

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

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Dormant Pruning, Pulling 'Micro-weeds'

Are you itching to get out there and get something done in the garden? There are two tasks best done at this time of year: pruning dormant fruit and pulling the 'micro-weeds' already sprouting up.

Pruning Dormant Fruit

It is time to start dormant pruning on fruit trees and bushes, grapes and kiwifruit. If you have big trees and lots to do, you might already have been at it. In any case, aim to have it done by the end of February if possible. It is best to prune on a dry day to avoid spreading branch and trunk diseases, such as bacterial canker on cherry; European canker in apples and pears; black knot on plums, cherries and peaches.

For photos of all 3, see: <http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/branch.html#155>

Do sanitize your pruning shears and saws between trees to avoid spreading disease, even if the branches don't look diseased. If you know you are pruning out diseased branches, sanitize after every cut. Soak tools in a solution of 4 parts water to 1 part hydrogen peroxide ('eco-bleach') or chlorine bleach. If you keep your tools well-oiled and dry when not in use, the frequent sanitizing won't rust them.

Dormant Sprays--DO You Really Need Them? is the question that always arises this time of year. I don't spray dormant oil or lime sulphur routinely because they also kill overwintering beneficial mites and insects that keep pests in check. If a tree had a problem in the previous growing season that is controllable with dormant sprays, then you might want to spray that one tree. That said, it has been years since I have used dormant oil on anything other than citrus (to control soft brown scale). About every 6 years or so, one of my pear trees accumulates enough pear leaf blister mites to justify a lime sulphur spray for that one tree.

What you need to know is that dormant sprays don't work on some of the things people hope to control, such as tent caterpillar eggs or apple scab. Before you spray, check my message last year for a list of what dormant oil and lime sulphur work on and when to spray:

<http://www.lindagilkeson.com/gardening-pdf/Winter Gardening 2014 - January 24.pdf>

As for timing: even though the recommended practice is to mix lime sulphur and dormant oil in one mid-winter spray, this isn't the best use of lime sulphur. It is most effective as leaves are dropping in the fall and again just before buds break in the spring. So combining the 2 pesticides usually means one isn't doing anything much.

Photos of the pests and diseases mentioned are in the image bank on my web site--which I will mention here has had a lot of new photos added this month. If you haven't seen the photo collection recently, see what's there to help you ID problems.

Knock Down the Mummies: If you have plum, cherry or peach trees, check the branches for mummified fruit left from last year's crop. If some of the fruit became black, shrivelled masses and stayed on branches after the leaves fell, it means they were infected with brown rot fungus (see:

<http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/foilage.html#139>). The fungus overwinters in those mummified fruit on

the tree. Spores will develop on the mummies in the spring and will be carried by rain to infect fruit buds all over the tree. The best way to break that cycle is simply to take a long stick and knock every mummy out of the tree, right now. Pick them all up and burn, bury deeply or put them in the garbage. It is a very effective sanitation step--no spraying needed!

Removing Weeds While They are Still 'Micro'

Weeds with the ability to germinate and grow in the winter have a head start on everything else in the garden, especially because most of us are not thinking about weeding at this time of year. But it will never be easier than it is right now to control them, when the weeds are tiny and the soil is soggy.

A particularly invasive little winter annual is Hairy Bittercress (neither hairy nor bitter, oddly; in fact it is a tasty mustard, good in salads). This little plant is also called smartweed, snapweed and a host of other (mostly nasty) names. It grows in a small bright green rosette, sending up tiny white flowers followed by seed pods from February onward; the pods open with an exploding action that snaps seeds all over the place. Here is a good photo: http://static.flickr.com/44/127240569_1b9fbfd4b5.jpg They can grow in even the smallest bit of bare soil or crevices in pathways, rockery, in gravel driveways, etc. Because the seeds fly quite a ways, be sure to look for it, and other weeds too, outside of your garden area. I find they are a particular nuisance under fences and in rock walls, where I don't have thick leaf mulches controlling weeds as I do on the vegetable beds.

Two more Seedy Saturdays: I don't have contact info so keep an eye out for local announcements.

March 14 Cobble Hill

March 21 Pender Island

Backyard Bounty Short Course April 25-26: There was such a good response to my first notice that I booked a bit larger room so I can comfortably fit in a few more people. The course will be held on Salt Spring; hours and a discounted hotel rate are geared toward accommodating people travelling from 'away' (and you don't need to bring a car to the island). Contact me immediately if you would like to learn more.

See my web site <http://www.lindagilkeson.ca> to see hundreds of colour photos of pests and diseases to help you identify problems (many more photos were added this month). 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, so check my schedule link on my web site for talks, workshops and gardening classes in your area.