

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

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Carrot Day Once Again

Carrot Day is the anniversary of this newsletter and long-time subscribers know what this message is all about. For new subscribers, I celebrate Carrot Day--AKA Canada Day--on July 1st (US readers could celebrate on the 4th of July). This is ideal timing to sow the last batch of carrots for winter harvests. You can sow carrots earlier, of course, but they run out of growing season in the coastal region if sown much later than the first week of July. If you want fat, full-sized carrots by October, sow them this coming week, no later than July 10. And sow a lot if you have the space; carrots store perfectly in the garden all winter so grow enough to last you through April. If you miss this planting window, later carrots will be small when growth stops for winter; they won't grow bigger in the spring because that's when they use their energy to go to seed.

Achieving a good stand of seedlings is the big challenge: Carrots are slow to germinate (6-10 days), but after that, they are pretty easy to grow. Often the soil is too warm for good carrot germination in the summer, requiring shade to keep the seedbeds cool and moist. This year's cool weather, however, is perfect for germinating carrots. Once the seedlings are an inch high, thin them to an inch or two apart. With care, you can transplant tiny seedlings to fill gaps in the beds—the roots might be a bit crooked but that's better than no carrots.

Where carrot rust fly is a problem (it is a widespread pest), cover the carrot bed with insect netting or floating row cover (see: http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/root_feeders.html#67). Install the covers within a week of sowing, before the first tiny green shoots appear, to prevent the rust flies from laying eggs on the carrots. Insect netting (e.g., ProtekNet; Bug Out; Enviromesh), should be supported on stakes or hoops as it is too heavy to rest on the seedlings. Floating row cover (e.g., Remay) is light enough to lift up with the growth of the carrot tops and doesn't require supports. Make sure there is enough slack in the insect cover material to allow the carrot tops to grow at least a foot high over the season. It is essential that there are no holes in the cover or any gaps along the bottom edges that would allow a tiny fly to crawl through. I use stones and narrow boards to weigh down the edges of the covers. Covers have to stay in place until the end of October, but you can lift them during the day when you want to weed or thin seedlings. Rust flies come out at dusk to lay eggs so as long as you replace the cover when you are done working you won't let in flies. If it gets really hot while seedlings are tiny, lay some kind of shade cover over the top of the insect netting until the heat wave passes. Once carrots are several inches high, their roots are so deep that heat waves don't bother them much (but keep them well watered).

For gardeners with raised beds more than a meter high (3-4 feet), carrot rust fly is less of a problem because most adults fly within a few feet of the ground. A few may land and walk up the side of the bed to get to the carrots, but much fewer than would attack carrots at ground level. Growing carrots in planters set on legs ('carrot tables') also keeps carrots out of reach of rust flies, but it takes more attention to keep vegetables well fed and watered in planters than in the ground. I have experimented with installing a screen fence around carrot beds (1 m/1 yard in height) as a barrier to rust flies; such fences should be designed to have an overhang at the top, flopped to the outside to direct flies away from the fence. But the fence was fiddly to install, hard to keep from sagging in places and rust flies got in anyway. Back to simply covering the whole bed for me!

One last carrot tip: Before and immediately after sowing is a great time to control slugs while the soil is bare of vegetation before the seeds germinate. Sprinkle iron phosphate slug bait (e.g., Sluggo; Safer's Slug and Snail Killer; Scott's Eco-Sense Slug B Gone) over the carrot bed and in the surrounding area, using small amounts, frequently.

Other planting for winter harvests: Early to mid-July is good timing to sow beets, rutabagas, endives and radicchio, kohlrabi and lots more Swiss chard and kale to supplement what you planted this spring. I figure I need 4 or 5 times more chard plants for winter harvest than I do for summer harvests to allow for the fact that the plants don't replace leaves during the winter.