

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

November 13, 2024

Cutworms, rats, winter sowing

With what has been relatively warm weather for this time of year, rampages of climbing cutworms and other caterpillars continue. Many people are reporting usually large numbers of caterpillars chewing up their leafy greens and other vegetables. Photos sent to me have been mostly of the usual suspect that I mention often: The Large Yellow Underwing Moth, whose larvae are those extremely hardy climbing cutworms that feed all winter. See: http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/leaf_chewers.html#25



Nighttime inspections by flashlight a couple of hours after dark to pick off the caterpillars are quite effective as the caterpillars are easy to see feeding on leaves. They are most active on warmer evenings (9-10oC/48-50oF), but do also feed at lower temperatures. The first night you hunt for them you will likely find most of them, but keep checking for a few more nights to pick off the last few. Cutworms I have been finding range in size from very small to larger ones that look more than half-grown. Their colours also vary widely, which is characteristic of LYUM cutworms: their background colour ranges from green to pale beige with light markings to darker brown with pronounced markings. As in past years, I have been finding about equal numbers of slugs and cutworms chewing on my bed of Chinese cabbage and other greens. I have even found a few late imported cabbageworms (velvety green caterpillars of the White Cabbage butterfly). Once you eliminate caterpillars, there won't be any more of them until the moths lay eggs next season, but keep patrolling for slugs as they thrive all winter. The safe slug baits containing iron/ferric phosphate are effective, but don't use the old metaldehyde baits (no longer sold in BC, but still available elsewhere) as they are too harmful to non-target creatures, including pets.

Rats! Rat control is a year-round project. At this time of year, they are moving into buildings, basements, attics, burrowing under porches, etc. as they search for winter nests. They continue garden depredations all winter on starchy root crops such as beets, carrots, celeriac, but will also gnaw broccoli florets, Brussels sprouts and even leafy greens as food gets scarce. The most lethal poison baits are not legal to be used in BC, but the 'safer' cellulose baits still available are not very effective. Rats must eat a lot of that bait before they become ill enough to die—and rats are very good at avoiding food that makes them feel sick. Strong snap traps, set correctly, deliver a swift end that I think is more humane than dying from slow poison or from being caught on glue boards. But exposed snap traps do catch birds and other animals. This is where the black clamshell boxes used for securing poison baits come in handy, because most of them also have a centre chamber designed to hold a rat trap. With the rat trap [e.g., TomCat brand fits inside most boxes] in the interior chamber, non-target



Rat damage to beets.

animals can't reach far enough into the box to get into the trap. If you use a very tasty bait, racoons may try to carry off the box in an effort to get into it (secure the box to something with a wire or strong cord). I use a small piece of dried fruit, which isn't particularly attractive to racoons, and, unlike soft baits, such as peanut butter, isn't eaten up by slugs. I often leave the traps set without bait, yet they regularly continue to catch rats. It is important to place the box correctly: it should be up against a building foundation (rats run along walls), with the entry/exit holes closest to the wall so that rats running close to the wall can run straight through the bait box. Once you put out a box, leave it in place for weeks or years. Rats are shy of new things in their environment and need time to get used to the box; moving it around frequently keeps them from considering it a part of their environment. After catching a rat, don't clean the box or trap before setting it again (the 'rattier' it smells, the better. Wear gloves to keep your scent off the bait and trap. There are various models of electrocution traps (some are only for indoor use), and of other trap designs that work for some people though not others. If you have something that works for you, keep using it all year round to control incoming rats. If rats are doing a lot of damage, it might be advisable to hire a professional pest management company.

Late sowing: November is a month when we can sow hardy varieties of lettuce, spinach, radishes and other leafy greens. The seeds don't germinate until spring, often coming up in March to provide a very early crop. The soil is much too wet to handle now so scatter seeds over the surface of a bed and just press them into the soil. Cover the beds with something to keep birds from picking up the seeds. I use covers of 1-inch welded wire that I made in sizes to fit my beds, but you can use lengths of chicken wire, bird netting or screening or cover the beds with plastic sheets, tunnels or floating row cover.

Seeds of many perennial flowers, especially native wildflowers, benefit from being sown in the fall. If you want to grow some native flowers for a pollinator garden, for example, now is the time to sow. Experiencing cold, wet winter conditions is necessary to stimulate germination in the spring for many such seeds. While you can mimic winter by refrigerating seeds in moist media, it can be easier to just sow them outdoors in November and let nature take its course. By spring it is easy to have lose track of where things were sown so mark beds well or keep a map recording what was sown, where.

Mulching month: As mentioned last month and explained in great detail last year (see my November 11, 2023 message in my archive of messages: http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html). For other general info on mulching, new gardeners might want to review the mulching info in my ABCs of Gardening segments that were included on June 28, 2024.

Protect your citrus: If you still have a citrus tree alive outdoors (a lot were killed in last January's deep freeze) it is time to install winter protection, whether you are using plumbing heat cables or incandescent Christmas lights to keep trees above freezing. If you have citrus in pots, then it is time to drag them into a greenhouse or sunroom. For details see my archived November 22, 2022 message.

Last call for garlic: If you still haven't planted your garlic, don't put it off any longer!

ABCs of Gardening Series: Beginning gardeners and new subscribers might want to review the basic information included in these sections in my newsletters from December 21, 2023 to June 2024. Topics covered: Designing beds, compost, lime and other soil amendments, irrigation, weeding, mulching (June 28, 2024).