

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

March 25, 2010

The last frost mirage

Some gardeners have put in their early potatoes, early peas, set out their strawberry plants and have lettuce seedlings and other greens under tunnels or in coldframes. If you haven't done all this by now—relax!

The season is still young and although it is an earlier spring compared to the last 2 years, the soil is still not warm. In my garden this morning the soil temperature was 9 degrees C (40 degrees F). While peas will germinate at this temperature they take a lot longer than at 20 degrees--which is what my own early peas are experiencing right now. I am sprouting them indoors in a couple of small pots of vermiculite on the windowsill (for details, see my April 1, 2009 message in the archive at:

<http://www.saltspringenergystrategy.org/food.htm>)

The great thing about growing vegetables all winter is that in the spring there is no rush to plant. Many of you now have lettuce, Swiss chard, kale, spinach and other greens growing quickly from last year's plants, as well as leeks, purple sprouting broccoli and winter cauliflower. You may still have the last of the carrots, beets, celeriac and other roots in the refrigerator (if you haven't dug up the last roots, do it ASAP as they are starting to grow). With all that bounty coming into the kitchen, you can relax and wait until the soil is truly warm to plant.

Harvest Note: Any roots crops still out in the garden are starting to grow again, but now they are working on putting up a seed stalk. Not only is their quality deteriorating, but it also means the roots won't grow any bigger no matter how long you leave them in the ground. Leafy greens will also begin to put up seed stalks soon, but the leaves don't lose their quality. They are fine to use right up until the day you pull the plants.

Average Frost Free Date: This is something you see mentioned in general gardening books and I am often asked about this. It is a concept applicable in other regions of Canada that has little meaning on the coast. Average dates are calculated from a long history of weather records with the assumption that they will apply to the region around the location where the records are taken. For such a geographically complicated region as the BC coast, there are striking differences in frost patterns over very small areas. Weather records from Victoria, Vancouver and Nanaimo airports likely bear little relationship to the frost patterns in your garden. The warmest, most sheltered coastal gardens may not see more than a few days of below freezing temperatures all winter. People with low-lying gardens, however, might still have ground frosts in May. In my garden (on the side of a mountain) the last frost over the last 5 years were: March 21, 2005; March 19, 2006; April 23, 2007; April 30, 2008; April 14, 2009. Just 1.8 km away, down at sea level I have seen ground frosts well into May.

Spring in this coastal region is such a long season compared to inland areas that the most that we can say about the last frost is it that it might happen anytime from March to May. All of the cool season, hardier plants we grow in the spring can withstand a few cold nights and you can always cover the plants in an emergency. A better indicator of when to plant for coastal gardener is soil temperatures: last year on April 1st, the soil temperature in my garden was 0 degrees a few inches down; this year it is 9 degrees in mid-March.

In even the warmest springs, however, it is often mid-May, and sometimes it can be mid-June, before you can safely set out the most delicate heat-loving plants: cucumbers, melons, sweet basil, peppers. This is not because of the risk of frost, but because a late, wet, cool spell just stops the growth of these plants and also leaves them vulnerable to root and stem rots.

For info on my books or to check my schedule for talks and presentations in your area see:

www.lindagilkeson.ca

You can read all of my previous messages on the Salt Spring Energy Strategy website:

www.saltspringenergystrategy.org