

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

April 12, 2017

Wet Soil, Harvesting Roots, Fruit Pollination

Our cold, wet spring continues...with the soil too wet to work in most gardens. For much of the region, March set records for rainfall, so it has been really, really wet. This spring certainly shows how valuable it is to fill your garden with mature, hardy vegetable plants before winter. Despite the bitter cold, a lot of crops made it through the winter and these deep rooted plants are now producing crops without anyone having to plant or cultivate cold, wet soil. Overwintered crops being harvested in coastal gardens now include greens (chard, spinach, kale), roots (carrots, beets, parsnips), as well as leeks, Brussels sprouts, winter cauliflower and purple sprouting broccoli. I lost a lot of my winter cauliflower and broccoli plants, with stems crushed under the weight of, heavy snow, but the few that survived are producing lovely heads now.

Which reminds me to remind you that it is now time to dig up any remaining root crops and put them in the refrigerator. They should be harvested before they start to use up the sugars in their roots to produce a flower stalk (as they always do after winter) and lose flavour. Leeks can stay out in the garden because, although they also develop a flower stalk in the spring, it doesn't affect their flavour. The leek flower stalk is tender enough to be edible and it also easy to remove before chopping the leek if you prefer. And don't be in a hurry to clean up the Brussels sprouts stalks. Even if your plants never produced sprouts or if you have harvested them all, the plants will send up a spring crop of shoots from each sprout site; these are tender and tasty (great steamed or in stir fries).

It is still really too cold to sow seeds directly in the soil (some places had ground frosts again this week). Although peas, onions, etc. seeds CAN germinate in very cold soil, it takes much longer than in warm soil, leaving the tiny seedlings at risk from slugs, cutworms and disease for much longer. If you have well-grown veggie starts to set out, they would fare better than seeds, but the problem is that most soil is too wet to work. Trying to turn in compost and amendments when the soil is wet damages the soil structure by crushing the tiny air spaces that let in oxygen and let out carbon dioxide (plant roots, soil microbes, earthworms, etc. all need to breathe). Soil should be filled with tiny air pockets and pores, similar to what you see in a slice of chocolate cake. If hard clods form when your soil dries out, it is a sign of compaction (especially likely with clay soils). Wait until such soils are moist but not soggy before handling them and keep feeding them with compost and other organic matter. Maintain mulches of leaves, straw, garden waste and other organic material for as much of the year as possible.

For soils that are warmer and dry enough to handle, such as in greenhouses or in beds that have been covered by coldframes or plastic, you can get on with planting seedlings of cold-tolerant vegetables (lettuce, peas, cabbage family plants) if you really want to. BUT there is no rush! You will still get better results for less effort by waiting until the soil warms up a lot more. If you haven't started doing anything in your garden yet, don't worry—you are not too late, at all. If you have seedlings that can't go out but are getting to large for their containers, do move them into the next size of pots to avoid stressing them.

I don't have anything to add to the message on buying and planting veggie starts that I sent out April 13, 2016 http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html so I refer you to that for details on what to look for and how to plant.

Fruit pollination: The wet weather is interfering with pollination of early tree fruit flowers both because emergence of insects is delayed and because they can't fly in cold or rain. The last couple of years we had very good pollination weather in the spring for fruit tree flowers, but this year I urge you to back up insect pollinators with pollinating by hand. In a dry period in the day, gently dust pollen from flower to flower with a small, soft paintbrush (get the cheapest little brushes for this: artists' quality is not needed). Gently tap the brush in the centre of the flower. The more times a flower is touched with the brush, the better the level of fertilization; as pollen builds up on the brush the more effective it is as a means of moving pollen. For peaches, nectarines and self-fertile varieties of cherries and plums, you just need to keep moving from flower to flower within the tree. For trees that need cross-pollination, meaning pollen from a different variety (apples, pears and some cherries and plums), you must go back and forth between flowers of 2 different varieties. If you can cut some flowering branches from large trees that won't miss them, you can take those branches to the tree you want to fertilize. With multi-graft trees (more than one variety grafted to the trunk), it is easy to go back and forth between the varieties on the same tree.

Coming Events:

Saturday, April 29: Steveston Community Centre. Preserving 1: Storage and Freezing 9:30-11:30
Preserving 2: Dehydrating and Canning 12-2:00. These workshops are free, but pre-registration is required: <http://www.richmond.ca/parksrec/about/registration.htm>

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Check the calendar on my web site <http://lindagilkeson.ca/> for talks, workshops and gardening classes in your area, also for book sales and hundreds of colour photos of pests, diseases and disorders to help you identify problems. All of my previous gardening messages are archived on my Gardening Tips page: http://lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.htm