

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

April 2, 2011

Picking and planting right now; book launch invitations

Although we have had a day or two of warm spring weather, it has been a colder than average spring. Looking at past records of what blooms, when, in my garden, it seems that my garden is at least 3 weeks later than 'usual'. Of course, last spring was similar--so maybe our definition of 'usual' will have to change. In any case, the more you get your garden onto a year-round schedule, the less late cold spring weather matters because you will still have a variety of fresh vegetables to harvest. Gardeners with overwintered lettuce, Swiss chard, kale, spinach, radicchio, endive, Komatsuna, corn salad and other greens are undoubtedly harvesting new leaves now, regardless of the cool weather. Purple sprouting broccoli and winter cauliflower should be starting to produce heads (mine are awfully slow this year, but they ARE coming along finally) and you may still have a variety of root vegetables.

What to do right now: If you still have carrots, beets, celeriac and other roots in the garden, though, do dig them all up now, as they rapidly lose quality when growth starts again. If they are still small, there is no point in waiting in hopes they will get bigger. From now on, they are going to concentrate on developing a seed stalk so the roots will not grow larger. Leeks will also start developing a central seed stalk. I find that this stalk stays tender and edible for quite awhile so I don't rush to dig them, though you certainly can, as they will keep a month or more in the refrigerator.

People are planting out potato sets, pre-sprouted peas and seedlings of hardy plants--but if you haven't done so, don't worry! It is still early days--and there are advantages to planting some things late to avoid the risk that they will go to seed prematurely this summer. Normally, biennial vegetables, such as beets, chards, onions, leeks, cabbage, celery, celeriac, spend their first summer growing bigger; if they are allowed to stay out in the garden all winter, the exposure to the cold weather stimulates them to send up seed stalks when they start to grow again in the spring (this is called 'vernalization'). The same crops can be 'faked out' by a late cold spell in the spring of their first year, so instead of growing all summer as they should, they go to seed. This can only happen if the plants were big enough to sustain seed stalks, but actually, plants don't have to be very big to manage this. My favourite example is that Swiss chard planted in March can be big enough to vernalize if there is a period of cold weather in late May--causing some of the plants going to seed in July. But, if you just wait until early May to sow the chard seed, no matter how cold it gets the plants will be too small to vernalize and won't be affected by the cold. Since chard is hardy, you can harvest it all 12 months of the year so there really isn't any need to try to get it into the ground too early. I sow it the first week of May and am usually picking the last of last year's leaves at the same time I pick the first leaves from the new crop. To read more about vernalization, see my note for March 9, 2009

(<http://www.saltspringenergystrategy.org/food.htm>) --or look it up my new book 'Backyard Bounty' (see below--nice segue, no?)

Salt Spring Book Launch: Sunday, April 10th, I will be launching 'Backyard Bounty' (see <http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/books.html>). The event will combine a gardening question & answer session with book signing. Drop in any time between 11:00 and 2:00 pm at Foxglove Farm and Garden Supply (Atkins Rd). The advice is free! So bring your questions about any aspect of growing vegetables and fruit organically, including dealing with pests or just stop in to say hello. You can bring your own copy to be signed or buy one at the event. Co-sponsored by Foxglove and Salt Spring Books (thanks, guys!).

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I have 2 other book signing/garden Q&A/meet-the-author sessions scheduled, so if you live in the area, do drop in:

Saturday April 23 at **Talisman Books**, Driftwood Centre, 4605 Bedwell Hbr. Rd., Pender Island

Saturday May 28 at **West Coast Seeds**, 4930A Elliott Street, Ladner

Olive Note: The **Saturna Olive Collective** is getting ready for their 2011 season and they are almost ready to take orders for olive trees. In the next few days they will post the varieties, size and prices, etc. at olivetrees.ca I don't know how other's olives fared last winter, but only one small branch on my tree appears to have survived the early cold in November. My garden is up a mountain on Salt Spring, though, so I expect trees in warmer locations likely fared better.

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