

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

April 19: Fruit Pollination and Peas

Fruit Flower Pollination: With the continuously cold weather this spring set to be alleviated this week with the forecast of sunshine, more fruit trees and bushes will burst into bloom. But the way the spring has been, you may have noticed there are still few bees out. Even though native species, such as bumblebees and mason/orchard bees, will work in cooler conditions than honey-bees, no bees work in cold and rainy weather. So this year you might want to help out the pollination effort yourself. For this you will need a small, clean, dry brush (the cheapest watercolour brush is fine) to move pollen between flowers. This is most feasible on dwarf fruit trees or on branches that are easy to reach. When I have hand pollinated trees in past years there have been noticeably more fruit on the parts of trees I could reach to pollinate.

To make this effort worthwhile you do have to know whether your fruit trees are self-fertile or whether they need cross-pollination from a different variety.

- For fruit varieties that are self-fertile (many plums, most peaches, some sweet cherries, all sour cherries), you only need to move pollen within each flower and between flowers in the same tree. Just take the brush and dap gently in the centre of each flower.
- For fruit varieties that must be cross-pollinated (all apples, all pears, a few plums and some sweet cherries) you will need to move pollen from the flowers of one variety to flowers of another variety (and vice versa). If there are lots of flowers on the trees, you can pick off clusters of flowers and take them to the tree to be pollinated. Dab back and forth between the flower cluster in your hand and the flowers on the tree.

If you look closely at the flowers, you will see the structures (anthers) that carry the pollen are sticking out a bit around the centre of the flower. There is only a short period of time when pollen seems to be present, even though the flower is open longer. There isn't very much pollen even at prime time so it won't look like much is on the brush when you gently brush it over the anthers. If nothing else, this exercise will give you a first-hand appreciation of the immense value of bees!

More about peas: A couple of people asked me this week if it is too late to plant peas--and yet others are wondering if it is still too cold to seed them outdoors. So just to set everyone's mind at rest: you can start peas any time all spring. I sow batches about a month apart up until the end of June. The late June peas usually produce until October. As it is still pretty cold for germination I started my second planting of peas indoors in vermiculite last week, but if the warmer weather this weekend pans out, the soil should finally warm up enough to sow directly. For late peas, it is a good idea to grow varieties listed as resistant to pea enation virus (AKA enation mosaic virus). This virus is spread by aphids in mid-summer and causes distorted pods, mottled leaves and stunted growth. I haven't seen it in spring sown peas, but I have seen it on Salt Spring in August, so for later plantings I grow enation resistant varieties, such as: snap peas 'Cascadia', 'Sugar Ann', 'Sugar Lace'; shelling peas 'Aladdin'; snow peas 'Oregon Giant'.

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Bragging Corner: My new book, *Backyard Bounty*, is at #2 on the BC Best Sellers list this week-- thanks to all of you that bought a copy!

For info on my books or to check my 2011 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