

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson
February 19, 2016

Starting Seeds, Clean Bee Rant

Another early spring looks to be upon us: Flowering plants I track as indicators in my yard are blooming only 1-2 days later than they did last year. Last year was the earliest I have experienced on the coast and the warmest on record globally. With overwintered broccoli and cauliflowers making heads and chard and kale beginning to grow, it looks like spring is here. At current vegetable prices those overwintered crops are green gold (at this rate, are we going to have to start locking our garden gates!?).

Seeds to plant: If you are growing your own seedlings, this is the month to start celery and celeriac (indoors, on bottom heat). They are slow to germinate and the tiny plants grow slowly. You can also start leeks, onions and shallots this month from seed indoors on bottom heat. Given that this may be another very early spring, starting peppers, eggplants, even a couple of tomatoes or zucchini this early might work out, especially if you have a sunroom or greenhouse to move them to later. If you don't have overwintered lettuce and spinach plants, you could start seeds of these indoors this early, too. Line up a few seed potato on the windowsill to sprout so they take off quickly when you plant them out next month.

Growing your own: All vegetable seeds germinate best over 21°C (over 70°F). The optimum germination for most plants is even a few degrees higher (e.g., the optimum for peas is 24°C), which is why bottom heat mats are so useful. Seeds germinate fine at average house temperatures, but put them in your warmest location, such as on top of the fridge or water heater or in a warm bathroom. As soon as the first tiny green tips show, seedlings must be moved to very bright light. That means under grow lights or in a sun room or greenhouse; you can get by with a single row of plants lined up along a south facing window if it gets unobstructed light. Plants will also be sturdier if grown a bit cooler (18°C/64°F), too. The cause of long, leggy seedlings is insufficient light and conditions that are too warm. A heat mat will be too warm once the shoots poke through the soil. If you have a seedling heat mat kit with a clear plastic cover, don't use the cover for seedlings: it keeps in too much heat, reduces the light levels and allows condensation to drip down, keeping the soil surface soggy (an excellent way to cause damping off diseases). If you can't provide bright, cool, well-ventilated conditions right now, wait another month so your seedlings can be set out in a cold frame during the day. You can grow excellent quality seedlings in a coldframe, but it takes some effort. Remember to open the frame when it is sunny (without fail) so plants don't cook and bring them indoors at night until night temperatures stay above 15°C (60°F). Oh, and avoid overwatering--that seems to be the most common mistake people make with their tiny plants.

If you don't want to start seeds, a pretty good selection of common vegetable starts are available at garden centres and plant sales, such as at the Horticulture Centre of the Pacific. On Salt Spring, we are extremely lucky to have a local grower, Chorus Frog Farm (on Rainbow Road), that grows their own organic seedlings and carries a wider variety than is usually seen in garden centres.

A word (OK, a rant) about Blue Orchard Bees/Mason Bees: If you have a colony and haven't cleaned the cocoons yet, do it right now as the first bees will be emerging any day (this year, vow to get the cleaning done in late fall). For bee nests, you may have read (darn that internet!) that all you need to do is drill holes in a block of wood and put it out. We now know that doing that is being the bee equivalent

of a slum landlord. In the wild, mason bees are naturally solitary. Each female finds her own hollow reeds, woodpecker holes, etc. to make mud cells for her eggs. When she is lured into sharing a multi-unit apartment house, however, there is a high risk of parasites building up in crowded conditions if the nests are not cleaned between uses.

If we provide nests, they must be designed so cocoons can be removed and cleaned properly. A colony can be so badly infested that many bees die in their cocoons; I have seen bees emerging with such high loads of mites they can't fly. Sadly, they just end up crawling around on the ground. Bees with lighter loads of mites leave mites behind on flowers to infect other bees. If you are not prepared to use disposable nest materials and clean the cocoons properly, then it would be better for the wild bees in your neighborhood if you don't lure them into bee houses. There are other very valuable ways to help out the bees in this world by providing bee forage and wild, weedy areas for food sources all season. And do take down any old nest boxes and get rid of them if they can't be cleaned.

There are lots of options for cleanable or disposable bee nests from making your own paper straws (free) to purchasing cardboard tubes or split nest boxes that can be opened for cleaning. Lots more on bee life cycles, managing nest boxes and what to do now if you have un-cleanable nest blocks with bees in them (they can be salvaged), in an article I wrote last year for Transition Salt Spring:

<http://transitionsaltspring.ning.com/page/top-tips>

Planting fruit this spring? Best place I know of to buy all kinds of tree fruit, citrus, olives, figs and other delights: Fruit Trees and More, 724 Wain Rd., North Saanich: <http://www.fruittreesandmore.com/>

Upcoming Events

Tomorrow: Feb . 20. Victoria Seedy Saturday, Victoria Conference Centre. See:

<http://jamesbaymarket.com/seedy-saturday-speakers-2016/> My talk is at 11:30: 'Resilient Food Gardens for a Changing Climate'. I will be selling my books at the author table outside the Metchosin Room, including the new publication: ***Resilient Gardens 2016: Climate Change, Stress Disorders, Pest Update.***

My speaking schedule for 2016 is fully booked. Check the calendar on my web site

<http://lindagilkeson.ca/> for talks, workshops and gardening classes in your area, also for book sales and hundreds of colour photos of pests, diseases and disorders to help you identify problems.