

Gardening Newsletter
by Linda Gilkeson
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Seeds, Yams and Pruning

With the gardening season arriving quickly (yay!), it is time to sort out our seed collections, decide what to buy and check seed suppliers for new varieties:

Germination test: If you are wondering whether seeds in old packets are still good, you can check with a quick germination test:

-Count out 20 seeds if you have lots, 5 seeds if you only have a few. Spread them on a wet paper towel or cloth and cover with another piece of towel to keep them moist. If you are testing many different varieties, you can germinate them all on the same paper towel. Before wetting the towel, use a waterproof pen or pencil to draw a circle for each group of seeds and label it. Then wet the paper and place the seeds in their labelled circles. Of course, be careful handling that setup so you don't scramble the seeds...

-Put the moist towel with the seeds in a plastic bag or container and close loosely to maintain a bit of air flow. Keep the seeds warm, check daily for moisture and watch for the tip of a tiny white root sprouting from each seed.

-Most seeds germinate in 2 to 5 days (carrots, onions and parsnips can take longer). Count how many seeds of the total have sprouted a root tip and calculate germination percentage. If at least 75% germinated, then they are good to go. If the percentage is lower, plan to sow those seeds more thickly to make up for lower viability. If less than half germinate, it is time to buy fresh seed or to grow them out this season if you are saving your own.

For more on this and on how to store your seeds to prolong their life, see my January 23, 2017 message: http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html

Seedy Saturdays are here: The first of these event in the region are starting this month, with Denman Island, Jan. 27 among the first. To see dates for communities near you, Seeds of Diversity maintains a list with contact information at: <http://seeds.ca/events>. These are wonderful events where gardeners can buy seeds and suppliers from local vendors, trade seeds, attend workshops and hear featured speakers.

A word about garlic: Some people are worried because their garlic has started to come up, others because it hasn't. There is no need to worry either way: your garlic is just fine, which will be apparent as spring rolls on.

Starting sweet potato plants (AKA "yams"): If you want to grow sweet potatoes this year, now is the time to start sprouting a tuber to get plants. Take a small or medium-sized tuber from the grocery store or from your own crop if grew them last year. I suggest starting 2 tubers from 2 different sources to make sure at least one sprouts. There are two ways to get slips: 1. Prop a tuber upright in a jar half-filled with water (doesn't matter which end is up) or, 2. Lay a tuber on its side, half-buried in moist peat moss or potting soil. Keep them very warm (I start mine on bottom heat). Within a month or so, depending on how warm they have been kept, shoots start to grow from the tuber. Move the tuber to a warm, sunny windowsill and let the shoots grow until there are clusters of roots at the base of each shoot. When a shoot has good roots, carefully sever the little plantlet from the mother tuber and pot it up. Grow them in the sunniest, warmest windowsill you have until time to plant out (May). One root

usually produces 5-10 slips. If you rooted cuttings from plants last fall, just keep in warm, sunny conditions and repot them in larger pots as needed.

Dormant pruning: If you have a lot of fruit trees, grape vines, etc. to prune this winter, you might want to get started whenever there is a nice day so that you are finished pruning by the end of February. For trees that show signs of disease on the trunks or branches, be really careful to prune on a dry day and sanitize your pruning tools between each cut. Common fruit tree diseases include European canker on apples and pears; black knot on plums and cherries; bacterial canker on cherries and peaches. To see photos of all of these diseases: <http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/branch.html#155>
Sanitize pruners in bleach solution (1 part hydrogen peroxide: 9 parts water) or by dipping or wiping the pruners in rubbing alcohol. For infected trees, I use 2 pruners, leaving one standing in a plastic bottle of disinfectant while using the other pruner, then switch the tools after each cut. When cutting out infected branches, try to make the cut at least 10 cm (4 inches) below the diseased area.

A brand new, expanded and updated edition of my gardening book, *Backyard Bounty: The Complete Guide to Year-Round Organic Gardening in the Pacific Northwest* is coming out in early March. Pre-orders before then will get a 20% discount from New Society Publishers. See: <https://www.newsociety.com/Books/B/Backyard-Bounty-2nd-Edition> I will also have copies for sale at all my speaking events and workshops this year.