

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

March 29, 2013

Strawberries

What weather we are having! I am sure you are all out gardening this weekend and trying some first plantings of peas, potatoes and annual greens, such as lettuce, spinach and Chinese cabbage. These are good bets because a late cold spell won't make them bolt to seed as it could with biennials, such as onions, leeks or cabbage (see my March 8 message for more on vernalization of biennials).

Veggie starts are coming into the nurseries and farm stands, but if you are planting these right now, do cover them with plastic, floating row covers or cloches at night. Wonderful though the sunny days are, the nights are pretty cold.

One of the best things you can do right now is plant strawberries (and other perennial fruit too).

Strawberries:

Long ago I abandoned June-bearing strawberries in favour of day neutral or everbearing varieties that yield from June to October. Not only is it lovely to have berries all summer (and to show off at the fall fair), but these make the most of a small garden space because they produce so much more fruit per square foot than spring berries.

Day neutral strawberries are insensitive to daylength, which is what controls flowering so they develop flowers all season and well into fall. In the first year they are planted, the largest harvest seems to be in July and August; in the second year, plants start producing about the same time as the June strawberries, with a peak in late June-early July and another peak in August and September. I plant a new bed each year and keep the last year's planting so have both 1-yr and 2-yr plantings going each summer for continuous fresh berries. Everbearing plants are not the same as day neutrals, but in our climate they grow the same way. Here are some notes to help you choose from the day neutral and everbearing cultivars for sale in local nurseries this year:

Tristar: Berries have excellent flavour and a deep red colour without white 'shoulders'. Resistant to powdery mildew, produces a lot of flowers and few runners. Berry size is related to temperature, with the fruit being smaller in warm temperatures and larger in cooler temperatures. This isn't a berry for greenhouse or tunnel production. SO far, still my all time favorite.

Seascape: Vigorous with nice looking, tasty berries. Highly susceptible to powdery mildew and IMHO the flavour is not as good as Tristar.

Albion: Notable for its top quality and excellent flavour, but I haven't yet seen plants for sale in local nurseries. On Salt Spring, Chorus Frog Farm will soon have plants for sale on their farm stand (Rainbow Road, across from the entrance to the swimming pool). [See their blog for info and for a list of veggie starts they now have available: <http://chorusfrogfarm.wordpress.com/2013/03/28/out-like-a-lamb/>]

Quinault: An older everbearer with a classic, rich strawberry flavour. Berries are small and soft and must be picked the moment they are ripe or they quickly rot; plants produce a lot of runners. Used to be my

fave for flavour before Tristar came on the scene. Could do well planted in a strawberry jar or tiered beds, where the berries have good air circulation, which prevents *Botrytis* infection.

Eversweet: If you want to try strawberries in tunnels or greenhouses or even in a sunroom, you might try this one. It has been bred to produce good quality crops at high temperatures, although is also widely planted in New England so it is hardy. I am trying some this year to see how it tastes and produces in our climate.

A last note: You might try planting some strawberries in the holes in concrete construction blocks--my Dad's plants grown in a long rows of blocks yielded excellent crops for many years without being replaced (the roots are deep in good garden soil below the blocks). I have plants still producing well after 4 years planted in the holes in landscape blocks, which I used to edge a garden bed. They are hard to keep watered, but the berries hanging down over the concrete sides ripen well and keep on coming....just a thought for increasing production in a small space.

April events:

Salt Spring: I will be giving a free workshop "Don't Panic! Keeping up with Insects & Diseases" on Saturday April 6th, 11:00 am at Foxglove Farm & Garden Supply (Atkins Rd). Apple maggot, pea leaf weevil, club root of cabbage, pear scab and other problems have spread to Salt Spring. Learn to identify these as well as common vegetable & fruit problems and how to manage them organically. Bring your questions, specimens of damage or pests or even photos of problems from last year.

Richmond: Backyard Bounty: Organic Harvest Year Round. April 13, 9:30-4:30 Richmond City Hall. For registration info, see: <http://www.richmond.ca/parksrec/about/guide.htm>

Duncan: Fall & Winter Gardening, April 27th, 10-4:00 at the Cowichan Campus of Vancouver Island University: See the Continuing Education courses on the VIU website <http://www.cc.viu.ca/ce/> The title is really a misnomer--it should be fall and winter EATING, since the course will cover how, when, what to plant to make sure you have lots to eat from your garden all winter, including how to cure and store onions, potatoes, squash, etc. from the summer garden.

See www.lindagilkeson.ca for info on buying my books and to see colour photos of pests and diseases from the new edition of *Natural Insect, Weed & Disease Control*, or to check my 2013 schedule for talks, workshops and gardening classes in your area.