

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

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Carrot Day is Here; More Winter Crops to Sow; Mulches

We are well into summer with milestones for sowing seeds for winter harvest crops coming up quickly: It's nearly that day again, when it is time to celebrate July 1 (or 4th of July for our US friends) by sowing a big bed of carrots to feed you from fall through spring. My Canada Day celebrations always include getting those carrot seeds sown, well-watered and covered securely with insect netting against carrot rust fly. Some years, scorching hot weather in the first weeks of July can make the soil too warm for carrot seeds to germinate if the bed isn't well shaded. Carrots take longer than most vegetable seeds to germinate and must be kept cool and moist the entire time so it can be hard to get a good stand of carrots from a summer sowing. This year, the coastal weather forecast is for cool to moderate temperatures for the first part of the week so it will be easier to keep the seeds cool, but if you live inland in a warmer climate or if the coastal weather gets warmer over the next week or two, take precautions to shade the bed until seeds come up. You can lay burlap, old beach towels, newspaper or opaque white plastic (e.g., recycled compost or potting soil bags, slit open) directly on the soil or support the cover on stakes, seed trays, chicken wire, etc. . If you are using insect netting or floating row cover to protect against carrot rust fly lay shade fabric over the top of the insect netting until the carrots get a good start.

Once they get their roots under them, carrots are easy to grow, but it can be tricky getting through the germination period. For this early July planting, I always sow plenty of seeds because it will be too late to replant if there is a failure. It makes thinning more of a chore, but usually ensures a good stand of carrots. While you can sow carrots any time from early spring until early July, sowing after that doesn't leave enough time in the growing season to grow good sized carrots before growth stops in the fall.



This is a good time to sow beets for winter as well. Though they can be sown until mid-July because they germinate and grow faster than carrots, I sow them in the same big bed as the carrots so that the beets can also be covered by the insect netting. This prevents beet/spinach leafminers from laying eggs on the leaves (the larvae burrow inside the leaf to make those brown blotches: see http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/leaf_chewers2.html#45). Since both carrots and beets will be heavily mulched in the fall and harvested on the same schedule during the winter, I find it is a good fit to grow them together.

In early July, you can also sow turnips, kohlrabi, as well as endive and radicchio (which is surprisingly hardy). Even though you may already have Swiss chard or kales growing in the garden from spring plantings, you may want to sow more before the end of July to have additional overwintering plants. Hardy leafy greens can't grow replacement leaves during the winter, therefore you need more plants to sustain winter picking than you do in the summer when they are growing fast. With a wary eye on winter cold snaps, I will be planting more of the hardiest chard varieties for winter: 'Lucullus', 'Leaf Beet', 'Green Perpetual' are narrow stemmed varieties with flatter leaves and seem to be noticeably hardier than more savoyed chards with broad or coloured stems (though these usually do make it through most winters).

If you are not growing your own fall and winter crops from seed, look for plants to buy in July. We are very fortunate on Salt Spring to have Chorus Frog Farm <https://thequarryfarm.ca/chorus-frog-nursery> producing their own organic seedlings of the frost-hardy varieties, including 'Galleon' and 'Purple Cape' cauliflower that not available elsewhere. I will provide a more detailed list in a July message as I hear about other sources of growing winter varieties. Before buying seedlings at a garden centre, check that lettuce, broccoli and cauliflower varieties they are selling are hardy (see my June 15, 2024 message http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html for broccoli and cauliflower varieties). Unfortunately, wholesale producers of the seedlings sold to garden centres are still passing off summer varieties of cauliflower (Snow Crown, Snowball, etc.), broccoli and lettuce for fall and winter harvests so buyer beware! On the other hand, most varieties of Swiss chard, spinach, cabbage you might find in a garden centres are hardy enough to get through most coastal winters.

ABCs of Gardening: Mulching

This section contains notes especially for beginning gardeners. The series started with my December 21, 2023 message: http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html

Mulches are materials spread on the soil surface around plants. For home gardens, the best mulches are organic materials, such as fallen leaves, straw, coarse compost, crop waste, pulled weeds, shredded paper and other biodegradable materials. Such mulches insulate the soils from heat in summer and from freezing in the winter, they save water by reducing evaporation from the soil and, because they block light, they prevent weeds from germinating. As organic mulches decompose through the action of earthworms, insects, and soil microbes, they provide nutrients for plants. In fact, surface mulches build soil organic matter faster than you can by digging in compost! Mulches also make an attractive habitat for ground beetles and rove beetles, which are predators of slugs, root weevil larvae, root maggots, etc.

When to mulch? The only time that mulches need to be removed is when the soil is cool and wet and you want to sow seeds. In the spring, rake back winter mulch to allow the soil to warm up and dry out, then sow seeds or set out seedlings. Once the plants have grown several inches high, you can start pushing mulch back between the little plants, adding more as plants grow. Finish mulching when the spring rains stop and the soil starts to dry out—some years this happens in May, other years it is June until things warm up and dry out. Just have everything well mulched before the first heat wave hits. For seeds sown in mid-summer, try to work some fine mulch, such as grass clippings or crumbled leaves, around tiny seedlings as soon as possible to shield their roots from high temperatures, add more mulch as the plants grow.

Other mulches: Wood chips are excellent for fruit trees and berry bushes because they remain on the surface, but are not suitable for vegetable beds because planting and harvesting activity mixes the chips into the soil (where they deplete the soil of nitrogen as microbes work to decompose the chips). Plastic mulches are environmentally costly, don't feed the soil, and are now known to contaminate soil with plastic particles. Although landscape fabric is often used around perennial plants, they are awful for plant health. The pores of the fabric clog with debris so water doesn't penetrate and the essential exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide from the soil is blocked, which suffocates roots and soil organisms. After a few years it is common to see stunted perennials struggling to root on top of landscape fabric. Cardboard can be used as a short-term mulch where you want to kill plants. It is useful over the winter to kill a patch of sod in preparation for turning it into a garden, but then it should be removed. It is not a good mulch for fruit trees and bushes because it also prevents oxygen and water from reaching the soil below; plants will be much happier with a porous mulch of wood chips, leaves, etc.