

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson
March 17, 2014

Early Planting (or Not)

The bitterly cold wind this morning reminds me that spring has not settled in yet.

Don't give up: No matter how battered, don't give up yet on your overwintered plants. Those with deep roots, such as chard, parsley, kale, mizuna or namenia may look awful, but may survive to put on a spring crop of new leaves. While losses of purple sprouting broccoli and winter cauliflower are higher than usual in most gardens, with about 20% of the plants killed, the battered survivors are already making heads. Looking under the mulch after our snow finally melted, I found beautiful radicchio, carrots and other roots. My Brussels sprouts are leaning at drunken angles, but the sprouts are fine, the remaining leeks are beat up but usable, about half of the spinach came through and the corn salad is picture perfect. Not too bad for the worst winter in years....

To sow early or not? Hold on--there is no rush to stick seeds in that cold soil! When your garden is on a year-round harvest schedule there is quite a bit to eat in early spring, which means you don't need to battle bad weather, soggy soil, root rot, slugs, pillbugs or cutworms (these feed until late April) for an early start. In fact, most vegetables germinate best between 21 and 30oC (70-86oF). Despite the common idea that peas have to be sown early (they really don't), the optimum for pea germination is actually 24oC (78oF). Peas and other vegs do germinate in cool soil, but it takes longer and they grow slowly, which leaves the tiny seedlings vulnerable for longer to attack by diseases and assorted critters. Anyway, you don't gain much time, because later sown plants catch up quickly to earlier plantings.

Seeding indoors: You can get a head start by germinating seeds indoors, of course, or you can buy seedlings, which are now appearing at local nurseries. Peas can be sprouted indoors in vermiculite or soil for a couple of weeks before being set out (see my March 8 note last year for details: [http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening-pdf/Winter Gardening 2013 - Mar 8.pdf](http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening-pdf/Winter_Gardening_2013_-_Mar_8.pdf)). The hardier annuals, including lettuce, peas and many leafy greens (arugula, spinach, mustard, bok choy, etc.) can be sown indoors or in cold frames any time from now on. I usually don't start leafy greens this early because I rely on overwintered plants but the one-two punch of extreme cold, then heavy snow, did in the lettuce and other greens, so I have started seeds indoors this week.

On Salt Spring, the **Chorus Frog Farm stand** (Rainbow Road, across from the swimming pool), has just opened their new, greatly expanded emporium with more parking off the road. Right now they have 5 kinds of peas, lettuce and a variety of hardy leafy greens on the stand.

The trouble with biennials: Starting biennial vegetables (such as chard, cauliflower, celery, celeriac, onions, leeks, cabbage) too early can lead to trouble if well grown seedlings are planted out early and then we have a late cold spell. Cold weather in April or May can fool biennials into thinking winter has passed. This is called vernalization and causes some or all of the plants to bolt to seed in mid-summer instead of waiting until the following year. Only the larger seedlings are at risk so you can set out small plants (e.g., cabbage or celery with less than 5 leaves, onion sets smaller than a nickel) early. If they are growing too big, you may need to pot on seedlings and hold them in a greenhouse or coldframe until

there is little risk of a cold spell. For biennial greens, such as chard and kale, I find it works well to wait until late April or early May to direct sow them so I don't fuss have to with seedlings.

What to start now: Many people have started pepper seeds indoors by now as well as tomatoes. For my garden, starting tomatoes at the end of March is good timing. This week I started a few cauliflowers (indoors) as well as sweetheart cabbage, another spring experiment. These are small, fast-growing cabbages, conical with a pointy tip; popular in Great Britain as a spring vegetable, the leaves are sweet and tender and can be used in a salad or cooked. I grew a few last fall and was impressed with how quickly they popped up. West Coast Seeds and William Dam Seeds currently carry 'Early Jersey Wakefield' and the hybrid 'Caraflex' .

Potatoes: Main crop potatoes can be put in as late as May, so there is plenty of time yet to get them in. For early spuds, line up the potatoes sets on the windowsill for a couple of weeks to grow sturdy, dark green sprouts before planting.

Speaking of potatoes, when I washed the thick layer of clay off the "certified organic" potato sets I had bought, I was horrified to see scab all over the skins as well as signs of tuber flea beetle damage. Into the wood stove they went! Scab is a bacterial disease that grows on the skin of potatoes, leaving small black scabs. The potato underneath is fine and some scab is allowed through the grading system for table potatoes. While it is a myth that potatoes must grow in acid soils (they grow just fine at a neutral pH), those grown in acid soils don't get scab because the bacteria can't grow in acid conditions. I grow potatoes in my vegetable garden, rotating them to a different bed each year, so certainly don't want to introduce a disease that thrives in soil conditions (pH 6.5-6.8) preferred by other vegetables. Obviously, it would be a good idea to carefully inspect 'certified' seed potatoes before you buy--if they have too much soil on them to see the condition of the skin, I will be giving them a miss in future.

Upcoming events:

Saturday, March 22: Backyard Bounty: Organic Harvest All Year Round. 9:30-4:00. Sponsored by the Koksilah Farmer's Institute, Cowichan Station (south of Duncan). Contact: a.auchincloss@shaw.ca

Wednesday, March 26: Don't Panic! Control Pests and Diseases Organically. 7:45-9:00. Salt Spring Garden Club talk, Meaden Hall. Non-members are welcome to attend.

Saturday March 29: Year Round Harvest workshop. Galiano Island. Contact: galianofoodprograms@gmail.com

Saturday April 5: Storing & Preserving Fruit & Vegetables: 3 workshops. City of Richmond. Contact: ELai@richmond.ca

See my web site <http://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