

# Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

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## Early Planting and the Usual Suspects

The fast start to spring last month seems to have slowed down a bit with the recent cold weather, but it sounds like we are in for a nice stretch of warm, mostly sunny days starting this weekend. In most gardens there have been few, if any, days that garden soil has been dry enough to work due to constant rain. To tell if your soil is dry enough to handle, squeeze together a handful of soil: if it makes a compact ball that doesn't crumble apart easily when you gently rub it between your hands, it is too wet to work. Soils with more clay will be the last to dry out and their structure is easiest to damage by cultivating while they are too wet (resulting in hard clods). Sandy soils dry out sooner, but even my own sandy, well-drained soil is still too wet to work today. Anyway, trying to sow too early makes it more likely you will lose tiny plants to roots rots, cutworms, slugs, pillbugs, wireworms, birds, cold, rain (sigh).....making it all much easier to wait until the soil warms, the days are longer and seedlings can grow quickly.

This summer plan to increase your plantings of winter crops so by the end of October your garden is completely full of standing food. Most of those hardy plants will feed you all spring too, making it unnecessary to rush early plantings into the ground at a time when it is most challenging. Right now, I am still harvesting overwintered lettuce, spinach, Chinese cabbage, chard, kale, corn salad, radicchio, mizuna, leeks, carrots, winter radish, celeriac (you could have beets or parsnips as well); some varieties of winter cauliflower and winter broccoli are producing now and the later varieties will be coming on in the next month. With miscellaneous parsley, watercress and other self-sown surprises coming up, there can be a lot to eat in the spring without having to plant anything yet! If you don't have one of my planting charts that shows when to seed these winter crops, you can print a copy from the link on my home page: <http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/>

Beware the vernalization conundrum: This is another reason to delay planting biennial vegetables for a little longer. Many veggies (onions, leeks, carrots, beets, cabbage, kale, chard, celery, celeriac) are biennials, meaning if left in the garden over the winter, they bolt, meaning they send up flower stalks in the spring of their second year. For biennial plants, the cold chill of winter is the signal that another season has arrived and it is time to go to seed. If, for example, we start Swiss chard really early, then have a bout of colder weather in April (5-10oC/40-50oF), some or all of the plants "think" that was winter. The result is that half way through the summer, they start putting up flower stalks. We are puzzled because we consider it their first summer, but they are confused into responding as if it is their second growing season. We are pretty much the only gardeners in Canada that can run into this problem because our weather is so mild in Feb. and March that we are tempted to plant early. Increasingly variable weather due to our changing climate, however, means we can have unusually cool spells as well as heat waves any time. Ironically, it is the hardest working, early-starter gardeners that run into this problem the most because the larger a biennial plant is when a cold spell occurs, the more likely it is to bolt. Tiny, late sown plants don't have the energy to produce seed stalks so they don't bolt. High risks for vernalization are: onion sets larger than a nickel, leeks the thickness of a pencil, celeriac and cabbage family seedlings with more than 5 leaves. I used to think the biggest onion sets gave the biggest onions, but those are the ones most likely to bolt. The most reliable onion sets are the smallest ones because they can be planted early without risking bolting, which allows them to develop a large root system well before the long days of May and June stimulate onion bulbs to form.

Hardy annuals (lettuce, spinach, peas, etc.) are the best bets for early planting. Nurseries and suppliers now have veggie starts available and these plants fare much better right now than trying to get seeds started in cold soil. On

Salt Spring, the Chorus Frog farm stand on Rainbow Road is open with seed potatoes and veggie starts (including broad beans, peas, sweet peas, lettuce, arugula, beets, kale) ready to go.

Root harvest time: Carrots, parsnips, beets and celeriac still in the garden are beginning to get the idea that spring is here. I keep a very thick mulch over the beds to keep the soil cool as long as possible, but by early April, the soil has usually warmed enough that roots start to grow. To preserve quality I will be digging my remaining roots this week and storing them in the refrigerator. Of course they are still edible if they are not dug up, but the plants use up sugars stored in the roots to make flower stalks so they lose flavour as the weeks pass. I don't count leeks among the roots that have to be harvested, although you could dig what you have left and store them in the fridge for up to a month. Leeks do develop a flower stalk in the centre of the plant in the spring, but it is tender and there is no need to remove it when chopping leeks for a recipe. I harvest leeks from the garden until all I have left are ones I keep for seed. Note: If you plan to save leek seed, be aware that the seed stalks get quite tall and it takes most of the summer for seeds to mature. If the seed plants would be in the way of this year's garden plans you can transplant them to the back of a flower bed or other garden spot out of the way (they will need to be staked to support the flower heads).

Other planting notes: You can plant potatoes any time, but you have until late May to get in main crop potatoes. You can start seeds indoors any time too for cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli and leafy greens. It isn't too late to start onion seeds, but do it ASAP. Plant peas any time through the end of June (I usually plant a big batch once a month until then). For peas this early, there is a better survival rate if you sprout them indoors for 2-3 weeks before transplanting them outdoors. For details, see: [http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening-pdf/Winter Gardening 2013 - Mar 8.pdf](http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening-pdf/WinterGardening2013-Mar8.pdf)

Pests right now are the usual suspects: slugs and climbing cutworms. The remedy for cutworms is to find them on the plants in the evening and dispatch them or wait them out. They pupate in April and May and once they move to this next stage, they are longer feeding. Their pupae are those mahogany "bullets" found in the soil (for photos of all stages from egg, caterpillar, pupa and moth, see: [http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/leaf\\_chewers.html#25](http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/leaf_chewers.html#25) ). The info on slugs from last year's March email remains the same: They can be kept to low numbers with the safe slug baits containing iron/ferric phosphate. Sluggo Slug & Snail Bait is on the OMRI products list for certified organic growers. Other slug baits include Scott's Ecosense Slug-B-Gone, Safer Slug and Snail Bait. A tip on using these baits: sprinkle very small amounts over a wide area. The products are essentially pasta pellets containing iron, meant to attract slugs. When a slug or snail eats iron, it interferes with its ability to make slime so they die, but not immediately, as they would if they ate a toxin. SO don't put a ring of pellets around plants you want to protect because it will attract the slugs to enjoy a pasta dinner along with your plants. I suggest spreading a tablespoon of bait over an average garden bed (say 4 feet x 10 feet). Renew the bait after rain.

Beware of birds digging out your early peas. Covering the beds with floating row cover or bird netting is a good idea because once birds discover the tasty seeds, they can decimate a planting.

Upcoming workshops for the City of Richmond:

Saturday, April 2: Beginning a regular series of food preserving workshops over the season starting with: Fresh Storage and Easy Freezing (9-11:00); Preserving Fruits and Vegetables (12:30-2:30): West Richmond Community Centre.

Saturday, April 9: A full day, year round gardening workshop: Backyard Bounty (9:30-4:30): Richmond City Hall. These workshops are free, but pre-registration is required:

<http://www.richmond.ca/parksrec/about/registration.htm>