

# Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

**May 31, 2011**

**TCs and BSs**

Tent caterpillars are upon us. BUT don't panic--the numbers will be high for a year or two, then natural disease outbreaks and parasitic insects will cause the caterpillar population to collapse to nearly zero. Then the beneficial insects die off because they don't have a food supply, which paves the way eventually for a few surviving tent caterpillars to regenerate a high population in another 6 or 7 years. Around Victoria, tent caterpillars were seen in high numbers last year, so gardeners in that area should start seeing caterpillars wandering around in late June with tiny white dots on their heads (these are the eggs of a parasitic tachinid fly). When most of the caterpillars you see have eggs on them, it usually signals the end of the outbreak. In other areas, including Salt Spring, this is the first year of noticeable numbers of tent caterpillars, so next year will likely be a year of very high numbers. No matter whether you take action or not, the numbers will rise, then collapse naturally over the region.

You might want to defend small fruit trees, however, to avoid losing fruit this year and next. Right now tent caterpillars are small and black and are feeding around leaf and flower buds on apples and other trees. If the trees are small enough to reach, you can pick off the small nests of silk with the caterpillars by hand (wear gloves). If the trees are large and, later, when the caterpillars grow larger, you could spray BTK (e.g., Safer's Biological Insecticide) on those trees. There is only one generation a year, so when this spring's caterpillars have wandered a way to spin cocoons (usually end of June, but could be a little later this year), they are gone until next year. The silk nests stay on the trees long after the caterpillars are gone (so no point in spraying those!). Trees with a lot of leaves damaged will leaf out again.

Time to plant Brussels sprouts: I like to sow these winter vegetables at the end of May to first week of June. With this timing sprouts don't begin to develop until late September/early October. By this time cabbage aphids have died down for the winter, so they don't damage the sprouts. Of course, earlier sown plants will grow fine, but you might have to watch out for aphids. A critical thing to know is that Brussels sprouts sown after mid-June usually won't have enough growing time to make sprouts at all. If sprouts don't form on the plant by late fall, they won't form properly in the spring: after winter, plants send up a seed stalk from where each sprout should have been.

In mid-June, I seed purple sprouting broccoli and overwintering cauliflower so the plants grow to a good size before winter. If you don't have seeds for these and for other winter crops (hardy lettuce, kale, spinach and other greens), better get on it! It gets hard to find desired varieties as seed suppliers run short.

For more detail about this from last year, which had a very similar long cool spring, you might want to read my message of May 25th, 2010 on the Salt Spring Energy Strategy website:  
<http://www.saltspringenergystrategy.org/docs/Winter%20Gardening%202010%20-%20May%2025.pdf>

Soil testing questions: A common question is where to get soil tests done. Salt Spring has an excellent soil testing lab: Agrichem Analytical. They also service all of BC by mail-order. Their soil pH test costs \$15. Check out their web site for instructions and prices: [www.agrichem.ca](http://www.agrichem.ca) . Phone 250-538-1712.

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For info on my books [including my new best seller (I love saying that!), **Backyard Bounty**] or to check my 2011 schedule for talks and presentations in your area see: [www.lindagilkeson.ca](http://www.lindagilkeson.ca)

You can read all of my previous messages on the Salt Spring Energy Strategy website: [www.saltspringenergystrategy.org](http://www.saltspringenergystrategy.org)