

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

August 7, 2015

August Sowing, Fruit Ripening

I had a surprise at the end of July when I found a pear lying on the ground under my tree: it hadn't been knocked off by critters--it was ready to pick! In fact I picked about half the crop of Red and Yellow Bartletts that day, which is about 3 weeks early compared to last year. That reminds me to mention that unlike other tree fruit, pears are of better quality if they ripen off the tree. When they are left on the tree until soft enough to eat they are usually brown in the centre, the flesh is grainy and beginning to spoil in places; when taken off the tree they ripen evenly from the inside out. You can tell when a pear is mature enough to pick if you gently lift it upward and sideways. If the seam where the fruit stem meets the twig pops cleanly apart, the pear is ready to pick. If it just won't pop off or if you have tugged so hard that the twig or stem breaks instead of snapping cleanly at the joint, give the crop more time. While summer pears are mostly ready this month, winter pears (e.g., Bosc, Anjou, Comice), won't be ready to pick until September or October (probably September this year). I love pears because they can be harvested long before racoons become interested--and pears also are not attacked by the 2 new fruit pests in the region: apple maggot and spotted wing Drosophila. And dried pears, pear butter, canned pears, frozen pears are so delightful....

Another crop often picked at the wrong time is figs. Unlike other fruit, these have to ripen completely while still on the tree. They won't ripen any more once they are picked. If you don't have a fig tree (or a friend with one) you may never have enjoyed a truly ripe fresh fig because the ones for sale are usually not completely ripe. To tell when a fig is ready, look at the stem, which should be collapsed so the fruit hangs down rather than sticking outward from the branch. The fig should feel very soft and heavy and the flesh should stay indented where it is touched (no sponginess). I check figs both morning and evening to catch them when they are perfect and before they are attacked (much) by yellowjackets and birds.

August seeding: It is just about Spinach Day at my house, when I sow a big bed of spinach for harvest this fall through next spring. Usually about the end of the first week of August works well but it has been such a hot summer that I am waiting for showery weather to arrive over the next few days to make it easier to keep the seedbed cool and damp. I know Long Standing Bloomsdale, Tye and Large Leaved Winter spinach do OK on this schedule and perhaps most cultivars do, so try whatever you have.

Other things to sow this month: Lettuce for fall and winter harvests can be sown any time this month. Right now you can seed winter radishes and the faster growing greens: arugula, mustard spinach ('Komatsuna'), namenia, mizuna and other small Chinese cabbages and leaf mustards. Kale and collards can still be started from seed if sown immediately, but you will have larger plants by fall if you can get seedlings. Seedlings of kale, Swiss chard, spinach, purple sprouting broccoli and overwintering onions (e.g., 'Walla Walla') are in some markets this month. Beware of buying summer cauliflower (e.g., 'Snow Crown') and summer broccoli varieties, which I have seen for sale this week at supermarkets and garden centres. The cauliflower usually produces tiny 'button heads' when the weather cools and the broccoli may not produce much until spring (and then only if the winter is warm enough to allow them to survive). Of course, if you want to experiment, go for it--it has been a weird summer so who knows what will happen this year!

August Pest and Disease Notes:

Spotted Wing Drosophila: The BC Ministry of Agriculture Aug. 4 monitoring report for berry crops on the south coast shows SWD activity is currently predicted to be on average 18 days ahead of last year. Numbers of SWD in traps rose sharply in raspberry fields, continue to remain high in blueberry fields and they are present in strawberries. Numbers started increasing rapidly in late June (compared to late July in previous years) and some traps counts are extremely high. If you want to stay up to date on trap counts in berries on the lower mainland, check: <http://www.agf.gov.bc.ca/cropprot/swd-trapresults.pdf>

Is late blight on the horizon for your tomatoes? I hope not, but the damp weather forecast for this weekend looks like it may involve showers on and off for 3 or 4 day, depending on the location. So far, this summer's hot dry conditions have been perfect for preventing late blight, but an extended period of leaf wetness could allow spores to infect tomato leaves. The odds of a late blight infection increase as we get later into the fall with damper weather and more spores around on tomatoes and potatoes. So if you haven't been keeping the rain (what rain?) off your tomatoes up until now, you might want to think about doing it. (Of course, you might have harvested so many ripe tomatoes by this time that you don't mind taking your chances). If you cover tomatoes, be sure to leave lots of ventilation along the sides and ends of tunnels or other shelters--if moisture condenses on the underside of the plastic and falls on the leaves that also provides perfect conditions for late blight.

Upcoming events:

Saturday, August 15: I will be doing 2 free workshop for the City of Delta Sustainable Gardening program: 9:30-11:00 *Preserving the Tastes of Summer*: Learn to cure vegetables for long-term storage, store fresh fruit, simple methods for freezing produce. 11:30-1:00 *Don't Panic: You CAN Control Pests, Diseases & Weeds Organically*: How to identify, prevent and manage pests, diseases and weeds in landscapes and food gardens. Harris Barn/Kirkland House, 4140 Arthur Drive. Registration information in the Delta events calendar: <http://www.delta.ca/your-government/news-events/event-calendar>

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

My teaching and talk schedule for 2016 is rapidly filling up, so check my schedule on my web site for talks, workshops and gardening classes in your area.