good germination. I am finding that cut open plastic compost bags, with the white side up, are especially good because they keep the soil damp from condensation on the underside of the plastic—but use anything you have on hand. Of course, if you plant seedlings, you won't have to worry about this step, but remember that roots of seedlings are still very close to the surface so the need to be mulched as soon as they are planted and will need shading in hot weather until they get established. If you can find shade cloth that blocks 30-50% of the light, you can leave it over seedling beds throughout a heat wave because it will let in sufficient light for growth. If using materials, such as curtain material, lace tablecloths, etc. that don't let in enough light, only cover the beds in the hottest part of the day and let plants get early and late sun.

It is too late to start seeds of winter broccoli, winter cauliflower and the large cabbages that need all season to develop, so look for seedlings of these from local suppliers to transplant. Although you may see Brussels sprouts seedlings for sale, it is too late to plant small plants now because they won't have time to make sprouts by the end of October (and if they don't make sprouts this fall, they won't make them at all).

In addition to Chorus Frog Farm on Salt Spring <https://thequarryfarm.ca/chorus-frog-nursery> which has a large selection of winter vegetable starts for sale right now, here are other sources that let me know what they have this summer (new subscribers, see my June 15, 2022 message for info on varieties to look for http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html)

B. Dinter Nursery Ltd., 2205 Phipps Road, Duncan, has a long list of winter veggie varieties that they have grown themselves, including purple sprouting broccoli, Galleon cauliflower and many kinds of hardy lettuce and leafy greens, cabbage, kales, sweet onions, even root crop. www.dinternursery.ca

Victoria Compost Education Centre is holding their Organic Plant Sale on August 10, 10:00am-1:00pm in Haegert Park (1202 Yukon St.). There will be at least 6 vendors of organically grown plants, music, a parent & child gardening workshop and other fun www.compost.bc.ca

Russell Nursery, 1370 Wain Road, North Saanich, is growing their own hardy lettuce starts; they will also carry other starts of leafy greens, etc. from wholesale distributors. <https://russellnursery.com/>

Yellowjackets vs. European paper wasps: People used to the hair-trigger stinging behaviour of yellowjacket wasps and their unwelcome attendance at outdoor picnics and barbeques may not know that the similar European paper wasps behave quite differently. European paper wasps look like yellowjackets: same size, same yellow and black stripes, but they have orange antennae. A close observer will notice that their hind legs seem to trail downward a bit when they fly. See photos of both: <http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/beneficial.html#119> The nests of paper wasps are small disks of cells, a couple of inches across, that never get bigger (they do not form big colonies like yellowjackets or hornets). Paper wasps are less aggressive and much less likely to sting than yellowjackets and have no interest at all in human food because they only eat fresh insects they have just caught. Both yellowjackets and paper wasps capture caterpillars and other insects to take back to their nest to feed their larvae, but yellowjackets are also scavengers so are attracted to human food, especially meat. It is important for peace of mind to know which wasps are around, especially if someone in the household is allergic to stings. This year I have seen very few yellowjackets, but lots of European paper wasps in my yard, which is fine: I know they will mind their own business, hunting pests, drinking from the birdbath and not bothering people or our food.



European paper wasp eating an azalea sawfly larva. Photo: Leslie Cox

Where's the bees? Several people have noted how few bees seem to be around (and others have noticed how few butterflies there are...). There are several reason for this, starting with the sad fact that insect populations of all kinds have been decreasing worldwide for decades and estimates are that we have lost 60% or more of total biomass of insects [See a pdf of my talk "Where Have All the Insects Gone"

<http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/pdf/Where%20Have%20Insects%20Gone%202022%20web.pdf> for causes of insect decline and what you can do to help reverse the trend].

There are also periods when bees temporarily disappear because they are visiting flowers up in trees, such as maple or Arbutus/Madrone, or are away in the bush, visiting oceanspray, blackberries, snowberry, where they are less likely to be seen. When those flowers fade, bees move back to foraging in gardens and crops where they are more visible. Another reason for seeing fewer bees at this time of year is that many species of native bees are only active as adults in the spring anyway. If you are familiar with mason bees/Blue Orchard bees, you know the adult bees all die off in late May, having built nests, fetched pollen and laid all their eggs. The bee larvae remain for the rest of the year developing safely inside their cocoons in the nest; they spend the winter there and new adult bees emerge in early spring.

There are some bees, such as bumblebees and leafcutter bees, that are active from early spring to fall. In late summer/early fall, a colony of bumble bees produces new queens. The queens mate, then all but the queens die off. Queens that survive winter go on singlehandedly to start new colonies in the spring (if you ever wondered why bumble bees look so big in the spring, it is because what we see first are queens). For bumble bees and others present all season, access to pollen and nectar for the entire summer is essential for the colony to survive long enough to produce queens for next year's colonies. In our region with very dry summers there are few plants in bloom to keep them going (and browsing by deer has eliminated a lot of understory native plants that could have fed bees). It is estimated that about half of bumble bee colonies in the Lower Mainland starve to death over the summer. To fill this gap in bee forage, do what you can to grow flowers that bloom in late summer and into the fall: goldenrod and Douglas aster are 2 of the very best perennials, benefiting many pollinators. Others: nodding onion, clovers, Shasta daisies, black-eyed Susans, Sedum, pearly everlasting, penstemons. For lots more information on native bees: Simon Fraser University Pollination Ecology lab: https://www.sfu.ca/people/eelle/bee_info.html and Pollinator Partnership Canada: <https://pollinatorpartnership.ca/en/>

ABCs of Gardening Series: *Beginning gardeners and new subscribers might want to look at the archive of my past newsletters for this series of notes that started with my December 21, 2023 message: http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html* Topics covered so far: Designing beds, compost, lime and other soil amendments, irrigation, weeding, mulching. From time to time I will add more notes to this series.