

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

April 28, 2015

Fruit Flowers, Fruit Flies, Be the bee

Well, it has been a difficult week for fruit pollination between the cold, wind, showers, hail and downpours. This classic coastal spring weather reminds me again of how much I appreciate berries, figs and grapes to provide fruit in our climate. Unlike tree fruit, these crops won't be wiped out for the season if we have bad weather during the week or two their blossoms are open. Figs have closed fruit that is internally fertilized and grapes are wind pollinated, so neither need bees to set fruit; this makes them dependable regardless of spring weather and diminishing pollinator populations. Berries flower later and often over longer periods (especially the everbearing varieties) so the odds of being pollinated are much better. In fact, some berries, such as strawberries and currants, can set good crops without bee pollination, though fruit set is best if pollinators are also at work.

Even where there are lots of bees, they might ignore your few fruit trees if they are preoccupied with more attractive flowers. I was quite annoyed last week at the height of the warm sunny weather to discover my large, active colony of mason bees working the forget-me-nots in my flower beds. Not one bee to be seen in the pear and apple blossoms! I finally laid floating row covers over the flower bed for a couple of days in an effort to send the bees to my fruit blossoms.

In bad weather, I back up bee pollination with pollinating by hand. The fact that in some years I don't get fruit above where I can reach shows the effort was worth it. The easiest flowers to pollinate are peaches and the self-fertile plums and cherries. With a small, soft paintbrush, stroke the centres of the flowers to move pollen within the flower. The pollen is on the male anthers (in a ring around the centre) and needs to be moved to the central, female structure. Hand pollinating apples, pears and others that require cross-pollination is more fiddly. These trees must receive pollen from a different variety because their own pollen is genetically incompatible. Where trees have lots of flowers, it is easiest to remove a flower cluster from one tree, take it to the other tree and dust the pollen onto those flowers. For trees that can't spare the flowers, you will need to dance back and forth. One reason I like multi-graft dwarf fruit trees--the ones with several different varieties on the same tree--is that you can stand beside the tree and reach all of the flowers to move pollen around.

Last note on fruit tree flowers: I have come across a few gardeners this year who were dismayed to hear that they can't let their baby fruit trees have fruit for the first couple of years. You really can't let them produce fruit too early because it stunts their future growth. For dwarf fruit trees, pick off flowers or tiny fruit for at least the next 2 springs after planting. This applies no matter how old the trees were when you got them. In fact, the larger the nursery stock was when you bought it, the longer it can take to recover and grow well, especially if it was a bare-root tree. IF your young trees grew really well in the years since they were planted, you might be able to leave a couple of fruit to mature on a 3-year old tree, but still no more than 1 fruit per branch. If you have to move a young tree, the 'countdown' starts again--wait 2 to 3 years after replanting before allowing fruit to develop.

Currant fruit fly: If you are growing currants or gooseberries and have had problems with small maggots chewing inside the berries (see: <http://lindagilkeson.com/borers.html#93>), you might want to cover the bushes with insect netting to prevent the flies from laying eggs on the fruit. At my house, the period for covers is May 15 to June 10; after that I remove the netting. Just to be safe side this year, I will cover

bushes a week or two earlier, given the earlier season. The link above includes a photo showing tiny scars on fruit where eggs were laid. If you start to see these, covers bushes immediately to prevent any more berries from being hit. I now use ProtekNet, a sturdy insect netting designed for this use. It is easy to wrap around a bush and secure with clips. Then I circle the bottom of the cover with string and cinch it in and tie it to the trunk. ProtekNet is available by mail order from William Dam Seeds (<http://www.damseeds.ca/>) and from 2 Vancouver Island nurseries that I know of: Dinter Nursery, south of Duncan (<http://www.dinternursery.ca/>) and Russell Nursery near Sidney (<http://russellnursery.com/>). Dubois Agrinovation is the Canadian wholesaler for the product: <http://www.duboisag.com/>. With care, you can also use floating row cover--at least on currants and thornless gooseberries. Fine, sheer curtain material works too, but don't leave it on for more than 3 weeks because the fabric blocks sunlight and the plants will suffer.

My Upcoming Workshops:

City of Richmond: May 2: 3 workshops: *Beautiful Gardens without Pesticides; Pollination, Pollinators and How to Attract Them to Your Garden; European Chafer Management & Healthy Lawns*. Thompson Community Centre. For more information and to register for any of the above workshops, see: <http://www.richmond.ca/parksrec/about/guide.htm> Classes are free to people in Richmond, but pre-registration is required.

Port Moody: May 13. 7:00 pm. *Beautiful Yards and Healthy Gardens without Pesticides*. Port Moody City Hall (100 Newport Drive). Open to the public as part of Port Moody Naturally events. More information: AMehdic@portmoody.ca.

See my web site <http://www.lindagilkeson.ca> for hundreds of colour photos of pests and diseases to help you identify problems (many more photos were added recently). All of my previous gardening messages are archived on my Gardening Tips page: http://lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html

My teaching and talking schedule for 2015 is fully booked and so are the first months of 2016 (!), so check my schedule link on my web site for talks, workshops and gardening classes in your area.