

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

February 3, 2012

Spring Fever

With the warm weather lately, gardeners are certainly starting to leaf out--followed closely by their plants!

This is a tricky time of year with the risk of a cold burst of Arctic air far from over. Overwintering vegetables are beginning to show the first new growth so you might want to pull away the mulch away from the centre of leafy greens, lettuce and radicchio to allow the leaves to see the light. Keep the mulch handy, though, in case you need to snug it up around the plants again.

I uncovered my globe artichokes this week as they were starting to grow, but will be watching carefully for cold weather in case I need to cover them right back up. As fruit trees and perennials break dormancy, the new growth is less hardy so a late cold snap can do more damage than the same temperatures would in mid-winter.

Although the lure of sowing early seeds will be making your fingers itch, just hold on for awhile. You might want to experiment with how early you can poke peas into the soil, but other crops (including peas) will fare better if planted later. Many things that go wrong with early plantings result in the death of the plants: slugs, cutworms, wireworms, pillbugs, root rots and damping off. But the big disappointment comes in when you manage to grow lovely plants from an early sowing and then find later that they go to seed in mid-summer. This can happen to biennial vegetables such as onions, leeks, Swiss chard, beets, celery, celeriac. After getting an early start, a late cold spell in April or May can fool such plants into thinking that winter has come and gone--which is the signal for biennials to send up flowers (called vernalization). Others, such as cabbage, cauliflower and broccoli can end up with 'blind' heads (no heads) or 'button' heads (tiny little things) if a late cold spell damages the growing point of a seedling.

As you get into year round gardening and have a greater area of your garden producing food through the winter, the more food you will have in early spring--and the less pressure you will feel to plant early. After all, in another month or two the first of your overwintered broccoli and cauliflower should start heading up; by March, leaf production from kale, lettuce, spinach and chard should be picking up speed. If you planted enough to get through the winter, you should also have overwintered root crops, leeks, cabbage and Brussels sprouts as well.

Pruning fruit: Something you do want to do now is pruning fruit trees and bushes and, if using them it is time to apply dormant sprays. I don't use dormant oil and sulphur routinely as they kill beneficial mites and other good guys, but you might want to spray if you saw problems on your trees last year for which these sprays are effective. Dormant sprays don't work on tent caterpillar eggs, apple scab or peach leaf curl (3 common problems that people hope dormant sprays will solve). They do help control scale, aphids, leafroller eggs, red mites, russet mites and blister mites.

Upcoming public talks: This weekend--Feb. 3 & 4--I will be speaking at the Qualicum Beach Seedy Saturday; on Feb. 18th I will be speaking at the Victoria Seedy Saturday. For details, check out the calendar on my web site.

For info on my books [including my new **Backyard Bounty**] or to check my 2012 schedule for talks, workshops and gardening classes in your area see: www.lindagilkeson.ca

No need to copy and save all these messages as I hear some people are doing: you can read all of my previous messages on the Salt Spring Energy Strategy website: www.saltspringenergystrategy.org