

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

April 7, 2014

Planting Right Along

I am sure you are champing at the bit to plant! Early plantings of peas, potatoes, radishes and annual leafy greens, such as lettuce, spinach, arugula and Chinese cabbage are a good bet with the period of warm weather forecast through the weekend. The soil is still very cool, though, and we are far from out of the woods yet with respect to frost so be ready with temporary covers or cloches in case of a cold spell. Some gardens are warm enough for early cauliflower, broccoli, and cabbage if they are set out under cloches.

Cloches: For individual plants, there are various designs of cloches from recycled clear plastic jugs to pricy replicas of Victorian glass bells. I use 1-gallon plastic milk jugs with the bottom cut off and anchor them with a stick through the handle to keep them from blowing away. No matter what you use, be sure plants don't overheat inside: take the lids off of jugs or, if using commercial plastic cloches, make sure the top vent is open during the day.

Floating row covers: Excellent for covering whole beds, the fabric breathes so doesn't need to be removed during the day. The different brands (Remay is common, but there are others) come in light and heavier weights: the heavier is better at holding in warmth.

Plastic: Before planting, sheets of clear plastic can be laid flat on the soil to trap heat and warm up soil. Once seeds are sown, support the plastic off the soil or remove it altogether. Leaving plastic flat on the soil can fry germinating seeds on a sunny day. Use wire hoops, plastic pipes or wooden frames to hold the plastic up; ensure good ventilation by leaving the ends open or propping up the sides during the day.

On warm sunny days, remove cloches and covers entirely--it can get really hot under there! And besides, plants grow best in full spectrum sunlight.

A variety of veggie starts are in the nurseries and farm stands now, even tomatoes--but it is MUCH too cold to put those out right now unless you are planting in a greenhouse. If you are starting your own seedlings indoors, now is good timing to sow cucumbers, squash, pumpkins and melons (for the optimists among you) and sweet basil. I find this schedule results in plants that are a good size without being overgrown by the end of May, when it is usually warm enough to put them out. Seedlings that suffer a check in their early growth because they were held too long in small pots or because they are sitting out in a cold garden become over-hardened. They don't produce as well as plants that never had to experience such a setback. If you jumped the gun and started tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, etc. too early--not to worry--but do move them into larger pots as soon as you see roots coming out of the drain holes in the container.

Strawberries: Last year, I tried 3 different varieties of everbearing/day neutral strawberries to see if there was anything better than my old favourite 'Tristar'. Nope! they are still the best in my opinion. Though 'Albion' is also quite good, mine came down with strawberry leaf blight in the wet, cool June weather; it turns out that good ole' Tristar is less susceptible to leaf diseases. For more on strawberries, see my note last year: [http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening-pdf/Winter Gardening 2013 - Mar 29.pdf](http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening-pdf/Winter_Gardening_2013_-_Mar_29.pdf)

Soil Testing: Most soils in the coastal high rainfall region are naturally acidic and should be amended with agricultural lime. For most soils (there are rare exceptions) a soil pH of 6.5 to 6.8 provides the best conditions for the community of soil microbes, earthworms, protozoa, etc. that make nutrients available to veggies*. Raising the pH also make heavy metals, such as aluminum, in the soil less available to plants (and that's a good thing). But not all soils need lime: soils in low rainfall areas in the rainshadow of mountains, or where a lot of animal manures or wood ashes have been applied, may not. Some gardens have had sufficient lime added by previous gardeners. So it is a good idea to get a soil pH test done every 5 or 6 years and apply lime accordingly. Lime has to be dug into the root zone to have an effect (i.e., not sprinkled on the surface) so if you get a test done right now, you can turn in the lime at the same time you are preparing beds for planting.

Salt Spring has an excellent soil testing lab: Agrichem Analytical (www.agrichem.ca Ph: 250-538-1712), which also services all of BC by mail-order. Their soil pH test costs \$15. There are soil test labs in other areas and some garden nurseries will send samples to a testing lab for you. It is really important to do a good job of taking the soil sample so that it reflects the average of your soil conditions. See the Agrichem web site for instructions on how to take a soil test on under their Resources & Links page. Don't bother with the home pH test kits or probes--According to Consumer Reports most are not accurate.

*For a fascinating online manual on this soil community, see the USDA-NRCS Soil Biology

Primer: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/soils/health/biology/>

Upcoming event:

Richmond: Saturday, April 12. Backyard Bounty: Organic Harvest Year Round. 10:30-5:00 Performance Hall, Library Cultural Centre on Minoru Boulevard in Richmond. Pre-registration

required: <http://www.richmond.ca/parksrec/about/registration.htm>

See my web site www.lindagilkeson.ca for hundreds of colour photos of pests and diseases to help you ID problems, to order books or check my 2014 schedule for talks, workshops and gardening classes in your area. I am totally booked for 2014, but if your group is interested in a presentation, 2015 isn't full....yet....

All of my previous messages are archived on my web site under the *Gardening Tips* page and are also available through the Salt Spring Energy Strategy website: www.saltspringenergystrategy.org