

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

July 6, 2014

Zucchini Tricks and Tribulations

Well, it is time to talk about that embarrassing gardening problem: Zucchini failure.....Perhaps you thought you were the only one suffering from this? I can assure you that you are not alone: one of the most common questions I get is "Why do small squash shrivel, rot and fall off?"

If your squash plants produce flowers and fruit, but the fruit doesn't stay on the plant, it is because the flowers were not fertilized. The confusing thing is that the little squashes grow a bit before they shrivel and fall off so it looks like something else must be wrong. Plants in the squash family have separate male flowers and female flowers on the same plant. Bees normally move the pollen from the male flowers into the female flowers, where it fertilizes the ovary (which is what later becomes the fruit). Bees may not get the job done for a variety of reasons, especially early in the summer: the weather may be too cool or wet, bees may be scarce or are busy visiting more attractive flowers. In small gardens there just may not be enough squash flowers open at one time to get noticed by bees. If you only have a couple of squash plants, there is less chance of having both male and female flowers open at the same time.

The problem is easily fixed if you hand pollinate the flowers. This ensures bumper crops and you can also make sure that early flowers of winter squashes are fertilized in time to give the fruit the rest of the summer to ripen fully.

1. First, look for an open female flower: it will have a tiny, miniature fruit on the flower stem just beneath the flower. Then find an open male flower: it has a straight stem, without the miniature fruit below the flower. You can also see pollen, like bright yellow dust, on the centre structure of the male flower.

2. Pick the male flower, peel back the petals and gently dab some of the pollen onto the centre structure of an open female flower. You can dust several female flowers with the pollen from one male flower. New squash flowers open every morning, making this a good time to do the job.

Note: Some squash produce only male flowers at first (and some produce only females at first) so if all the flowers look the same on your plant, that is entirely possible. Just fertilize well so plants produce lots of flowers and eventually both types of flowers will be present at the same time.

If a plant doesn't have a male flower open at the same time as a female flower, there is another option: you can use flowers from one variety to fertilize another if they are the same species. In this region gardeners commonly grow three different species of squash and pumpkins. The pollen from one species won't fertilize a different species, but as long as you stay within the group of varieties that are all of the same species, you can use the pollen from one variety to fertilize flowers of another. Such crossing won't change the characteristics of the fruit you get this season, but if you save seeds, the next generation will be a (usually inferior) hybrid between the two parent plants. Most summer squash and some winter squash are in the *Cucurbita pepo* group, which means that flowers from zucchini can be used to pollinate patty pans, marrows, yellow crooknecks, vegetable spaghetti, acorns and vice versa. Many winter squash and pumpkins are in the *Cucurbita maxima* group. Butternut squash and Tromboncino are in the *Cucurbita moschata* group. Seed companies usually provide the species name on the package or in the catalogue description (usually abbreviated to *C. pepo*, *C. maxima*, *C. moschata*).

If you don't know the species of your plants, just stick to moving pollen from male flowers to female flowers within the same variety and you won't go wrong.

Another zucchini note: New gardeners are sometimes alarmed by the silvery patches on leaves of zucchini, concerned that it might be early infection of powdery mildew. Powdery mildew will show up at the end of the summer--it always does--but not to worry right now. Silvery or white patches are normal leaf colouration for many zucchini cultivars. Similarly, yellow zucchinis sometimes have bright yellow speckles or patterns on leaves--again, perfectly normal.

My last zucchini tip: If you have a dehydrator, try drying slices of zucchini. This is the best way I know of to keep surplus to use in soup and stews. When the dried slices soak up the liquid they quickly resume the appearance and taste of a cooked slice of zucchini. You can also eat the dry slices like chips, with various flavourings, salt or spices as desired.

What to plant this month: If you do it right now, there is still time to sow Swiss chard, kohlrabi, beets, rutabagas and carrots for winter harvests. By late July sow mizuna, collards and kale, winter radish/daikon, turnips, leaf mustards and mustard spinach (Komatsuna), Chinese cabbage and greens (napa cabbage, joi choi, bok choi), winter onion, broccoli raab.

The first 2 weeks of August is good timing for sowing arugula, winter lettuce and spinach that will go through the winter (earlier spinach mostly goes to seed, but waiting to end of the first week of August to sow spinach works very well). You should be able to find spaces in the garden for these winter crops after you harvest garlic, onions from sets, new potatoes and have finished up crops of early peas, cauliflower, lettuce, etc.

Upcoming events:

Richmond: Saturday, July 12. Free workshops 9:30-11:00: Trouble shooting Common Gardening Problems (bring samples, photos & questions on gardening and lawn care); 11:30-1:00 Saving Your Own Vegetable Seeds; 1:30-3:00 European Chafer Control. East Richmond Community Centre. Classes are free but pre-registration is required: <http://www.richmond.ca/parksrec/about/registration.htm>

Delta: Saturday, July 26: Free Sustainability workshops: 9:30-11:00 Preserving the Tastes of Summer (how to cure and store onions, garlic, potatoes, squash; store fresh apples and other fruit, simple freezing methods); 11:30-1:00 Don't Panic: You CAN Control Pests and Diseases Organically. Ladner Community Centre.

Registration: <http://www.delta.ca/parks-recreation/activity-search>

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: http://lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html

If you are having critter problems (racoons, rats, rabbits, etc.) have a look at my August 2, 2013 note on that page; for more on winter greens and planting see last year's July 9 note.