

Winter Gardening Newsletter by Linda Gilkeson

Linda's List for Oct. 1, 2012 Tomatoes and a correction

I have had so many questions about tomatoes that I thought I would send another message this week, and after hearing from a gardener on Quadra Island about her experience with carrot rust fly, I thought I had better pass that along too.

She reported that she had a late carrot rust fly attack last fall, after the end of September when she had taken off the covers. This is certainly possible in a year like we are having, with a late start to the season and a warm fall as they have 2-4 generations in the region. Their usual peak of egg laying is the last two weeks of August and first week of September--but this year, who knows? It looks like it is warming up again for another stretch of sunny weather. If your area has had a hard frost, as some places have had by now, the flies would be killed. If you are in a warmer area, particularly along coastlines where temperatures are mild, you might want to replace or keep those covers on for another few weeks after all.

And while I am making corrections, some newsletter messages (I send them out in 14 batches to avoid spam restrictions) went out with a typo regarding giving cabbage heads "an eight turn"--which I hope no one interpreted as eight turns as that would kill the plants. It should have been "an eighth of a turn".

Tomatoes: Many people report that only now their tomatoes are ripening in good numbers--but given the fact that June was so cold and wet right to the end of the month, this is not surprising. We really have only had 3 warm months since then and the days are so much shorter in September that things grow or ripen much slower than they would have earlier.

The usually practice is to wait until just before a killing frost to pick mature green tomatoes (these are full size and light green). But, with the warm fall we have had, plants are slowly declining into old age so it is less clear cut as to when to do the last pick. For tomatoes exposed to the weather, given the risk of late blight infection is very high, I would pick any fruit that has gone from dark green to lime green. Once tomatoes get to that lighter shade of green they will ripen off the vine. Plants that are being kept dry, under roof overhangs or other shelters can be left out until it the vines look too miserable. In an unheated greenhouse they might go right through November. If the oldest leaves are looking really sad right now, possibly with patches of gray fuzzy coating (*Botrytis* mould), don't worry about it--*Botrytis* fungus is common on dying foliage. *Botrytis* can get into stems, however, through injuries where leaves are pruned off, killing the plant. In the summer there is little risk of *Botrytis* infection, but at this time of year the risk is so high that it is not a good time to prune leaves.

Storing tomatoes: Pick off each fruit and store them one layer deep in shallow boxes or trays in a cool, dark place. Some people wrap each tomato in newspaper, which prevents any rot from spreading from one tomato to others, but also makes it harder to check on their condition. You can also pull whole vines and hang them in a shed to allow fruit to ripen (spread newspapers below to catch dropping fruit).

Kept at 10-15°C, most tomatoes will hold for several months. To finish ripening, bring tomatoes to room temperature. They don't have to be exposed to light to ripen, though it will increase their colour somewhat. Check on the stored tomatoes often to remove ripening or rotting fruit.

For info on my books or to check my 2012 & 2013 schedule for talks, workshops and gardening classes 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