

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

November 1, 2010 Gardeners, start your mulching!

When it is time to think about snow tires, it is time to mulch...

Mulching: An insulating layer of a fluffy mulch, such as leaves, straw, bracken fern, is a must-have for your veggie garden. Even cold hardy plants can be injured if the upper layer of soil freezes in cold snap. When bare soil freezes, expanding ice moves the soil (called frost heave), which can break fine roots. Freezing also damages the 'shoulders' of carrots and other roots exposed above the soil; the damaged areas then rot. I like to put mulches on in two layers, starting about now with a layer 4-6 inches deep tucked in well around the base of plants. When it gets colder in December, I put down a second layer of leaves, this time completely covering over the leaves of carrots and heaping leaves well up over the bulbs of kohlrabi, the shoulders of celeriac and beets.

Mulches are for empty beds too, to protect soil from erosion and control weeds over the winter. Leaves are the best mulch you can get, so while you are raking leaves, stockpile some for next summer's mulch too. I put them in big plastic bags or pile them in a bin and cover it with plastic so they don't start to break down.

Staking: Top-heavy winter plants, such as broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower and cabbage, should be staked to prevent the stems from breaking or the plants from being uprooted by wind or dragged over by weight of wet snow. Drive in 3 or 4 bamboo or metal garden stakes or sturdy branches around each stem to support them. With care you can winkle a tomato cage down over smaller plants such as purple sprouting broccoli (it is good idea to have a helper and use a tea towel to wrap the leaves together so they aren't broken while you are slipping the cage in place).

Covering: We don't know what kind of winter we are headed for, so I like to be prepared with plastic sheets that I keep folded up in the garage in case I need to cover plants during an Arctic outbreak. Covers are not needed when and where there is a good layer of snow over the garden. Without snow cover most everything is good to -5oC or -6oC, but when the forecast calls for temperatures lower than that overnight, I cover beds of leafy greens (lettuce, spinach, Swiss chard, Komatsuna, etc.). Corn salad, winter varieties of leeks, Brussels sprouts, kale and parsley are so hardy that I only cover them in the most extreme cold snaps (-15oC). At it's simplest, a cover can just be a sheet of plastic laid over the plants and weighed down with rocks, boards or bricks. Try to keep water or heavy snow from sitting too long on the plastic and crushing the plants underneath, but even flattened plants will usually straighten up after you dump the water off the plastic. If you have plants under plastic tunnels, cold frames, cloches, that's fine--just make sure they are very well anchored to survive high wind.

Notes about this 'list': This time of year, my messages are few and far between, but will become more frequent when we get back to planting. A note to new 'subscribers': if your message comes a day or two later than your friends,' it is because there is a limit to how many e-mail I can send in a day (otherwise Telus thinks I am spamming you) so I send out batches each day until everyone gets the most recent message.

For those of you inquiring about my courses and talks, I have updated my schedule on my web site:

www.lindagilkeson.ca

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

www.saltspringenergystrategy.org